

Eight ingredients of productive data analyses for improving student learning

Why *School Teams* Don't Analyze Data

BY RONALD S. THOMAS

Envision this: Four teachers on their school's 5th-grade team meet to analyze data at least weekly. During a typical 45-minute planning session, the teachers use a protocol to study results of an assessment on two-digit division they all administered a few days before.

The teachers start by identifying the strengths and needs of most students and by deciding whether gradewide re-grouping or re-teaching of key concepts is needed. Next they plan more intensive, small-group interventions on one-digit divisors for the handful of students who still need them, as well as an activity to challenge the high-flyers ready for more advanced work.

Finally, the four teachers discuss a new strategy to engage reluctant learners they will try in the next unit.

The teachers walk away feeling the meeting was a good use of their time and respecting anew the expertise of their colleagues.

Now, picture this: Four teachers on the 4th-grade team at another school value their independence above all. They have common planning time scheduled several days a week, but if the teachers get together at all, it is

merely to trade a worksheet or two or decide logistics, such as how to transfer the math manipulatives or when to schedule the field trip.

The teachers view the common assessments administered by their school district as a burden that both they and their students must endure.

A Shared Responsibility

Whether schools have productive data-analysis sessions leading to instructional improvements and increased student learning or meetings that are a waste of time and resources could well hinge on the structures that are put in place by and the expectations of school and district leadership.

As I have worked with more than 200 school teams as a data coach for the past 20 years, I have seen team after team struggle to become a truly collaborative professional learning community that analyzes and acts on data effectively. Why is this so, and what can school system leaders do to equip teams with the tools they need to be successful?

I have identified several necessary conditions that schools must have in place to be effective in this role.



► **PUT THE RIGHT TEAMS IN PLACE.** In his book *Leading Teams*, Harvard Business School professor J. Richard Hackman differentiates between “real teams” and “co-acting groups.” Applying his definition of co-acting groups to schools, teachers may have classrooms located alongside one other and regularly meet to share ideas, but each teacher’s lessons and students’ results are independent of the others.

In real teams, however, members share the responsibility for the success of all students. Team members rely on

each other for increasing the learning of all the students in the team or grade. It’s not a scenario of “my students” and “your students” but rather “our students.” Interdependence for student outcomes is the most important hallmark of collaboration.

Team members tend to talk about what they have in common. Because grade-level teams in elementary schools share standards and assessments, they usually are the most effective configuration for data analysis. At the secondary level, course-based teams (such as the high school

Algebra 1 team or the 6th grade language arts team) are best. Interdisciplinary teams are not as effective for data analysis as members usually do not have the same content standards to meet or the same assessments for students to master.

► **BUILD A CULTURE OF TRUST.** A significant level of trust must exist among team members and between school leadership and faculty. Administrators need to empower the staff to act decisively to raise student learning as long as their actions can be supported by data. As Richard DuFour pointed out in *Learning by Doing*, even though this level of trust takes time to generate, leaders can't wait until the perfect positive culture is in place to have teachers start the data dialogue.

Struggling to begin the conversation, implementing the decisions made during the dialogue and, most importantly, seeing student learning increase are the most effective builders of trust.



Ronald Thomas (center) trains teachers how to make use of their student data during workshops at Towson University.

► **USE A PROTOCOL TO INCREASE COLLABORATION.** Often, having a process in place can be useful to structure difficult team dialogues. In *The Power of Protocols*, Joseph McDonald and others define protocols as “guidelines [that] everyone understands and has agreed to, leading to conversations that school people are usually not in the habit of having.”

Based on the ability of protocols to build trust and improve team performance, Michael Hickey, a colleague at the Center for Leadership in Education at Towson University and a former superintendent, and I partnered with many talented teachers to develop a six-step data analysis

protocol known as the Classroom-Focused Improvement Process®.

Using this protocol, teacher teams answer a series of questions that guide their analysis of district or classroom assessment results to identify (1) patterns of class-wide strengths and weaknesses in student understanding of the content standards under study; (2) individual students ready for enrichments and interventions and the instructional focus that the differentiations should take; and (3) instructional upgrades they will make in the next unit. A focused exploration of powerful questions in a logical sequence enables teacher teams to begin to develop the skills they need to be collaborative.

► **ARTICULATE A COMPELLING REASON TO ANALYZE DATA COLLABORATIVELY.** As leaders in schools and districts, we've lectured, cajoled and even begged staff to conduct data-driven conversations. But in many cases we have not provided what Harvard's Hackman and others have labeled a “compelling direction” to energize team members and engage their talents.

It is becoming increasingly clear that justifying data analysis to teachers based on increasing test scores and meeting adequate yearly progress or Race to the Top goals is far less persuasive than basing improvement initiatives on the reason most educators entered and remained in the profession — to help students learn.

The message to teachers must be this: These are *our* kids and their learning. Our work is not about abstract concepts of state accountability or school improvement. We did not get into this business to increase state test scores. We are here to help children learn. In the midst of our hard work, we all need to recall and remind our staff of why we do what we do.

Teachers must receive a clear message from school administrators, too, that reviewing and analyzing data is to be done solely to improve their teaching practice and eventually student performance. It is not undertaken to prove to school leadership that instruction is effective. Making every data-based discussion an accountability point for teachers is a fatal flaw that many first-generation, data-driven leaders have committed. As states enact Race to the Top teacher evaluation legislation, it will be even more important to differentiate between using data to prove teacher competence and using data to improve instruction.

► **BE CLEAR ABOUT THE AUTONOMY TO BE GIVEN TO TEAMS.** To enable collaborative teams to be successful, leaders must be clear about the extent of autonomy team members will have to act on the results of their data dialogues, such as re-teaching essential concepts or altering the timing of future units. Either teachers have the autonomy to act based on their data or they must religiously follow pacing guides that identify what must be taught each day of the year. They can't do both at the same time.

“Going off” the pacing guide and re-teaching to the whole class may be warranted when:

■ The knowledge or skills in which many students are weak are instrumental to their success later in the course or in other courses (or represent, what Doug Reeves has called, the “power standards”);

■ Weaknesses shared by most of the class are demonstrated from more than one source, such as in a district benchmark as well as through ongoing classroom assessments; and

■ A different and engaging strategy will be used to re-teach the content, other than the way it was originally presented.

It must be clear to teachers that teams are expected, not just permitted, to spend additional time on essential curriculum content that many students have not mastered and to modify the content, timing, teaching methods and/or assignments for the next unit, based on documented student needs.

► **PROVIDE ONGOING TIME, SUPPORT AND COACHING.**

Because working in teams can be chaotic and challenging, regular coaching from school leadership team members is essential to sustain top performance. Process feedback about the internal operation of teams is particularly important as teams are struggling to establish a collaborative environment.

Studies from the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative, cited by *Education Week* in 2004, found the likelihood for success in increasing student learning is greater when teachers on a team have common planning time during the school day and have structured data meetings at least once every two weeks and more frequently if possible.

► **BUILD IN SELF-ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS.**

Most teams will need assistance in putting internal mechanisms in place to follow up on decisions made during data-driven dialogues. Effective protocols often include templates that teams complete as their conversation progresses. As the meeting ends, the chair e-mails to the members the template containing the actions team members committed to take. A copy can be forwarded to school administrators so they can better monitor and support the team’s work.

Follow-up is improved when faculty members are expected to document at the next team meeting the outcomes of the interventions, enrichments and instructional improvements that they implemented. Lesson studies, walk-throughs and periodic data reviews by the team with administrators also can serve to increase internal team accountability for follow-through.

► **CONNECT SMALL VICTORIES TO SPECIFIC ACTIONS AND CELEBRATE THEM.**

Everyone recognizes the importance of celebrating small victories during the early stages of any change process. An essential part of celebrations often overlooked, however, is the intentional connection by school leaders of the specific actions of staff, such as increased collaboration and structured data analyses, to the student learning results that followed.

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Decisive Actions

Where might your most potent leverage point be in increasing team performance? When you reflect on the effectiveness of teams in your district, ask yourself: Do your schools have real teams acting on a clearly articulated, compelling direction to reduce learning gaps by analyzing data collaboratively? Are data dialogues structured by protocols that lead teachers to take definitive instructional actions that increase student learning?

Also, are team members clear about leaders’ expectations that they act decisively, as the data warrant, to modify their instruction to address identified weaknesses? Do team members have in place their own internal accountability mechanisms that result in follow-up and thoughtful reflection on what works and why?

Student achievement in your district may hinge on your answers. ■

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Additional Resources

Ronald Thomas suggests these information sources relating to his subject:

► “Achieving with Data: How High-Performing School Systems Use Data To Improve Instruction for Elementary Schools,” a 2007 study by the Center on Educational Governance, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, that identifies key strategies to strengthen the culture for data-based decision making (www.newschools.org/about/publications/achieving-with-data).

► Classroom-Focused Improvement Process, a question-based protocol that school teams use to analyze assessment data, and a complete set of templates available from the Maryland State Department of Education (www.mdk12.org/process/cfip).

► “Use of Data at the Local Level: From Accountability to Instructional Improvement,” a 2010 U.S. Department of Education report on current state of data use in schools that may be used as a benchmark against which to assess your district’s status (www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/use-of-education-data/use-of-education-data.pdf).