

By Carol Seid

# Data present a clear picture of time spent on instructional tasks



Photo by ANNA MOSER/Anna Moser Photography

**Carol Seid visits the library at Fairmeadows Elementary School in West Des Moines, Iowa, where she is the principal.**

I had been an elementary administrator for about nine years when I first heard about the SAM (School Administration Manager) project. I was in my second year as elementary principal in West Des Moines, Iowa. I had begun to make significant changes in this building and had already asked teachers to think about their educational purpose and programs much differently than they had before. We were in the initial stages of using instructional decision making and professional learning communities to focus on using relevant data to make highly effective instructional decisions.

Each building administrator in my district had been asked to indicate his or her interest in a time analysis

study with possible future implications. Little did I know that this SAM would have such a huge impact on the way that I look at everything I do.

I didn't know much about the School Administration Manager project at that point, but I did know that I was already really busy and exhausted daily. I was shadowed for a week by someone from outside the district trained in the SAM protocol, and I was sure that this initial examination would show just how busy I was. My time change coach, Carol Lensing, a retired superintendent who works with The Wallace Foundation on the SAM project, went over my baseline data with me. It turns out my instincts were right — I was really busy. I was just wasn't busy on the right things. My baseline

showed that I spent 32% of my time on instructional tasks. Lensing shared my information and told me I could decide if and how it would be shared with others. She also suggested some ways that I could work to make that percentage change, if I wanted to. Now I had some questions to consider. What should I do with this information? Would I be able to effectively implement SAM? Who would be a good SAM for me? Do I have the right relationship with anyone in a relatively new position for this to work? Would there be a cost — financial and relational? Could I give up being a manager — and do I really want to? Would I be supported at the central office level? These are some of the questions I worked through as I moved forward.

I went back to the educational leadership research that had been presented to me over time. I knew that instructional leaders can make an impact on student achievement. If I could focus my time on instructional issues, I could make a greater impact on student achievement. I talked with key people in my life about my vision for implementation of SAM and asked for the district superintendent's support.

### MOVING AHEAD WITH SAM

As we moved forward, we used an existing position in the school (my principal secretary) and reallocated some of her tasks to other staff members in order to implement SAM. We received a small increase in clerical time to accommodate the implementation of SAM. My SAM, Rhonda Neal, had participated in a similar project in a corporate setting, so she understood what a SAM's role would be. She also has a clear understanding of my educational vision and personality.

Neal and I were trained on the software component for the implementation of SAM. Together we set goals for the percentage of time I would spend on instructional tasks and talked through coding the tasks and events of the day. We agreed to meet daily to track events. In our meetings, we would also talk about management tasks I could delegate and my specific instructional goals, and we would share gentle coaching comments. Initially, our meetings were spent almost entirely on the analysis of how I spent time. Because the data collection and software allows for specific instructional categories, we discussed what instructional category would be the best fit. For example, would the discussion within grade-level meeting be considered a decision-making group category, or a planning/curriculum/assessment category?

My SAM schedules all my meetings and my teacher pre-observation conferences, observations, and post-observation conferences. She takes all my phone calls and answers most of the questions that people may have. Neal reminds me of my specific instructional goals — to increase time spent modeling/co-teaching, providing feedback, and being a part of student celebrations — and holds me accountable to the schedule appropriately.

I believed it was important to share my baseline data and plan for SAM implementation with the school staff and with the com-

### What is SAM?

The School Administration Manager (SAM) project is a national pilot project funded by The Wallace Foundation to better understand how principals spend their time and to develop strategies to help principals focus more of their time on teaching and learning. The project's goal is to shift the principal's time away from administrative duties to provide more time for instructional leadership responsibilities.

In addition to providing principals with the data and strategies to enhance their instructional capacity, schools participating in the project may also choose to designate a person as a SAM, a person to whom the principal delegates some administrative duties in order to shift focus to instructional tasks.

To learn more about the SAM project, see [www.wallacefoundation.org/SAM](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/SAM).

munity. I have continued to demonstrate my focus with complete transparency. Neal facilitates the changing perception of how I use my time within school and community by communicating about what I do with complete openness. For example, she specifically shares that I am working with 2nd-grade teachers to plan math lessons, rather than saying, "She's never in the office anymore. I'm not sure where she is." She also deals with ordering, purchasing, and receiving supplies. She takes care of the logistical aspects of assemblies, events, and standardized testing. Neal schedules student celebrations focused on instruction. No longer do I deal with most building maintenance issues or share management information with staff. My SAM takes care of it. She promotes the vision for the school with staff, students, families, and community so that I can focus on instructional leadership. The most important thing that Neal does for me is to protect my time so that I can be the kind of instructional leader I want and need to be.

My colleagues have noticed that SAM expands leadership opportunities beyond what we initially expected. As we talk more openly in the school about our instructional goals and our data, teachers have more opportunities for leadership as well. Our decision-making processes have shifted as I participate side-by-side in teaching and learning. This also helps me be more accessible to both teachers and students.

At our first annual data collection last October, we were eager to see if the external data collector coded events the way that we had on the software calendar. My monthly goal was to increase the percentage of time on instructional tasks from my baseline of 32% to 75% by the following year. My first annual data collection showed that I was spending 74% of my time on instructional tasks. And, although I had not made my goal of 75%, I was pleased. Recently I completed my second annual data col-

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Foundation supported our work in innumerable ways. Because of the findings from the research they commissioned, the support of the national coalition of partners they assembled, the ongoing professional development we were given, and the networks of grantees they fostered, we were able to apply the best research to our efforts.

**The key word is system:** Developing a cohesive leadership system means addressing all parts of the system. The comprehensiveness of our work was overwhelming at times, but without paying attention to how all the facets impacted each other, we wouldn't have realized the levels of success we have to date. Having standards requires aligning evaluation systems to those standards and training people in how to coach and evaluate against those standards. Revising preparation programs means having cohesive mentoring and induction programs in place once those aspiring leaders land jobs. Robust training through leadership academies requires coordination between higher education, intermediate service agencies, and professional associations. Policies at the state and local level must be enacted that reinforce best practices. Changing only one part of the system while not addressing all of the others that impact the work would be wasted energy.

**There's no there there:** This is a process, and we're not there yet. In fact, we doubt that we ever will be. The more we accomplish, the more we see there is to accomplish. Iowa's school leaders have their biggest challenge ahead as they work to implement the Iowa Core Curriculum, which details learner outcomes for every student. Based on input received from the Leadership Partnership group, we have now launched a public engagement effort to help Iowa's communities understand the magnitude of the changes that need to occur in schooling if our students are to achieve success in the 21st century. From that, some other need will emerge.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

Despite all the lessons and challenges, we know we are on our way. We've enjoyed progress in improving leadership statewide and a measure of success. We believe we are building a scaffold of supports for leaders in the form of standards, training, and conditions that can equip them to meet the learning needs of every student in Iowa. We won't be content until that's true.

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lection. My goal now is to maintain 75% to 80% of my time on instructional issues. I am hoping soon to see data indicating I have been able to attain at least 80% of my time on instructional tasks. I do not think that all my time can or should be focused on instruction. There will always be management issues that the principal needs to handle. The daily SAM meeting itself is a management task. Yet I know how easy it is to be overwhelmed with those management issues and lose sight of the most important responsibility: how to ensure that each student has the highest quality educational program possible. SAM helps me retain that focus, always.

**SCHOOL RESULTS**

Fairmeadows is a building with positive

student achievement data. Last year, our building student achievement goals were to have 92% of students in grades 3-6 demonstrate proficiency (at least the 40th percentile) on core areas for the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, 95% of students in grades K-6 demonstrate proficiency in reading, and 77% of all students proficient in mathematics on district assessments. These goals represent a 5% increase in proficiency from the previous year. We met these student achievement goals.

I am not naïve enough to think that SAM made this happen. I am privileged to have extremely professional, effective, and dedicated teachers and amazing students at Fairmeadows. The initiatives we continue to refine and implement (instructional decision making and professional learning communities) provide a structure for our community to maintain a focus on im-

provement of instructional strategies to increase student achievement. I do believe that our implementation of SAM has been a factor in the effectiveness of instructional strategies and the efficient use of data to drive instructional decisions. These are aligned quite closely because the purpose is the same for each of these big initiatives: ensuring the highest quality educational programs for each student at Fairmeadows. Our student achievement goals for this year continue to focus on increasing the proficiency for each student at Fairmeadows.

**SAM CHALLENGES**

This is nowhere near a perfect world. We struggled with some aspects of SAM as we began our implementation. We are glad to look back on some of those struggles, while other aspects of our implementation continue to be challenges. Right away we

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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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