

Crunching the Numbers

Districts are collecting more data than ever, but are they using it to improve performance?

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Is your district data rich but knowledge poor? With so much public attention devoted to accountability in education, many districts are gathering more data than ever before—from student test scores to departmental performance indicators. However, capturing data is only the first step. Many districts do not use the information they have to analyze which instructional or administrative practices need attention, and few create action plans or shift resources to improve those practices.

By asking timely questions, your school board can find out where your district stands—and help build a culture of inquiry that uses school data to improve instruction and other functions.

Taking the next step

In a recent study, we found that many districts have a long way to go in focusing systemwide attention on improving student outcomes. The study focused on 28 city districts that were identified as leaders in adopting performance-driven practices; that is, using student achievement data to improve school performance. All 28 districts had taken the

important step of adopting clear and well-articulated goals that helped focus their systems around student achievement. In addition, all 28 had ramped up efforts to collect data about student performance and break it down in ways that could provide more meaningful analysis.

But the districts were not as effective in taking the additional step of creating systems and establishing routine practices to analyze and use performance results to drive improvement. For example:

- Only six of the 28 districts said superintendents had desktop access to data they could break down in meaningful ways.
- Only 12 had developed systematic ways to review the cost-effectiveness of academic or other programs.
- Only a few districts had linked human resources and payroll systems to finance and budget systems.
- Almost all the districts reported that recruiting qualified teachers was a high priority, but only nine had developed explicit recruitment strategies such as early hiring or streamlined application policies.
- Only 12 had incentives in place to attract and keep teachers or principals in low-performing schools or in areas

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of critical need.

Yet each district appeared to be making progress in selected areas, and, taken as a whole, several promising developments emerge:

Instructional leadership. Districts are beginning to shift the role of the principal from that of administrator to that of instructional leader. In this role, principals visit classrooms more frequently and develop relationships with master teachers. Principals and master teachers are charged with assessing needs and delivering professional development at each school, so that training and support are tied to student achievement gaps. Principals are encouraged to view all of their roles—such as hiring and firing, budget planning, managing people, and community relations—in relation to supporting instructional leadership and improving student achievement. In practical terms, this requires districts to give principals greater authority in a wide range of areas (including budget) and holding them accountable for results.

Revitalized staff meetings. Many districts are remaking staff meetings, so that rather than using these critical discussions between principals and teachers to resolve admin-

istrative issues, they are spending the bulk of meeting time analyzing student data, developing action plans to improve achievement, monitoring program results, and sharing information about instructional practices.

Professional development. Many districts also are transforming professional development from “seat time” to “support time.” Instead of simply attending a course or lecture and getting credit for it, teachers receive professional development at key moments, often through individualized means, such as increasing meaningful interactions among teachers and principals, engaging teachers in dialogues about practice, providing mentoring opportunities with master teachers and instructional coaches, and following through with real-time support after the training. These efforts—referred to as “coaching,” “real-time training,” “at-elbow support,” “peer support,” and “just-in-time training”—can metaphorically break down walls between classrooms and use what teachers know to create change.

Accessing and using data. In many districts, this new professional development includes training principals and teachers to access and use data to analyze student performance gains and weaknesses. Although this training has

been typically limited to improving data access and technology use, some districts are beginning to help teachers develop the skills they need to use data to better understand and improve classroom practice. As one chief of curriculum and instruction said, “We are a data-rich system, but the data analysis is poor. I think we need to do more training and professional development at the local level to ... help them learn how to use data.”

A springboard to change

Developing better ways to analyze and use information lies at the heart of systemic and meaningful school reform. Too often, school reform efforts are seen as disconnected demands in disparate areas such as standards, assessments, curricular developments, finance, human resources, and organizational capacity. What often is missing is under-

standing the processes and practices that can enable districts and schools to use their collective knowledge and experience to inform decision making.

When teachers and administrators engage in continuous learning practices—when they analyze and use information to build and share what they know—they are more likely to shape reforms to fit the needs of their schools. By actively identifying gaps in student achievement and other areas, teachers and administrators can focus their resources where improvement is needed most.

These continuous learning practices include the following key elements:

Clear and rigorous student achievement goals. Everyone in the school community must be able to articulate and agree to uphold high goals for student achievement, and must work together to align organizational processes and systems to meet those goals. Objectives for student achievement gains at individual schools should be clearly connected to and support districtwide student achievement goals.

Efforts to gather and assess information. Ongoing processes and practices should be in place to bring teachers and administrators together to discuss and effectively measure performance against goals at frequent intervals.

Action plans based on performance results. Teachers, principals, and district administrators need practice and support in using performance outcomes to develop action plans to maximize student achievement and other goals.

Ongoing feedback loop. Districts and schools need to establish routine processes—through staff meetings and district/school interactions—to regularly monitor the effectiveness of action plans.

Adopting continuous improvement practices in one functional area, such as instruction or human resources, cannot be fully successful without parallel advances in other areas—such as professional development or finance. For example, districts that provide more ongoing coaching and support for teachers may find that teachers are more likely to share what they know with each other and with principals. Finance departments that have agreed to monitor their own success at least partially in terms of student achievement goals may be more flexible about shifting funds to areas that are more likely to affect student outcomes. Likewise, human resource departments with automated information systems may find that they have more time to focus on the effective recruitment and retention of teachers and staff.

What can school boards do?

School boards play a pivotal role in promoting and supporting district efforts to adopt continuous learning processes. Boards that have a positive and dynamic relationship with their district leaders, our study found, are more likely to engage actively in reviewing and assessing progress toward district goals. Building on such a relationship, you can

Obstacles along the way

Districts that want to engage in systemwide reform face significant hurdles. These challenges and their effects vary significantly by district, but the following are common:

■ **Lack of leadership continuity.** Districts where a strong superintendent has been in place for several years appear to have greater success in implementing major improvements across departments and functions.

■ **Fragmentation and lack of coordination.** A significant challenge is getting bureaucratic departments to work cross-functionally to improve services in ways that can help principals and teachers improve student achievement. It is also difficult in many districts to open the classroom doors so teachers can share what they know.

■ **Lack of technology infrastructure and timely data.** Access to relevant, reliable, and timely information is essential if school employees are to ground their decisions in the context of district and school needs. Lack of technical resources, data, and analytical assistance will affect decision making at all levels.

■ **Organizational culture.** Traditionally, the culture of many school districts has not been geared toward sharing and analyzing student achievement results to improve instruction and programs. Transforming this culture into a robust culture of inquiry—including a willingness to explore and improve on mistakes and organizational weaknesses—is difficult and complex but crucial. Creating a culture that embraces inquiry and change often requires providing incentives and support systems.

■ **Fiscal constraints and underfunding.** Modest fiscal challenges can force districts to prioritize their needs. But when districts are seriously underfunded, they often fall into crisis mode and do not have the flexibility to allocate funding to significant reform-related areas, such as professional development, technical resources, and student intervention programs.

engage your district in continuous learning processes in a number of practical ways.

Set high districtwide goals for student achievement. Work with the superintendent to establish and articulate clear districtwide goals that focus on high achievement for all students, and be sure to engage parents, union leaders, and business groups in this effort. Send the clear message that the district believes every student can reach high academic standards.

Tie school objectives to district goals. Ask the superintendent to develop specific strategies for connecting school-level objectives and action plans to district goals for student achievement. Each year, many schools update broad improvement plans that are not specifically connected to districtwide goals and do not sufficiently target student achievement gaps. To counter this, many districts establish routine practices and support for principals and teachers to work together to assess student needs, establish clear achievement objectives, and create intervention and action plans to meet those objectives. Some districts also include school site achievement objectives as part of principal—and sometimes teacher—evaluation.

Get evidence of monitoring at the school and district level. Ask how schools are reviewing student achievement progress—and request quarterly updates with detailed evidence about which schools are meeting their targets and which are not. In many districts, school leaders must meet with district leaders at least quarterly and analyze evidence about the effectiveness of intervention efforts. This requires schools and districts to provide access to reliable student data in a timely fashion. If the district cannot deliver on these information management needs, then board members need to address this. Attending to this concern at the board level not only raises the bar for schools to address student needs early in the year, but also shifts some responsibility back to the district to provide support for struggling schools.

Align finances and human resources to achieve district and school goals. Ask the superintendent to show how budgets, finance policies, and human resource policies are being shaped and revised to meet district goals for student achievement. In many districts, the reverse actually happens. Require evidence that the district is prioritizing its own goals across departments, connecting dollar amounts to those goals, and monitoring departments' effectiveness in meeting those goals. Ask principals about ways to increase budgetary flexibility so that their schools have the resources they need to implement their action plans. Also ask master teachers how to improve human resource policies so that low-performing schools can get the teachers they need.

Target professional development to student achievement gaps. Ask for evidence that professional development opportunities are specifically connected to districtwide goals and gaps in student achievement, and in

teacher and principal training. Because most principals and teachers have had little or no training in using student achievement results to guide practice, many districts also require professional development in this area. The value of a school's teachers lies not in what they know, but in the extent to which they share that knowledge with students and other teachers. Ask for the district's strategies for getting master teachers to share what they know in ongoing, structured ways, and sit in on some of those activities.

Enlist union participation. Meet with union leaders and ask them to be more involved in ramping up schools' effectiveness. Ask the superintendent to develop and implement annual surveys of parents, staff members, teachers, and administrators about the effectiveness of the board and of administrative and instructional efforts districtwide. Demand that the superintendent post the results for the board, for each administrative department, and for each school. Insist on transparency and self-assessment at the top if you expect teachers to feel more comfortable sharing what they know with each other.

Building a culture of inquiry

Given the challenges facing education today, school boards must do all they can to create the conditions for continuous improvement within schools—not because people are clamoring for reform, but because practices of continuous improvement can provide schools with ways to connect reform demands with actual student needs.

Building a culture of inquiry and implementing continuous learning practices are important steps toward helping school systems become performance driven. Not surprising, building such a culture requires establishing a level of consistency, trust, transparency, and self-reflection that begins at the top and that affects practices and behaviors at all other levels of the organization.

Many strategies are available for effecting such change. For board members, perhaps one of the most effective is simply, straightforwardly, and, at every juncture, asking for evidence and being willing to examine what you learn. ■

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"Anatomy of School System Improvement: Performance-Driven Practices in Urban School Districts," the study on which this article is based, was conducted in partnership with NewSchools Venture Fund and with support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. It is available online from www.newschools.org.

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