INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE
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The Quest for Quality Instructional Data

Administrators and teachers are learning how educational data can guide their efforts to improve student learning. Those who have truly mastered using data to inform decisions have a more comprehensive view about the relationship among data, the professionals who use it, as well as what happens in the classroom. The most successful school districts are embracing the philosophy that accurate data plays a critical role in driving instruction and making informed decisions. But there is still much more to learn.

Many districts are still in need of good instructional data during the school year, not only when summative assessment scores arrive. Creating quality interim assessments and aligning them to student learning goals (academic standards) are critical actions in determining the next instructional steps and, ultimately, increasing academic achievement for all students. Progressive school districts have pioneered the practice of using formative assessment to improve academic achievement.

However, along with their successes have come some painful lessons. For instance, several districts have spent large sums of money to develop teacher-made assessment items that do not reflect the calibration of high-stakes test items. A number of schools purchased item banks that were used long ago for another purpose; therefore, they did not reflect the complexity of current state standards. Still others relied on text-embedded assessments that often included a myriad of additional skills and standards from a variety of grade levels. Unfortunately, none of these actions contributed to the marked improvement of student achievement. As a result, many of these districts are seeking newly released item banks that are aligned to state standards, reflect the rigor and calibration of state tests, and can be validated through correlation studies based on summative and formative data.

Managing Academic Data

Given high-quality data, districts must learn how to properly use hardware and software as an instructional tool. Educators are recognizing the advantages of using state-of-the-art technology, and are anxious to increase the learning curve for all administrators and teachers.

Recently, I visited a district that has a strong commitment to using technology for guiding instructional decisions. The district had transitioned from a limited amount of state-released assessment data to a full-scale, Web-based, instructional data management system. One of the principals brought up the issue of speed: “I had to wait four minutes to bring up my AYP results for all disaggregated groups and grade levels.” Other principals chimed in with similar complaints. The superintendent calmly reminded the group that last year at this time they had waited four months to receive their data.

The good news is that these are great examples of educators whose schools benefit from the advantages of Web-based, real-time data management. The bad news is that there are many more educators who need access to these technology-based tools.

Having accurate data about your students’ academic achievement at your fingertips is a powerful tool, but using an advanced data management system is not always intuitive for the user. Administrators and teachers need solid professional development support and guided practice to become better users and consumers of academic data. Fortunately, instructional data management systems have a variety of user levels. Less advanced levels are easier to use and provide basic information quickly. But as more complex information is desired, the user needs to develop more sophisticated skills in order to navigate the system and gather the required information.

‘The Scripted Years’

Once administrators and teachers have quality data and the skills to access it, they ask the proverbial question: “Now what?” To fully answer this question, we must look at the history of data-driven instruction. For many years, educators learned how to teach through methodologies, strategies, textbooks, programs and professional development. I call this era “the scripted years.” Sound educational approaches were used with thousands of students by ensuring teachers adhered...
to the prescribed methods and materials. They measured the success of these approaches through annual summative test scores. Once a year, school staffs would review the results of their annual scores and try to change practices that did not meet their expectations. In short, they answered the "now what" question during an annual event, rather than seeing it as a continual improvement process.

But public education’s "client" began to change, and various scripted methods were not successful in helping all students learn. Many teachers began to face the disheartening realization that one approach could not possibly work for all students. Good teaching required a deeper understanding of student learning patterns and needs.

There's no doubt teachers benefit from learning additional strategies, but they must be able to determine student academic needs and prescribe a course of action to meet those needs when all is said and done. For the majority of teachers, this opportunity to use their professional skills is overdue. Teachers welcome the challenge and seek the expertise required to support every student's success.

Making a Difference

Today, technology has provided the means to access more information with increased frequency. We can now monitor how well one student is doing or what thousands of students are learning during the school year. We can also give teachers the information they need to analyze the effectiveness of their current instructional efforts. Thus, teachers can understand almost immediately what worked and what did not, as well as analyze their effectiveness with an entire class or an individual student.

This enables educators to weave an improvement process into the very fiber of teaching and learning through quality assessments and opportunities for teachers to review and discuss the implications of data, and then work together to plan academic interventions. Placing technology and high-quality assessment data in the hands of administrators and teachers is nothing short of empowering professionals to use their skills and abilities to enhance the quality of education.

Slowly but surely, districts are reinforcing their core philosophies with the belief that teachers and principals make the difference. While learning to use data to make instructional decisions cannot be totally scripted, it must involve each educator’s ability to comprehend, analyze and act in a manner that produces educational results for all students. Don’t look now, but it is happening nationwide.

### District Snapshots: Schools Find Success With Data Management System

#### Teachers Dig In With Data. Three years ago, Paramount High School in California was in trouble. Only 20% of its 10th-grade students passed the state High School Exit Exam, and grades were falling. But with the assistance of outside coaching and a new data management system, teachers worked in course-specific teams to align standards, instruction and assessment. Focusing and analyzing their efforts soon led to changes in classroom practice. Teachers planned good first teaching lessons as well as interventions for students who needed extra assistance. Paramount High School ended last school year with 69% of its students passing the High School Exit Exam.

#### Principals Designate Academic Planning Time. Teachers in California’s Snowline School District had been using a data management system and a process for analyzing student data together for several years when their principals discovered a new opportunity. After attending school-based grade level and department Structured Teacher Planning Time meetings, Snowline principals were anxious to share findings, innovative ideas and progress with their peers. They designated quarterly principal meetings as Structured Principal Planning Time meetings; now, they bring their school data into a setting of collegial analysis, problem solving and resource allocation. When schools have similar needs, they ban together to provide targeted support.

#### Data Using Teacher Leaders. Clark County School District in Nevada is well-known for its rapid student growth. How does one keep up with 280,000 students and growing? Yet, within four districtwide professional development days, more than 2,000 teachers were taught how to read the results of their most recent formative assessment test, how to engage their peers in analyzing the data, and how to prompt teacher-designed interventions. Because of this, Clark County celebrated the overwhelming success of their teachers’ ability to provide quality leadership in almost every style.