Explicating data's multiple links to professional learning

A decade ago, most educators gave little thought to the links between professional learning and data. Now, data is one of the seven Standards for Professional Learning.

What happened? The shift in data awareness began with the No Child Left Behind legislation. The law did not specifically link data to professional learning, but it did cause school systems to disaggregate student achievement scores by demographic subgroups. That, in turn, led educators to examine why some students were not making adequate yearly progress towards meeting academic standards.

One factor in student achievement, and an important one, is the performance of teachers. When teachers improve their instruction and classroom management, it increases opportunities for struggling students to achieve. For most teachers, improving their performance requires a combination of resolute will, hard work, and effective professional learning.

The bedrock of professional learning is data, but the mere existence of data makes no difference. To truly increase student achievement, other factors must be in place to make data widely available, used in the planning and evaluation processes, and supported by leadership and resources.

Data must be widely available in formats that encourage and facilitate its use. This enables educators to disaggregate and analyze student performance data to develop a deeper understanding of students' specific learning gaps. It is only through such a deliberative process that educators can gain insights into the knowledge and skills they must develop to become more effective in helping students learn.

Many educators do not appreciate why or how student performance data should shape educators' professional learning. Therefore, system leaders should insist that preliminary to developing any professional learning experience, educators must analyze relevant student performance data and understand its implications for educators' learning needs. Educators must root the design of professional learning in their new understanding of what they need to learn and do differently to more positively impact student learning. This applies to all educators—central office administrators, principals, teacher leaders, and all others who engage, individually or collectively, in learning experiences that a school system financially supports.

However, the value of linking data analysis to professional learning extends beyond its design. When school system leaders succeed in developing a culture of data use and analysis to improve professional learning, educators use data to monitor and evaluate the short-term, intermediate, and long-term effects of professional learning. This requires intentional and thoughtful efforts by school system leaders to determine what professional learning data are most important to collect, and how to do so in ways that don't burden front-line educators. Perhaps no other area of professional learning is so neglected as the collection, analysis, and use of data.

Achieving this new approach to professional learning will require more than central office mandates. Many educators will need time, expertise, and facilitation to become comfortable with student performance data and its meaning for their practice.

This is why two other standards for professional learning address the need for leadership and resources. The seven Standards for Professional Learning are not a menu from which school system leaders can choose one standard to emphasize. Rather, the standards are interdependent components that must work in tandem for professional learning to achieve its potential benefits for educators and their students.

School system leaders have a responsibility to not only make data use and analysis a priority, but to deploy it in the context of a comprehensive, standards-based restructuring of current professional learning practice.

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