

# WEAVE DATA INTO LEARNING

**SUPPORT AND PLANNING ARE KEY TO INTEGRATING DATA USE INTO TEACHER PRACTICE**

**By Jo Beth Jimerson**

**D**uring a dialogue in a course for aspiring principals, I laughingly shared a story from my days as a middle school teacher as an example of ineffective professional learning. The district had purchased computers (for every teacher!), and we were provided a beginning-of-year, one-hour training on the basics of the district network and expected uses. One catch: The vendor was late with delivery, so we sat in a small room — sans any computers — and passively listened to a central office representative talk about what the interface would look like when the computers were delivered.

This happened more than 15 years ago. Imagine my surprise when a middle school teacher in a large urban district shared a similar — but more recent — story. “When we got our last data system, they made us all sit in the auditorium and showed us a video of screen shots while someone on the video described the system,” he said. “We didn’t even get a live person.”

Though the middle school teacher’s complaint was on the extreme end of what I generally hear from teachers, the underlying dissatisfaction with the lack of support in learning about data use fits with what I’ve learned working with teachers and school leaders over the past decade. While the majority of school leaders with whom I’ve worked are familiar with the general characteristics of effective professional learning, these practices

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seem to get lost when the learning involves data use or data systems. Somehow, data use becomes something to which effective professional learning practices are only sporadically applied.

Most district and campus leaders with whom I’ve spoken describe content-area professional learning as needing to be job-embedded, just-in-time, ongoing, and active — all characteristics emphasized in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) as well as in a broad swath of professional learning research. Why, then, do many of these same leaders schedule one-shot workshops, training sessions, or beginning-of-year/end-of-year data reviews that violate many of these same standards of practice?

Reflecting on my experiences as a teacher and principal, in light of current research, I concluded that two issues seem to contribute to this knowing-doing gap: Responsibility for supporting data use is often diffused to the point of dilution among district personnel, and planning related to professional learning for data use is fragmented between the technology and curriculum and instruction divisions within district central offices.

## DIFFUSION

When I ask school leaders who is responsible for helping teachers learn the ins and outs of data use, a common answer is, “We all are!” (Jimerson & Wayman, 2011). When pressed to name who maintains ultimate responsibility for ensuring that effective learning supports specific to data use are in place, many educators seem perplexed. Several comment that one department might help with the platform, while another works with reports, and still another works with how to look at the data. They struggle to identify a particular person, department, or team that supports professional learning for data use.

While it may be admirable that everyone shares a sense of collective responsibility for helping peers learn about data use, this approach can create gaps in learning supports. What data are educators expected to use? When? From what systems are data available, and, if a team of educators uses data to identify a problem, what resources are available to address that problem?

What’s problematic about a diffused, piecemeal approach to supporting data use is that rarely does a coherent

picture of learning emerge. Instead, teachers are left to fit together numerous and disparate pieces of a puzzle to make sense of sometimes overwhelming amounts of data.

Sometimes, when a responsibility is identified as “everyone’s job,” it risks ending up as no one’s job — it falls through the cracks created by the fast-paced nature of schools, where leaders may be tugged in multiple directions on any given day. In this way, a diffusion of responsibility for ensuring that data-related professional learning gets done, and gets done in a manner reflective of effective professional learning, creates challenges for improving the capacity of teachers to engage in data-informed practice.

## FRAGMENTATION

Some districts also contend with fragmented planning and supports for data use-related professional learning. When planning for data-related professional learning does happen, it treats data use as something separate and parallel from general or content-area professional learning. I’ve heard leaders talk about professional learning related to data use as “compartmentalized” away from issues of teaching and learning, and this can be an apt description.

Teachers describe workshops scheduled in the summer, or at the beginning or end of year, in which vendor representatives or district technology office staff provide training on data system platforms and how to navigate through the data system. They rarely use their own students’ data in these trainings, and, because many occur during the summer, a best-case scenario generally involves using data of students who have moved on to the next grade.

Similarly, some district leaders paint a picture of fragmented planning. Computers and related hardware are typically purchased and supported by the technology side of the central office. Thus, training sessions involving data systems sometimes fall to people or to vendors whose primary district contacts work with technology, but not necessarily in an instructional capacity.

The problem is that many of these people — while adept with technology and systems — have little experience in a classroom or with facilitating effective professional learning. Some leaders in these roles have shared that they feel unsure of what teachers need or want and wish they had more collaboration with their counterparts in the curriculum and

instruction department.

Central office-level departments may assume ownership of particular data. An accountability office might take charge of benchmark data, while an elementary reading specialist might house primary reading inventory data. These staff members sometimes provide training on data use, but only as it pertains to their data.

To be certain, some teachers have also shared narratives that involve integration of data use with content-based professional learning. However, these almost always involve a data-able principal or talented leader who oversees a special program or department (e.g. bilingual education or special education). These exemplars are the exception. Still, they indicate that, in some districts, creative leaders capable of integrating data use with the broader narrative of teaching and learning do exist. The challenge for districts is to find these innovators and scale up their practices.

### BRIDGING THE GAP

Teachers and school leaders have been pressed to use data over the last few decades, and that pressure is increasing. Yet while data use has become a popular term among educators and politicians, evidence demonstrates that teachers and school leaders still struggle with making sense of data in the service of improved learning outcomes (Means, Padilla, DeBarger, & Bakia, 2009). Work by Elmore (2009) suggests that sometimes school leaders and policymakers assume capacity where it is lacking. Just because most of today's teachers have always existed in a context characterized by accountability and data use does not mean they have the knowledge and skills needed to make good use of data to improve instruction.

There is no evidence that supporting improved capacity to use data is best done by implementing professional learning that

diverges from that captured in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). There is growing evidence that, just like any other new knowledge or skill, teachers might best improve their capacity for data use by engaging in data use in ways that align with the characteristics noted in the standards — e.g. job-embedded, collaborative, marked by social engagement, and ongoing in nature (Kerr, Marsh, Ikemoto, Darilek, & Barney, 2006; Marsh, McCombs, & Martorell, 2010). To do this well requires that leaders engage in thoughtful planning and that they apply what they already know about effective professional learning practices to data use and data systems use.

Pulling from research as well as from experience and interactions with teachers and leaders, I offer three suggestions for district leaders as they work to support data-informed practice among teachers:

- **Assign ultimate responsibility for the development and execution of a coherent, embedded plan to support teacher data use.**

Someone needs to be in a position to drive the continual evaluation of whether and how teachers' needs related to data use are being met. This leader should be able to bring multiple voices to the planning table and outline the data-related skills and knowledge that the district will commit to helping each teacher develop.

- **Consider what skills and knowledge are needed for teachers to engage in data-informed practice, and ensure that these are supported throughout existing professional learning structures.**

District leaders should facilitate bridging among department personnel who share responsibility in any way for maintaining data systems and providing data system, technological, or data use and analysis support. Those who work at central office are no less learners than teachers or students; their own learning (in this case, around how to support data use among teachers) needs to be collaborative, relevant, and ongoing.

- **Fully integrate data-related professional learning so that data use becomes a tool used to continually evaluate and improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment.**

Data use is not a separate element of the teaching and learning narrative — it's an interwoven component of that narrative. Until it is similarly interwoven into other professional learning (rather than stacked onto other learning practices), leaders inadvertently reinforce the idea that data use is something extra rather than a fundamental component of teaching.

### LOOKING FORWARD

What would happen if effective professional learning practices were applied to data use-related knowledge and skills? Let's return to the experience of the middle school teacher at the beginning of this article.

If district leaders applied the characteristics of effective professional learning to data use, that teacher would not have been

### RESOURCES ON DATA USE

Earl, L.M. & Katz, S. (2006). *Leading schools in a data-rich world: Harnessing data for school improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Hamilton, L., Halverson, R., Jackson, S.S., Mandinach, E., Supovitz, J.A., & Wayman, J.C. (2009). *Using student achievement data to support instructional decision making*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation, Institute of Education Sciences.

Louis, K.S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K.L., & Anderson, S.E. (2010, July). *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning*. St. Paul, MN: Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement.

Wei, R.C., Darling-Hammond, L., Andree, A., Richardson, N., & Orphanos, S. (2009). *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad*. Dallas, TX: National Staff Development Council.

sitting in a large group in an auditorium watching a video of screen shots of a data system. He would likely be learning to use the data system in a small, collaborative group facilitated by another educator.

He would be using real-time data on his own students, and this data use would be couched in terms directly related to his instructional practice in his particular content area. He would be able to use data in collaboration with a team of teachers, draw conclusions, bounce ideas off peers, and change something about his practice immediately.

When he encountered challenges, his campus or district plan would point him to a reliable contact (either a teacher leader or administrator) who could help him in a timely manner. In effect, this teacher's learning about data use would neither be separate nor parallel from other professional learning. It would be an invisible, yet ever-present component of the professional learning already taking place.

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**Jo Beth Jimerson (j.jimerson@tcu.edu)** is assistant professor of educational leadership at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. ■

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