# Principal Matters

## Journal for Secondary School Leaders in Australia

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# The real work of school teams

American educators MICHAEL E. HICKEY and RONALD S. THOMAS say that data analysis in schools must be focused on the achievements of individual students, and integrated into the daily instructional planning process.

**WE** have trained literally hundreds of school improvement team (SIT) members through our work at a university leadership centre and, in a previous life, as leaders of large school districts. We taught them how to set rigorous goals on district and state assessments and how to mine their annual test data for every nuance. We taught them how to write mammoth plans detailing school-wide initiatives to address achievement gaps. We've watched as schools struggled to implement all these projects, together with everything else they were trying to do, with minimum buy-in from their teachers, who were totally absorbed with their own classroom concerns.

Usually only a small portion of these carefully-designed plans were carried out. In fact, data expert Mike Schmoker estimates only about 10% of school-wide plans actually occur (1). When we have cited this conjecture for administrative groups, most principals nod and smile knowingly. '*Yes, that's about right*', they admit. Finally, we sympathised with school leaders when all these planning and implementation efforts failed to produce the test results they had hoped for.

## Our mea culpa

We were wrong in focusing our attention solely on this kind of total school improvement training. We now know better. Let's face it. The days of the school improvement team as the primary data analyser for the school are over (as if they ever existed at a high level of quality).

We now know that the school-wide data that SITs must use is usually way too general and, according to testing guru James Popham, is 'instructionally insensitive' (2). That is, they are not designed to provide information useful to teachers in driving instruction. Their purpose is merely to produce an accountability score. We erred when we tried to get annual required test data to do more than it was ever intended to do. In addition, as every team member knows, the data used to develop school-wide plans is usually way out-of-date well before it arrives and is often based on students who have moved on to a new grade and a new teacher.

Over time, we observed that school-wide plans based on annual test data alone do not consider the wide variations that usually exist within, and between, grade levels and subject areas and usually result in very broad strategies to improve the overall performance of the school that is required to meet progress goals. The needs of individual students and teachers are lost in this search for the 'silver bullet' that will make the difference school-wide.

Besides, the make-up of a typical school improvement team (often the principal, a teacher from each grade, the media specialist, a few parents, and perhaps someone from the central office) and the fact that SITs typically meet once a month or less, make it impossible for this diverse group to focus on the details of student performance that are necessary for improvement on a daily basis.

Most damaging of all, we are now painfully aware that the effectiveness of the plan in improving student performance on the required test will not be known until the next assessment, perhaps a year away. These and other reasons hardly make SIT sessions the right environment for honest, in-depth, and real-time data analysis to occur.

## Grade level teams analyse data

Data analysis is too important to be done using only annual assessment data and only on a sporadic basis in school improvement teams. We believe that this critical work must occur, instead, on a regular basis in grade-level, content-area, and vertical teams and should be embedded into their ongoing instructional planning efforts. We have called the work of these teams a classroom-focused improvement process, affectionately known as CFIP.

What does the CFIP cycle look like at the classroom level? To kick-start the process, we work with grade, department, interdisciplinary, or vertical team members to complete a structured analysis of the three types of assessment data that might be available for their students:

- **EXTERNAL DATA.** This is data from state and national tests, including those that count for required progress goals.
- **BENCHMARK DATA.** This is data from district-wide or school-wide tests given to all the students in a given grade or course at about the same time.
- **CLASSROOM DATA.** This is assessment data from individual teachers.

Key questions we try to answer include:

- What are the strengths of the students (as specifically as possible)?
- What are their weaknesses (as specifically as possible)?
- Who are the students who need interventions or enrichments and on what should these interventions and enrichments focus?
- What are the instructional implications from what we have learned about student performance as we move forward in the curriculum to present new content?

While this may seem like a relatively time-consuming task, it is essential for teachers to understand the current performance status of their students on a variety of measures before they begin instruction. We believe it is time very well spent.

Here are the next steps, as we have seen them work successfully:

- Team members use the results of the data analysis and required standards documents to identify lesson objectives, develop a few common benchmark assessments that all the teachers will give at about the same time, and plan instructional strategies for the next unit collaboratively.
- Team members individually teach engaging lessons focused on the identified objectives for the unit and evaluate student understandings and skills using their own teacher-developed assessments as well as a few common formative assessments that 'best fit' the identified outcomes.
- Team members jointly examine and reflect on the results from the common assessments, make flexible grouping decisions for follow-up instruction, and identify individual students who require enrichments and interventions.
- Team members regroup students and implement the required follow-up, determine the scope of instruction for the next lesson series in the unit based on ongoing assessment data, and repeat the cycle.

We believe that this is data analysis at its best, integrated into ongoing instructional planning and carried out at the classroom level, where it will do the most good. Data analysis is the real work of grade level, department, and vertical teams, and because few schools are currently functioning at a high level of quality on all these steps, we believe this is where we need to focus our resources at the local, state, and national levels.

## School improvement teams build capacity

This is not to say that school improvement teams do not have an important role. They have an essential job, but it is not using only annual school-wide data to craft an encyclopaedic list of strategies that are disconnected from the actual needs of classroom teachers and that may or may not occur. The most important job of the SIT, instead, is to build the capacity of grade-level and content-area teams to do their classroom-embedded data analysis and planning work effectively.

School improvement teams build school capacity for effective grade-level team planning by, first, crafting and keeping alive a powerful student achievement-oriented agenda to drive the school. Leadership literature is replete with calls for carefully crafted and shared vision and mission statements. We have seen many teams breathe a collective sigh of relief when the word smithing is finished and all stakeholders 'sign on' to finalised statements.

But elegantly worded mission and vision statements mean nothing unless they are 'lived' every day by the entire staff. Some of the most powerful professional development we've implemented involves giving faculty members everyday problematic school situations and asking them to identify -- in clear and specific language -- the things that staff members can do and say to demonstrate that they 'live' the vision and mission. The key is to push for preciseness and concreteness in the responses. After a vetting process, these lists become the actions that all school staff members can be held accountable for performing when similar situations occur. Secondly, SITs build the capacity of grade-level teams to be good data analysts when they model the

use of data to drive decision making in the school. Much decision making in schools is done by a process that professional learning community expert Robert Eaker calls 'averaging opinions'. When we 'average opinions', he says, we call teachers together, ask for their thoughts on a topic, find an idea that most can live with, and bring that recommendation forth (3).

Instead, teams modelling data-based decision making should practice 'collective inquiry', described by Eaker as bringing all the relevant data regarding a topic forward, displaying it publicly in an effective matter, and making decisions in light of the preponderance of the data (4). To us, when SITs follow this model, they make the discussion of school and student performance data an important part of the school culture and are modelling best practices for grade-level teams.

## Building capacity involves parents

Third, SITs have a vital role in connecting the school with parents and other stakeholders. National standards require schools to engage parents as full and equal partners in the education of their children, thus extending the child's experiences beyond the school and into the home and community. SITs build the capacity of teams to be effective data analysts when they help create a broad understanding among parents and community members of what 'living the student-achievement oriented vision' means. This includes the importance of using limited instructional time to the best advantage and of working to implement partnerships that are centred on increasing student learning.

Finally, school improvement teams build capacity for effective grade-level team planning by helping to provide the required financial and human resources. The most precious resource that teams usually need is the time to meet and plan, enabling them to fully engage in the classroom-focused improvement process. Parental and school board support are often key to supplying the teacher time needed for collaborative planning, professional development, and meaningful assessment of student work.

Unfortunately, we have seen many excellent collaborative planning schedules die a quick (and ugly) death because the community was convinced that teachers are only working when they are standing in front of students.

The SIT has a major role in assuring that the overall allocation of resources clearly reflects the instructional focus of the school, that budget allocation decisions are based on data, and that support remains strong in the community for ensuring that education remains the Number 1 priority.

## Analyse the work of your teams

Take a good look at how data analysis is conducted in your school and the plans that teams generate. Are you making the same mistakes we did? Do school improvement teams focus solely on school-level annual test data? Do the plans that these teams generate list a million and one school-wide initiatives, most of which will probably never be done?

Or, is data analysis in your school centred in classrooms, focused on the achievement of each individual student, and integrated into the daily instructional planning process? Most importantly, does your school improvement team focus on building the capacity of grade-level groups to be successful data analysts by developing, 'living', promoting, and providing the resources for a student-achievement vision of school success? Student performance in your school may well depend on your answer.



Notes

1.Schmoker M. 'Tipping point: From feckless reform to substantive instructional improvement'. In *Phi Delta Kappan*. 2004; 85 (6): 424-432.

2. Popham WJ. 'Are your state's tests instructionally insensitive?' In: *Harvard Education Letter. Spotlight on high-stakes testing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press; 2003. p. 17-22.

3. DuFour R, Eaker R, DuFour R, Sparks D. *Let's talk about PLC: Getting started video series: Collaboration.* National Educational Service.

4. DuFour R, DuFour R, Eaker R, Many, T. *Learning by doing.* Bloomington (IN): Solution Tree; 2006, p. 4.

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