

REFORMING DATA-DRIVEN EDUCATION REFORM

Cicero INSTITUTE EDUCATION DIRECTION

As we close the No Child Left Behind era and enter the age of Every Student Succeeds, it is safe to say national reform efforts will continue to focus heavily on school accountability. As we continue to identify the gaps in performance across national, cultural, and socio-economic lines, this accountability will require accurate data and for measuring success. Our team at Education Direction continues to be thrilled by the high performance students achieve at our partner schools and districts: data continue to clearly indicate what works to support student success. The following are some of our recommendations to our partners about how to identify and track the right kinds of data on best educational practices.

We have found that several key elements of data-driven reform efforts determine the extent to which deep pedagogical improvements can occur. Most of these key elements require school leaders to reframe data use from the macro-level (using data for accountability) to the micro-level (using data for improving classroom instruction). The shift in purpose from accountability to pedagogical improvement is most likely to occur through providing data that teachers can easily integrate into the ‘rhythm’ of their existing curricular and teaching patterns.

The following key elements are not meant to represent an exhaustive or even prioritized list; we do not, for example, elaborate on the value of effective formative assessments, whose importance is paramount to achieve the ultimate goal of improving pedagogy and student learning. Instead, the examples below are relatively simple suggestions that can be implemented by school leaders to lay the

foundation for more robust data work over time.

BROADEN THE DEFINITION OF DATA

Student data extend beyond state test scores, and school leaders need to embody this belief. Often, the most relevant and timely source of student data include student class work and homework. School leaders should encourage teachers to allocate specific time in staff and department meetings to analyze student work, especially when teachers give common assignments. This should be done in teacher teams through the use of protocols that help teachers uncover the core learning that propels some students to success and holds others back.

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As teachers look at student work together, they can identify and address standards and sub-standards with which students struggle. Additionally, looking at student work with other teachers—more so than looking at traditional assessment results—creates the environment for colleagues to make pedagogical adjustments based on others’ experiences.

MAKE REPORTS ACCESSIBLE

INTELLECTUALLY ACCESSIBLE

Teachers should not have to spend significant time trying to understand data reports. Many reports we have seen include pages of tabular

data with unfamiliar headings, references, and notations. Reports should instead be comprised of simple graphs and charts from which insights can be quickly gleaned.

PHYSICALLY ACCESSIBLE

Data portals that require multiple, non-intuitive mouse clicks to find reports go underutilized. PowerPoint presentations and other software used to disseminate data are real obstacles for many teachers and are often poorly stored and difficult to retrieve. In many cases, the most effective reports (those that are leveraged by teachers to make instructional decisions) are one-page, physical copies that are proactively distributed to individual teachers and teacher teams.

HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT PRACTICE

Most teachers work hard and are passionate about their work. Examining data with an eye toward teaching improvement can easily feel judgmental and cause teachers to become defensive. School leaders should encourage those examining data collaboratively to use protocols as a way to incorporate descriptive language, rather than normative language, in their work together.

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For example, one can observe that scores were lower for one standard than for others, or that a specific group of students reported higher scores than another. Observing that similar groups of students performed differently, or

that certain standards were more readily mastered in another classroom should be a conversation starter, not stopper! Staying descriptive can initially feel uncomfortable, but teachers quickly realize that it helps them see beyond their own experiences and enables them to have professional, productive, and non-defensive conversations about student learning and their instructional practices.

GIVE TIMELY FEEDBACK

In most schools, despite recent advancements in technology, test scores from common interim assessments are still not reported until well after teachers have moved on to a different instructional unit or, in some cases, school year. Formative assessment systems at the classroom level can certainly help, but common interim data returned quickly, on a predictable timetable, can also be relevant to a teacher's current students and content.

Providing timely assessment allows teachers to make pedagogical adjustments to improve student learning before moving on to the next instructional unit. Or, at the very least, it enables teachers to remediate and differentiate instruction throughout the next unit of study. When data are returned on a predictable timetable, leaders can schedule to allow for collaborative discussions before moving on to other material.

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The elements listed above are powerfully simple, but they are often ignored in schools and districts across the US. We recommend school and district leaders begin small, with

policies—such as the ones above—that allow teachers to quickly experience success in using data. As teachers experience these ‘quick wins’ and the value of using data to improve instruction therein, they will be more likely to commit to more substantial data practices in the long run.

Using data to hold schools accountable can be a useful endeavor and will likely be a part of American public schools for the foreseeable future. However, when district and school leaders make data more useful and relevant for teachers to use individually and collaboratively, they take an important first step toward creating the kind of data system and data culture that will enable deep instructional improvement and sustainable, scalable gains in student learning.

Education Direction specializes in school transformation by working with school and district staff to design and implement better teaming, instruction, collaboration, and progress monitoring. We integrate inductive problem solving with data analytics to guide meaningful education reform.

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