

of program activities and totals of participating educators, summaries of seat time, and lists of different types of onsite services provided), all commonly required in the not-so-distant past by grant funders. Getting unstuck from head counts, customer satisfaction surveys, and anecdotal data (i.e. incidental hallway conversations) — deeply ingrained habits of mind — has proven difficult.

Moving to a more intentional focus on results-driven professional learning can happen when leaders have a clearer vision of what is possible in the next generation of professional learning. Here we step back to ponder what it would look like when learning leaders converse about and connect relevant data with their decision-making about initiatives, the work itself, and their spirit of inquiry about data and program evaluations.

What would it look like when data and program evaluation get attention on a regular basis, not as topics that get addressed apologetically, occasionally, and usually near the end or at a critical juncture in an initiative's life cycle?

Today, the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011), after multiple iterations and with widespread input and testing, can be a valuable starter resource in making the paradigm shift. Thomas Guskey points us to the essential role that data must play in the professional learning arena: "Because of its indispensable and fundamental nature, no other standard is more important or more vital to the purpose of the Standards for Professional Learning" (Guskey, Roy, & von Frank, 2014, p.1).

In a telephone interview with Guskey, I lamented the lack of enthusiasm and conversation today in moving toward stronger evaluation of professional learning. Guskey explained the situation from his perspective: "Part of that comes from a widespread misunderstanding of evaluation in general," he said. "Educators think of evaluation as something you do only at the end. You swoop in at the end and try to find out if anything changed.

"But, in reality, 90% of evaluation questions should be posed before you start — what results do you want to achieve, and what evidence best reflects those results? These critical impact questions start the whole planning process. The problem is we typically plan professional development focusing on what we are going to do, not what impact we want to have on students."

Guskey's point about evaluation still being viewed as a one-time task that gets done at the very end reminds us that this confused habit of mind is deeply ingrained. In my own experience, the distorted notion that program evaluation comes at the end is actually at the heart of the decades-long conundrum. Because evaluation tasks are not on the weekly or monthly calendar, evaluation is most often a scramble to gather whatever documentation can be done quickly at an end point (Champion, 2004a).

A paradigm shift about professional learning and data is overdue. This next era, with up-to-date data available everywhere all the time, demands that the field mature and move toward strong, credible program evaluation. The boldest leap that future leaders

must make is to be deliberate and purposeful in your evaluation work, using the Standards for Professional Learning and starting every evaluation effort at the same time the whole initiative is being planned.

Joellen Killion, Learning Forward senior advisor, has often pointed out the overlooked but inestimable power of starting evaluation discussions very early in an initiative's life. It is imperative to assess the evaluability of any initiative plan.

That early process involves identifying the extent to which a program plan is clearly articulated, has the scope needed, includes powerful enough learning activities for the particular context, and is based on a logical approach to change such that it will be possible to achieve the intended results (Killion, 2008, p. 31).

To extend the notion of evaluability, pausing with the help of a team of stakeholders could be considered essential as your Level 0 evaluation.

It happens when your initiative is still in early planning. Getting everyone's fingerprints on the plan achieves two important steps: It builds a powerful plan and jump-starts the early momentum needed to build a critical mass of supportive stakeholders. From a survival standpoint, starting evaluation at Level 0 helps prevent squandering both the resources and the credibility of professional learning teams or departments (Champion, 2004b).

As learning leaders, we need to take the reins to lead the paradigm shift with three important steps: Rethink our work, engage our co-workers, and embed student learning into our conversations.

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1

RETHINK THE WORK.

Working with data requires time and expertise.

Fundamental to making this paradigm shift toward more intentional use of data will be for leaders to rethink how work time is allocated. Whether you allocate five or 10 or 50 hours a week as a professional learning leader, pausing to figure out how to carve out some time to focus on data as a priority will be essential to make this shift.

Creating time needed can happen different ways: seeking out collaborative partnerships, bartering for help from assessment experts within the organization, engaging technology more creatively, making use of help from interns, and inviting help from outsiders, such as local university experts. It nearly always helps to analyze the rituals and traditional tasks that consume more time and energy than they can possibly warrant.

Rethinking the work might also require that learning leaders gain more expertise about program evaluation and data. They might, for example, take the lead in initiating a study group, learn and use evaluation terminology, and share new learning in meetings, conferences, newsletters, and online chats.

Everyone's path forward will be different depending on the context, but the goal is to raise everyone's level of competence and spirit of inquiry in the arena of data and program evaluation. In some instances, the path forward will be simple and straightforward. But in more contexts, learning leaders will face an uphill trek with a path that needs more clearing out and with twists and unexpected challenges (Champion, 2015). A spirit of inquiry will be a valuable mindset to making headway on the path toward building a critical mass of leaders around a data-driven paradigm.

The actual work of program

evaluation presents some new challenges. It calls for thinking big, then thinking through and managing the minutiae, while simultaneously making a plan for communicating about the evaluation efforts as they unfold, and then using results in making decisions.

Thinking must be crystal-clear about big decisions such as what questions you want to investigate and which specific indicators of impact you are aiming toward. You must also think through details of how and when various data will be collected and systematically analyzed long before you reach that juncture.

Backward mapping becomes an essential long-range strategic planning tool. It forces planning teams to be realistic about what is key and what is not key to getting results within a specified time frame. Projecting milestones to be measured in bold for each semester and working backward to the starting date is a reality check about the work calendar and promised deadlines for reporting on promised outcomes.

Whether you manage electronically or with paper, keep the work of evaluation on everyone's mind by creating an interactive public calendar. A visual reminder helps to keep attention on projected milestones and ensure that critical evaluation tasks get done on schedule.

Formative data, in particular, get stale fast, so they need to be analyzed and then used to make adjustments where needed. Juxtaposing the key evaluation tasks next to the long-term student learning targets, projected milestones, and program activities will help to make the critical connections between the program being implemented and the related evaluation tasks.

Your spirit of inquiry is critical if data are to really become useful in your decision-making. Be open to surprises in the formative data and dig deeper

to understand what is going on by triangulating the various data collected. Take the time to connect the dots to better understand interim results.

If the various formative data lead you to make some quick adjustments in the program, let it be known how the data, not hunches, helped get the program on track to ensure impact on teachers and students. Using formative data is not about fixing a mistake; flexibility is part of the process of getting results. Formative data help highlight what is going well and what needs to be changed to reach the intended results. The process of achieving change is iterative and one step at a time.

2

ENGAGE OTHERS IN CONVERSATIONS ALONG THE WAY.

Part of leading others toward a new paradigm will be to learn the art of keeping your stakeholders involved. Evaluation results should never be announced as a big surprise that no one expected. Technology now makes it easier to keep people in the loop — websites, electronic newsletters, blogs, videos, podcasts, etc., can help spread news.

Most stakeholders will not read a full evaluation report or even a bare bones factual abstract. Be creative in keeping your people informed and involved in interesting ways. Photographs, videos of students at work in classrooms, examples of student learning artifacts, charts displaying data — all can be powerful ways to communicate evidence of progress and student learning results.

An educational leader shared with our group in an institute one of her most successful strategies to share the progress of a collaborative reading initiative targeted at primary students who needed special help learning to read. Using a specific combination of

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strategies they had learned, teachers gave intense help to the students. To report progress on the initiative, a group of students attended a meeting of the board of education, and each student sat with an individual board member to read aloud a book of the child's choice. No slide presentation needed!

Sometimes a 10-minute briefing opportunity seems intimidating to craft and deliver, given all of the machinations and data involved in an evaluation effort. You will learn by your mistakes and get better at updating. Remember that your spirit of inquiry and emphasis on the valuable lessons the current evaluation effort is helping your team learn is critical — no apologies or emphasis on missteps, delays, or miscalculations needed.

Prioritize and be selective. Figure out what this particular audience would want to hear rather than trying to give a prepackaged speech to every group. I have discovered that it also pays to come prepared with the big picture, such as comparable data trends or initiatives in neighboring districts, states, nationwide, or even in other countries.

Know your stuff — avoid referring broadly to “the research.” That statement can lead to misstatements and spreading inaccurate generalizations in the rush of the moment. Track the questions you are asked so that you learn the kinds of information most requested. A well-crafted handout with key points and pertinent contact information can be very useful and conveys your eagerness to share information.



3 EMBED STUDENT LEARNING INTO EVERYDAY CONVERSATIONS.

A third essential skill of leading this professional learning paradigm shift will be to converge student learning data with professional learning in natural

conversations embedded in the work day. I asked Keith Young, formerly of West Ed and now senior consultant for Focused Schools in San Francisco, California, to describe the status of data and learning conversations. His description of guiding a team conversation points out the skills professional learning leaders need to transform examination of student data into job-embedded professional learning:

“Data analysis is probably the biggest area of need I see in the treatment of student work and teacher professional learning data,” he said. “Often teams do not take sufficient time to drill down and see what teacher and student actions were leading to the results that were produced. A lot of people jump too quickly to see how the lowest students performed. I notice that when teachers are pressed about what brought about the gains with the higher-performing students, there are a lot of ahas from the other teachers.”

As an example, Young said that when a teacher is asked about her high performance results from students, she might say, “I had the students practice the skill a lot more than I did in the past.” Typically, everyone will nod in agreement and just move on, he said. But it's helpful to press for more information: how often and where she practiced, for example.

When this happens, we find out she actually had students using the skill five times more than the other teachers. “This is a significant learning for the entire team,” he noted. “We make a lot of assumptions as educators that we all mean the same thing when we use terms like ‘practice,’ ‘model,’ ‘bell work,’ etc., when, in fact, there are tremendous differences in how these concepts play out in day-to-day work in classrooms. Without some press for specificity, the adult group work and analysis (of student data) might

not catch these subtle and significant differences. I see examples of this at least once a month in multiples states.”

My key takeaway: Young's conversation about student results data is getting their work done and embedding professional learning into the conversation. Young's approach is inductive, developmental, and deliberate. He subtly takes advantage of a teachable moment in this meeting about real student data.

He does not portray the conversation as primarily a form of interactive needs assessment that will possibly lead him to offer a formal three-hour workshop sometime in the future. Professional learning happens right here, right now, in a few minutes, and in a familiar place. This is an example of the sort of data-informed professional learning and conversations that give me great hope moving forward.

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