Tools
FOR SCHOOLS

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND LEADERS

LET DATA DO THE TALKING

Clarify goals and roles by examining data

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

They go by many names — coaches, instructional specialists, or various other titles. The job title, however, isn't the only ambiguous aspect of the position expert teachers fulfill by working with their peers on practices that will lead to greater student achievement.

Few schools have clearly defined these specialists' responsibilities, according to Michael Murphy, director of education at the Salesmanship Club Youth and Family Centers, where he provides coaching and leadership for two of the agency's programs (2009). That ambiguity, he says, leaves many who take on the role struggling with how best to begin once they have the job.

Murphy says the answer is to begin with data.

"Tools can help specialists generate data to create data pictures and initiate a dialogue about classroom practice and potential student results," he writes in *Tools & Talk* (NSDC, 2009). "Coupled with building relationships between the participants, tools can provide structure, boundaries, and a framework for a focused conversation about improvement. Participants find comfort in a clear structure and a roadmap for thoughtful conversations."
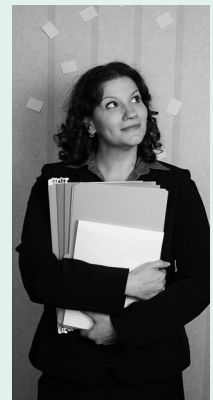
Specialists and teachers often do not know how to initiate conversations about practice

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Let data do the talking

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without a starting device, he says. According to Murphy, collecting classroom data, talking about the data, and using the information to address school issues is the root of change. In *Tools & Talk,* Murphy provides several specific tools that allow specialists to gather data and outlines ways for specialists to use the data in productive, side-by-side conversations with their colleagues.

Data are essential to changing practices, states Joellen Killion, NSDC's deputy executive director. "Educators are not yet sufficiently using data in the one place where data can make the greatest difference in students' learning — the classroom," Killion writes (2009, pp. 7-8).

Murphy says administrators too often overlook the data specialists gather in classrooms, instead focusing only on student test scores. Specialists, school leaders, and leadership teams can use classroom data both to support individual teachers' growth and to create a better sense of the overall strengths and weaknesses in the school, information that can be used for improvement planning.

Using data, specialists have a starting point for collegial conversations with teachers that can help elevate the quality of classroom instruction and allow specialists to connect teachers with ideas and resources that will enhance teacher performance and raise student achievement levels, Murphy says.

"The hope of coaching rests with coaches providing teachers foundational support that can make a significant impact on teacher practice and student learning," according to Killion (in Knight, 2009, p. 22). "Coaches who focus their services on strengthening the quality of teaching and learning will likely make a greater contribution to achieving that goal."

THE RESPONSIVE SCHOOL SCAN AND EXCHANGE

Murphy suggests five interrelated tools that school-based specialists can use to drive improvement. Measuring a school's responsiveness to families and children of varying backgrounds is one tool specialists can use to support teachers and link their work to overall school improvement. See Responsive School Scan on pp. 4-6.

Responsive schools actively and systematically work to create an atmosphere where students can learn by building meaning through their own cultural frames of reference (Murphy, 2009, p. 89). Responsive schools that focus not on students' "deficiencies," or what they are not, but on the strengths and capacities the students bring, have a significant effect on student achievement, according to Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and principal investigator for the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University. Epstein (2005, p. 2) cites research that concludes that if schools are welcoming, involve families, and focus on systems to support diverse students, students achieve more, have higher attendance rates, earn more course credits, are more prepared for class, and show other indicators of success in school. Geneva Gay (2000) says African, Asian, Latino, and Native American students will perform better on multiple measures of achievement when teaching is filtered through students' own cultural experiences and frames of reference.

The Responsive School Scan allows school-based specialists to begin to assess the cultural sensitivity of the school environment. The Responsive School Scan is useful when other information indicates the school needs work in structural, organizational, or pedagogical responsiveness or when leaders or staff want to quantify how well teachers are building on the strengths and interests of a diverse student population.

USING THE TOOL

The Responsive School Scan has 28 indicators of a school's quality in four areas: a welcoming school environment; information and

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NSDC'S BELIEF

Student learning increases when educators reflect on professional practice and student progress.

A RESPONSIVE SCHOOL

This tool provides data to help answer questions in these areas:

- **A welcoming environment:** What efforts have been made to create a welcoming environment for parents, guardians, and students? Do signs, physical surroundings, and communication create a first impression of intentional respect?

- **Information and access:** Can diverse visitors, parents, and guardians access information about the school and community services? Has the school tried to involve parents, guardians, and students in school goals?

- **Student voice:** Do the school's common areas have current, attractive displays of diverse student work, and language-appropriate explanations of the works? Do procedures honor students while offering a safe, orderly environment? Do students feel emotionally safe? Are students' diverse perspectives evident in school displays?

- **Culturally responsive classrooms:** Do teachers create attractive classrooms that promote collaboration, communication, and flexibility by adjusting to learning needs? Are students' lives evident in the artifacts and work displayed in interesting and useful ways in the classrooms?

access; student voice; and culturally responsive classrooms. Observers spend about a half-hour walking around the school to look at common areas including the hallways and offices, then about five to 10 minutes in each randomly selected classroom. Observers use a scale indicating whether each of the 28 points rates as: 1) museum quality; 2) meets the target; 3) needs work; or 4) didn't find it. All individual classroom data remain anonymous, key in building trust to be able to use the instrument, Murphy says, adding that the tool is *never* used in an individual's evaluation.

Preparing to use the tool requires building staff members' comfort level by having them review the tool before it is used and discussing the intent of gathering the data, along with how results will be used, Murphy says.

After completing the scan on the announced day, the observer summarizes the data on one sheet. The school leader and leadership team meet to review the scan for patterns in the data or for related indicators that demonstrate strengths or weaknesses, getting a sense of the overall school feel in terms of welcoming atmosphere and responsive instructional climate.

The goal of the exchange conversation is to help the school leader or leadership team understand how to be more intentional and to focus on planning for changes to address indicators from the scan, proposing actions they believe will create a more inviting, responsive, equitable school for parents and students. Leaders then meet and share the information with the faculty. Using the scan periodically allows leaders and specialists to measure and document their efforts to create a more responsive school learning environment and provides a critical starting point for conversations with faculty about school improvement.

"Tools," Murphy writes, "provide the school leadership team with information to link individual accomplishment to school accomplishment and to bridge the two concepts, and help teachers achieve what they naturally want — a sense of personal worth and efficacy, connections to the organization and the people within it, and results" (p. 21). ■

REFERENCES

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Murphy, M. (2009). *Tools & talk.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

THE RESPONSIVE SCHOOL SCAN TOOL

School name _____   Date and time _____

Responsive School Scan Tool team member(s) _____

_____

_____

INDICATORS	🏛	🎯	⚒	🚫	NOTES
WELCOMING SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT					
Is there inviting, accurate, and language-appropriate information on the outside school sign?					
Are the school's physical surroundings attractive to visitors and families?					
Is the tone of directions on all exterior entrances high-quality and friendly?					
Are visitors and families greeted and directed to sign in when they first enter the building?					
Are visitors and families warmly and appropriately greeted in the office?					
INFORMATION AND ACCESS					
Do staff in the main office exhibit friendliness, focus, and organization?					
Do visitors and families have a comfortable place to wait in the office?					
Do visitors and families have places near the office or front entrance where they can review information about the school?					
Does the school provide displays or make information readily available for parents to connect with community resources?					
Are the school's mission and vision current and displayed for parents and visitors to see?					
Does the school have a bulletin board on which parents can post announcements or news?					
Does the school have clear and fair processes for families and visitors to access school leaders?					

Source: *Tools & Talk: Data, Conversation, and Action for Classroom and School Improvement,* by Michael Murphy. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2009.

THE RESPONSIVE SCHOOL SCAN TOOL continued

INDICATORS					NOTES
STUDENT VOICE					
Are quality student work and student achievements displayed throughout the common areas in sensitive and attractive ways?					
Is the purpose of the displayed student work communicated in writing and in appropriate languages?					
Do common areas showcase culturally relevant posters, pictures, or displays?					
Does the media center or teacher resource room contain varieties of culturally responsive materials and resources?					
Do students in common areas demonstrate a sense of focus, purpose, and orderliness?					
CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CLASSROOMS					
Are the classrooms designed to be intellectually attractive and stimulating to the students?					
Do classrooms include pictures, artifacts, or displays that reflect the students who occupy them?					
Do classrooms include areas for small groups and comfortable places to work and study?					
Does the teacher's classroom appear to be designed for a variety of student groupings?					
Does the teacher use a variety of materials for instruction?					
Has the teacher posted fair and clear procedures for students to view and use to manage their own behavior?					
Does the teacher appear to use fair and equitable management strategies that support student learning and achievement?					

Source: *Tools & Talk: Data, Conversation, and Action for Classroom and School Improvement,* by Michael Murphy. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2009.

THE RESPONSIVE SCHOOL SCAN TOOL continued

INDICATORS	🏛	🎯	✒	🚫	NOTES
CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CLASSROOMS continued					
Has the teacher set clear goals for achievement?					
Do displays of classroom work honor and promote high-quality student learning?					
Do students seem engaged in their learning?					
Have teachers capitalized on student interests and/or real-world connections?					

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR THE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

KEY

🏛	**Museum quality.** There was evidence of extemely high quality.
🎯	**Meets the target.** The indicator met the operational definition and was on target.
✒	**Needs work.** Evidence shows either preliminary or partial effort. Varying and/or inconsistent evidence was noted, and it is recommended that the team construct new efforts to meet this indicator.
🚫	**Didn't find it.** The indicator was not found to be present at the time of the team visit.

Data conversations put evidence to work in the classroom

With the many varieties of data available to them, educators don't lack for information. What they need are structures and time to investigate and interpret the data, whether it comes from formal or informal assessments, high-stakes tests, demographic information, or other sources. Conversations are a logical beginning. The framework below suggests a variety of data conversations that can be useful in different contexts.

TYPES OF DATA CONVERSATIONS

Type of data dialogue	Data used	Who is involved	Conversation topics	Frequency
Whole-school conversations	State assessments, district benchmarks	School improvement team, entire staff	• Patterns of student achievement. • Needs for schoolwide programs (instructional, curricular, professional learning). • Needs for additional knowledge and skills for staff.	2 times a year
One-on-one conversations with focus on multi-year growth of students	State assessments, benchmark exams, end-of-course assessments, classroom assessments, common assessments	Teacher and administrator and/or coach	• Growth of students. • Overall proficiency of students. Instructional strategies to meet student learning needs.	2 to 3 times a year
Department and/or grade-level teams with focus on individual student interventions	Student performance on classroom and common assessments, discipline records, student work	Core teams, grade-level teams	• Diagnosis of individual knowledge and skills. • Next steps for students. • Grouping of students for instruction and intervention. • Pyramid of interventions.	Once a month or more often
Department and/or grade-level teams with focus on instructional strategies	State assessments, benchmark assessments, common assessments, unit assessments	Grade-level or content-area groups	• Growth of students. • Patterns in proficiency. • Instructional strategies. • Assessment strategies.	Once a week to once every 6 to 8 weeks
Student goal-setting conversations	Student work, grades, state assessments, common assessments, benchmark assessments	Teacher and individual students	• Goal setting. • Strategies for success. • Celebrations of learning.	Once a week to once a month

Source: Adapted from Harrison, C. & Bryan, C. (2008). Data dialogue: Focused conversations put evidence to work in the classroom. *JSD, 29*(4), pp. 15-19.

USE DATA TO SPUR ACTION

How do teachers and coaches start a conversation that will lead to improved practice? Michael Murphy's *Tools & Talk* provides structures and suggestions to answer that question for anyone who works with classroom teachers to find new ways to improve student learning.

Ready-to-use tools kick start discussions around how to build responsive, brain-based classrooms, create engaging student tasks, and form a classroom community of respect and learning. Data-gathering tools help teachers and coaches examine student engagement, how lesson and classroom design work together to support optimal learning, whether the school and classroom environment welcomes all students, and how well teachers are managing instructional processes.

Murphy provides a framework for conversations around the data, as well as prompts that allow coaches to discuss the findings in a collaborative way that encourages teachers to think critically about their own practices.

With an emphasis on strengthening supportive relationships, Murphy shows principals, assistant principals, instructional specialists, and anyone in a position to affect instruction how to gather and use data to improve teaching and contribute to schoolwide change.
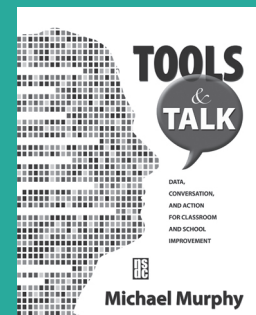
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