



By Stephanie Hirsh and Shirley Hord

# A PLAYBOOK *for* DATA

Real-life scenario demonstrates Learning Forward's Data standard in action

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This article is an excerpt from *A Playbook for Professional Learning: Putting the Standards Into Action* (Learning Forward, 2012). Written by Learning Forward Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh and Scholar Laureate Shirley Hord, *A Playbook for Professional Learning* provides those who work in professional learning with readily accessible information and examples on how to use the Standards for Professional Learning in daily practice. Each chapter of the book addresses an individual standard with a real-life story from the field, a summary of the standard’s “big ideas,” expert analysis by the authors, and guided reflection questions for readers.

This excerpt focuses on the Data standard and its three components: Analyze student, educator, and system data; assess progress; and evaluate professional learning. In this real-life scenario, educators in a small, rural school district have a major breakthrough when, during their learning session with a state department of education consultant, they identify key elements in the curriculum that students haven’t mastered. Staff members also recognize that these are areas requiring their own adult learning so that they are able to instruct students more effectively. Using data to assess student progress and to design strategies for improving teaching becomes a school district norm.

## The story:

### A DISTRICT LEARNS TO INTERPRET DATA

Karl Kline was a school improvement field consultant for a regional educational service center. He had spent 10 years in this capacity after two decades as a successful principal and administrator in mid- to larger-sized districts in his state. He was respected for his ability to help schools make significant gains in student achievement. His background as a statistics major and math teacher led him to a practical approach that had served many schools well in their efforts to pinpoint areas for improvement.

Each year after the state released the results of its annual standardized tests, the service center experienced a flurry of new calls. This year was no exception as more districts found their scores falling within a state warning band, the result of a state board of education decision to raise the cutoff scores. The field consultants would be busy for quite some time.

Kline was pleased to get the call to work with Merryville Schools, a district he had not yet visited but whose small size he thought would be an opportunity for a systemwide turnaround. As Kline drove the winding back roads to his first appointment with the district’s administrators, he anticipated a rigorous meeting to prepare to get the two-school district back on course. After a 45-minute drive, he pulled into the high school parking lot; the superintendent’s office was located in the high school. Su-

perintendent Rose Joslyn had seen him arrive and greeted him at the door, leading him to a small room, where she introduced the district’s elementary school principal and secondary school principal. Joslyn, the principals, and the Title I coordinator/federal programs director were the district’s administrators.

Joslyn outlined the reason she had invited Kline: They were to write a plan to address falling student achievement scores. The administrators took turns giving brief descriptions of their work and insights on the district. Kline thanked them for the invitation to work with them and told them he was ready to dig into the project. The group agreed that the best place to begin an improvement initiative would be at the elementary school. Kline asked that the group begin by looking at districtwide data from the statewide competency tests and data for the classroom levels for the elementary and secondary schools.

The administrators glanced at each other. The superintendent paused and then admitted that the administrators had not taken time to examine the data. The superintendent provided Kline with a set of data, and the group agreed he would return in two weeks to work with the elementary staff.

**DATA:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system data to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning.

**BEGINNING THE WORK**

For the next two weeks, Kline studied Merryville’s data. He looked at subscores by item and reviewed how various student groups had performed. He noticed gender differences in a couple of areas and a significant achievement gap for students receiving free and reduced-price lunch. He looked at the data by classroom and noticed where students had missed a concept that seemed to affect later grade-level strands as well. He was satisfied that he had a good overview of student learning in the district and closed his binder.

Two weeks after the initial meeting with Merryville’s administrators, Kline arrived in the elementary school media center to meet with the kindergarten to 6th-grade teachers. He spread the pages of the state reports on a large table. As teachers sat quietly, he introduced himself and explained his mission, then invited the teachers to review the data and to respond to the data’s messages. He wanted the teachers’ perspectives, rather than to share his views of what he had seen.

**Karl Kline put the refreshments out on a table and spread out the data again on an adjacent table. The cookies and lemonade were a success. The data were not.**

They dutifully filed over to the table and gathered around the sheets, staring at the columns of figures. Their faces looked bored or blank, and Kline thought they were tired after a long workday. He asked them

what they perceived from the data. After a lengthy time with no responses, he gently and with genuine concern adjourned the meeting, scheduling a subsequent meeting two weeks later when, he said, he hoped the staff wouldn’t be so tired.

Kline reflected on his approach and decision to solicit teachers’ reactions and input about the data. He was committed to not just telling them what he saw, but involving them in the process of identifying areas of need so they would understand and make decisions for their own learning. He decided that some social activity might be in order to begin their next meeting and might allow the teachers a few minutes to rejuvenate before they tackled the mental challenges of examining the data.

When he returned to the elementary school two weeks later, Kline brought cookies and lemonade. He put the refreshments out on a table and spread out the data again on an adjacent table. The cookies and lemonade were a success. The data were not.

When Kline asked the teachers for insights, the silence again was unbroken. He asked for anyone to volunteer one fact from the data, but was met with silence. Kline adjourned the meeting without having made any progress.

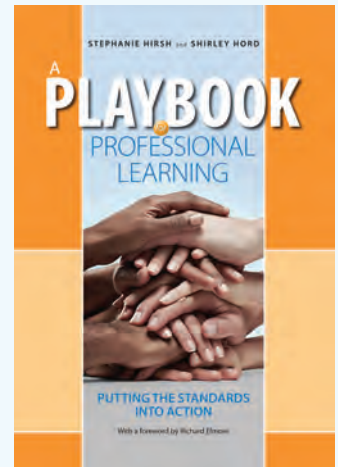
**LEARNING TO READ DATA**

As he drove home, Kline thought about the two meetings with the teachers. Why couldn’t he get a response from them? He knew the teachers cared deeply about their students and wanted them to improve. Suddenly, he had an epiphany:

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Maybe the teachers did not know how to read and interpret the display of figures from the state. How could they respond if they didn’t understand the reports? Kline was so used to looking at state reports that he didn’t think twice about it, as were most of his colleagues at the educational service center. And, with his math background, numbers were almost second nature to him.

He pulled off the road and pulled out his phone, dialing the number for the elementary principal. The principal confirmed his hunch — the school staff had had no professional development about their school’s state achievement test scores. The principal admitted that the staff hadn’t spent time trying to figure out what the information actually meant.

Kline’s next call was to a well-respected state department of education staff member who agreed to travel to Merryville to work with district staff on how to interpret the data. Kline’s third call was to Joslyn to report his experiences with the teachers, his conversation with the principal, and his request to the state department of education facilitator. Joslyn expressed her

appreciation and asked that the district’s entire staff be included in the professional learning.

On the day of the professional development, the state department of education facilitator arrived early with a binder of information for each staff member, organized by grade level. The binders included the information as teachers received it from the state, blank sheets formatted for teachers to extrapolate data sets, and protocols the group would use to dig into the data.

All the teachers arrived on time, along with the two principals and the superintendent. The Title I coordinator also was present. Staff worked in small groups as they followed the facilitator’s points on the slides she had brought. The educators were engaged. The study kept their attention as they began to understand the state department’s format for reporting school and classroom data, and they soon moved to item analysis in academic subject areas.

The groups had worked through midafternoon on the item analysis, when suddenly the secondary school science teacher jumped to his feet. “They didn’t get it!” he exclaimed. He realized from the student data that his teaching had not resulted in desired learning outcomes for students. A moment later and a trifle abashed, he reported, “I’m going to have to learn to teach that differently next year.”

The science teacher got it. He understood now that he needed new skills to help his students learn successfully. He would need to design learning materials and activities

that matched students’ needs in order to reach the goal.

Kline’s next meeting with teachers went more smoothly as they began to process the information and determine their next steps.

Joslyn was pleased with the meeting’s progress and called a meeting with the administrative team to write the district plan. Kline, on the other hand, was concerned that the staff had additional needs regarding their use of data. He hoped the district plan would address using data.

## Big ideas:

### USE DATA TO DESIGN LEARNING AND TRACK PROGRESS

Gathering dependable data and interpreting the data accurately are required to determine whether students are reaching learning goals. Having data without the knowledge and skills to use the data is a waste.

Professional development to help educators effectively review and apply what they learn from data is imperative so that

teachers are able to design appropriate student learning activities. Regular formative assessments help educators track student progress toward learning goals.

Some stakeholders assume that professional development automatically affects educators’ knowledge and skills — and their practices. They assume that adopting new practices immediately affects student learning outcomes. Too often, evaluation is lacking to determine whether the professional development has been powerful enough, continuous enough, or personalized enough to change administrators’ or teachers’ behavior in ways that support student learning. Gathering and interpreting data helps document the effect of professional learning on changes in administrator and teacher practice.

## Analysis & advice:

### DIG DEEPER INTO DATA WITH MULTIPLE APPROACHES

To continue the momentum established in the systemwide professional development, Superintendent Joslyn might next meet with the two principals and the Title I coordinator in a location free from distractions. She could ask the principals to bring their staff rosters and to identify teachers they believe could help lead school and district improvement plans. They could review the state student test data as well as student data from other sources. In addition, Joslyn can bring a rich data set to the discussion and guide the administrative team in considering educator data relevant to the student data and additional system data.

Joslyn might remind the administrators that staff members have just begun to learn about analyzing data and about the data’s relationship to instruction. She must continually reinforce the principals’ and school staff members’ interest in analyzing and using data to identify student learning needs. The school principals might consider whether they have space for a data room where staff could post and leave the array of emerging data, including students’ scores, for teachers to track student results. The leadership team can evaluate whether the idea is practical and whether space is available.

Joslyn also might lead the administrative team in using data to identify areas of high student performance and discuss how to celebrate the results with students and teachers. She also could guide them to identify areas of low performance and challenge them to determine the most pressing needs for improvement. Then she could persuade them to study the data with teachers, to solicit input, and to get staff observations and input for decision making. The superintendent prepares principals for their role in engaging all building staff, a critical first step in the district’s plan for change and improvement. She also then is adhering to the first big idea of the Data standard: analyzing student, educator, and system data for improvement.

Joslyn might investigate the concept of learning communi-

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## Guided reflection:

### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

The superintendent of this small district was compelled to seek external help when the district was unable to reverse declining test scores. Instead of settling for quick fixes, all district staff learned the power of analyzing data to use to guide continuous improvement. As staff developed skills in interpreting data, they uncovered additional learning needs. Questions remain about whether the district will commit to continuing to learn how to use data beyond analyzing student tests.

- What other sources of data will support staff decision making regarding professional learning?
- What sources of data do you use to inform your professional learning?
- What ideas might the staff include in the district improvement plan?
- How do you suggest the external consultant introduce the other two purposes for data?
- What actions might the principals and teacher leaders take to ensure that staff use data in accordance with Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning?
- What additional knowledge and skills do you need to develop related to the Data standard?

ties, which would allow the small faculties of each school to form groups to study student achievement and to use the data to identify areas that need attention before seeking solutions to low achievement. Joslyn could ask the Title I coordinator to find more information about learning communities and to bring those findings to the next meeting.

Joslyn's next step might be to coordinate both schools' concerns and interests. In a follow-up meeting, she will learn what progress the principals have made with their staffs in reviewing data and identifying the most pressing issues that staff must address. Joslyn will have closely reviewed the data herself to identify areas that will most likely need attention. She will need to be prepared for competing challenges and to be able to lead the administrative team to harmony on the schools' and district's approach.

Joslyn and her team might consider what professional learning will be necessary for changes in the content and pedagogy that will be the basis for the schools' improvement efforts. This district does not have a history of giving attention to implementing desired changes. Nor has it assessed changes in teachers' classroom practices or student gains from new ways of teaching. Measuring

progress is another big idea that constitutes the Data standard.

Joslyn might search for a consultant to support the district's effort to increase staff members' proficiency in their subject areas and in using data. She also might access Learning Forward's Innovation Configuration map so that she and the principals can learn about the principals' roles as related to the Data standard for professional learning.

Joslyn might consider having the district leadership team attend Learning Forward's Annual Conference in order to learn more about principals' roles in using data. Another option might be to engage in some e-learning on the topic. She could hire a leadership coach to help the administrators understand how to implement the skills they and their teachers will learn. In addition to finding money in the budget for consultants, Joslyn also is responsible for ensuring that all necessary resources are available.

As all these activities progress, Joslyn and her supervisors should collect data so they can evaluate the professional learning they are bringing to the district. This aspect of the Data standard allows for revising professional learning so that it is of high quality and enables staff to become informed about and skilled in new practices.

The district's comprehensive plan for school improvement, a state requirement that district leaders have viewed more as a compliance document than a help, should clearly include the steps that the superintendent and the district's educators will take. The energy, attention, and commitment that educators will give to the plan will be clear from the meetings and conversations that Joslyn and others will have for their professional learning. After all, change requires learning, learning is change, and using data will guide the way.

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**As all these activities progress, Rose Joslyn and her supervisors should collect data so they can evaluate the professional learning they are bringing to the district.**

# TAKING ACTION:

## Professional learning challenges

By Stephanie Hirsh and Shirley Hord

This tool, adapted from *A Playbook for Professional Learning: Putting the Standards Into Action* by Stephanie Hirsh and Shirley Hord (Learning Forward, 2012), is one of many activities that offer readers opportunities to engage with each other to expand their understanding and capacity to use the Standards for Professional Learning in everyday work.

The activities in the book progress along levels of engagement from reviewing the standard to digging deeper to taking action. These activities may be led, supported, or guided by a facilitator who may be a lead teacher, instructional coach, principal, or someone from the district office. Two or three learners may undertake these activities informally, or school and team leaders can use the activities in a more formalized setting, helping team members gain new understanding and insights into using the standards.

<b>OUTCOME</b>	Participants will identify data sources essential to responding to questions about professional learning.
<b>OVERVIEW</b>	Educators hear many questions about professional learning and its impact. Data are key to answering many of these questions. Participants explore ways to use data to respond to questions from various stakeholders.
<b>MATERIALS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A copy of the article “A playbook for data: Real-life scenario demonstrates Learning Forward’s standard in action,” by Stephanie Hirsh and Shirley Hord (<i>JSD</i>, August 2012, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 10-12, 14, 16) for each participant.</li> <li>• A copy of the tool Professional Learning Challenges for each participant.</li> </ul>
<b>OPTIONAL MATERIALS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data standard rationale, available at <a href="http://www.learningforward.org/standards/data">www.learningforward.org/standards/data</a>.</li> <li>• Video vignette, available at <a href="http://www.learningforward.org/standards/data">www.learningforward.org/standards/data</a>.</li> <li>• “Meaningful analysis can rescue schools from drowning in data,” by Douglas B. Reeves and Tony Flach. <i>JSD</i>, August 2011, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 34-40.</li> </ul>
<b>TIME</b>	50 minutes.
<b>LEARNING STRUCTURE</b>	Groups of three to four to promote active engagement.

**TOOL**

Directions		Time
1	Review the big ideas of the Data standard.	5 minutes
2	Discuss how the Data standard is relevant to professional learning in your setting.	5 minutes
3	Working individually or in small groups organized around the challenges presented, review the tool Professional Learning Challenges. Develop responses to each challenge.	10 minutes
4	Invite participants to share their responses with others and complete the tool with others' input.	5 minutes per challenge
5	Discuss the overall value of this exercise and discussion.	5 minutes

Professional learning challenges		
CHALLENGE	RESPONSES	DATA SOURCES
A PARENT APPROACHES THE PRINCIPAL AND SAYS: I don't understand why we have all these early release days. How do these days benefit students?		
A SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER VISITS A SCHOOL AND SAYS: I hear teachers complain about professional development. How do we respond to these concerns?		
A NEW TEACHER SAYS TO HER MENTOR: It seems like new teachers have a lot of required professional development. How will all these programs help me?		
A REPORTER CALLS THE PRINCIPAL AND SAYS: Your school is giving teachers a lot of time out of class for professional learning communities. How will you judge the groups' success?		
A BUSINESS PARTNER ASKS: Why should I give you funding for professional development rather than for new technology for classrooms?		
Source: Hirsh, S. & Hord, S. (2012). <b>A playbook for professional learning: Putting the standards into action.</b> Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.		