

By James Luján

Educators use student performance data to plan, implement, and evaluate



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James Luján tracks a variety of data at Ernie Pyle Middle School in Albuquerque, N.M., where he is the principal.

Do you believe that using data effectively plays a big role in the success of students? I certainly do. As principal of Ernie Pyle Middle School in Albuquerque, N.M., my goal in collecting data is “to transform data into information, and information into insight” (Fiorina, 2004). Having data about student academic performance motivates us to perform better as educators and tells us where we need to concentrate our efforts to improve.

In the Albuquerque Public Schools, we analyze data that tell us how schools with similar demographics perform better than others on New Mexico’s high-stakes

assessment. When we hear that a particular secondary school in one area graduates more students than other schools, we want to know why. What is in their data that indicates what they are doing right? What practices should we consider in order to achieve at higher levels? This attitude about data and what we can learn from it is part of our district’s competitive spirit, instilled in the culture and evident throughout the educational environment of teaching and learning.

As principal, I have many responsibilities, and I find that the constant use of relevant data helps me stay focused on my instructional leadership responsibilities. However, I am not the only instructional leader in the building. The minute I receive school data, I share the

Data generated by students	Data generated by families	Data generated by instructional leaders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student portfolios include representation of student work from various classes. The students collect their exemplary work and share it with their parents or guardians during a schoolwide student-led conference. • New Mexico Standards-Based Assessment. • Student data notebooks include class quizzes, unit tests, sample tests, and academic progress illustrated in graphs. • Student self-assessments allow students to reflect by writing about their academic and behavior progress. This process includes short- and long-term goal setting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An online quality of education survey allows parents to express their satisfaction or concerns about the school and its instructional programs. • Consensograms and questionnaires gather parent opinions about school programs, activities, and initiatives. • Attendance data monitor the number of family participants at school events over time. • We compare frequency of family participation in math, reading, GED, science, citizenship, and English language learners events to student attendance data. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily walk-throughs are five- to seven-minute classroom observations that give the administrator a snapshot of student and teacher behavior, student performance, and classroom environment and artifacts. We also look for evidence of data use. • Albuquerque Instructional Management System (AIMS) is a database that contains the New Mexico Standards-Based Assessment, district benchmark assessment scores and graphs, standard maps, demographic information, and qualitative data to help teachers document student progress over time. • Classroom profile sheets show specific student data at a glance. • Short-cycle assessments are recorded and monitored by teachers, students, and parents. • Weekly records, academic vocabulary tests, minute math, and writing/vocabulary assessments are meaningful ways to measure student progress on a daily/weekly basis. • Quarterly assessments of standards. • Demographic data allow us to disaggregate our data for many purposes.

information with my data team, which includes teachers, parents, and students. Once we study and analyze the data, we create an action plan that demonstrates the next steps to take to improve the academic progress of every student in every grade level in any specific area. These action plans are connected to every teacher’s professional development plan. Each educator uses his or her data as a tool to drive daily instruction.

DATA USE IN OUR SCHOOL

Data are everyone’s responsibility. We hold all stakeholders accountable for using data. How do students know whether they performed better than other students in a similar group on a certain test? How does lack of family engagement affect student performance? How do school administrators know that their students’ academic performances improve from one year to the next? The answers are found in relevant educational data, which can be used to make decisions and enhance that competitive drive to achieve success for students.

In the past, we felt inundated with data and had little time to analyze and use them effectively. Today in most of our schools, the staff uses data to create action plans that identify areas of strengths and areas for growth. Data provide me a clear view on what is going on academically at any given time and assist me in aligning my professional development with school needs. Throughout the school, the effective use of data allows administrators, teachers, parents, and students to bring about change. Thanks to data, students know where they are and where they

are going academically.

I also use data as an important communication strategy with parents. When parents know where their children stand, they are more likely to stay active through their participation in school activities, which helps students stay in school, and improve academically (Cervone & O’Leary, 1982).

As a data-informed leader, I ask all stakeholders to turn to different types of tools to inform our decision making at Ernie Pyle Middle School. (See chart above.)

LESSONS LEARNED

I know now that to be successful in using data to strengthen my role as an instructional leader, I must first have a plan of action for how I will use the data, and then implement the plan, evaluating progress regularly. What the owner of the data does with them are critical to the success of a school. I challenge school leaders to ask themselves: Who is the owner of the data? The owner of the data is the person or team willing to use them effectively to improve students’ academic performance.

I believe data can be a double-edged sword. One side of the sword can wound you, inundating you with statistics that overwhelm and confuse you. The other side is the reflective edge that allows students, parents, and instructional leaders to see the progress, be motivated by it, and gain knowledge to become our very best.

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There is an urgency to educate instructional leaders about quantitative and qualitative analysis of school data. However, instructional leaders must instill that sense of data accountability within all stakeholders involved in improving student learning. As Henry Ford said, “Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.”

REFERENCES

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Asking the right questions

In my leadership role, I ask several questions to understand how various sources of data can guide instructional improvement and professional development plans.

- **What do the data tell us?** While Ernie Pyle teachers are reaching proficiency on standards, they must also target intervention based on specific item analysis for student groups.
- **What questions are further raised by these data?** Does movement of students between classes or schools have an effect on results/scores and data?
- **What standards do we need to focus on, by grade level, for more improvement?**
- **What’s working?** Earlier data analysis tells us that a focus on standards, critical thinking, reteaching, and assessment supports student proficiency.
- **What’s not working?** We learn from data that some teachers are teaching skills in isolation and working in isolation, negating the benefits of collaboration with colleagues.
- **What are our opportunities for improvement?** Staff members need more information and training on our data system to know how to access information. They need to continue collaboration on content and teaching specific skills.
- **What do we need to focus on next?** Grade levels need to collaborate on content to assure all staff is teaching essential skills. Teachers need support on differentiated instructional strategies.

— James Luján

struggled with the software. We struggled with our district technology folks and SAM tech support staff to find a way to use the software more efficiently. We can say without a doubt that this is an aspect we are glad to look back on now.

At first, our daily SAM meetings were focused on how to code events. It was a part of every month’s meeting with our time change coach for that first year. We rarely have those discussions now. We continue to struggle with time. There are days when Neal and I don’t get to meet. If that happens a couple days in a row, I feel lost and less effective.

I thought I might regret giving up some management tasks and the acknowledgement I would get from them. Any acknowledgement I may have given up has been replaced by the satisfaction I have knowing I am focused on the right work now.

There are people who do not care for the implementation of SAM because they don’t have the access to the principal that they were used to. There are some situations that need to be addressed by the building administrator, and others that are perceived as needing to be addressed by the building administrator. I work hard to ensure that all situations are addressed in a caring manner, but not necessarily by the building administrator. I am not willing to sabotage my instructional leadership to appease everyone’s perception of my role.

HONING MY FOCUS

I have heard from other administrators that they are too busy to meet daily with a SAM. My response to them is that I am too busy not to meet with Neal. I can’t afford to spend any of my time inefficiently. There is just too much at stake for our students

and community. I cannot overemphasize how important the coaching aspect of SAM is, along with the analysis of the data.

We ask teachers to use relevant data to make instructional decisions in their classrooms. This is a way I can use data as an administrator to ensure I am making effective instructional decisions as well.

The data from this initiative allowed me to see in black-and-white the difference between what I thought I was doing and what I actually did instructionally. Richard Elmore reminds us that we must be focused on the right work. SAM is the way I can maintain my focus on the right work.

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