Looking for the woozle

Spotlight standard: 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.*

THE *Story*

K arl 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 stan-
dardized 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 appoint-
ment 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. Superintendent 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 1 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

About the district

Merryville is a small, rural village situated beside a natural, unspoiled river in a quiet area of the state. The town's population of 675 is supported by a business district that includes the post office and a dry goods store housing a small grocery store. Several small enterprises support and cater to vacationers who come to the attractive area for water sports and holiday excursions. Three dozen or so large (and pricey) summer homes line the river, and their owners' families have begun to remain in Merryville year-round, adding a new dimension to the school district's divergent population.

The school district's four administrators and 18 professional staff had grown up in the area. All attended college within a 40-mile radius of Merryville and live with their families within the 10 square miles of the district's service area. Most have taken professional trips to other states and have vacationed in more distant locations. But, always, they return to their roots to live and work among friends and several generations of their families. The staff reflect the philosophy and perspectives of the citizens of Merryville. They are conservative — and very satisfied with their school system.

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 the 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.

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.

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.

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When he returned to the elementary school two weeks later, Kline brought macadamia nut 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.

The teachers were excited about the refreshments but had no discernible reaction afterward when they were invited over to the data table. When Kline asked them 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. He was frustrated as the teachers hurried out of the room with their eyes downcast, and he packed up pondering what had happened.

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: 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 felt at that moment like Winnie the Pooh, tracking around the spinney of larch trees, searching the ground fruitlessly for the woozle that was sitting just above his head in the tree.

He pulled off the road and pulled out his mobile 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 the district staff on how to gain access to the meaning of their 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. She noted that everyone on the district staff needed to develop skills in using data to make instructional decisions.

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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 1 coordinator also was present. The facilitator had staff work in various small groups as they followed her 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!"

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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*

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.