How to Use the *Closing the Gap Professional Development Toolkit*

The *Toolkit* is designed to be used both in group-facilitated sessions and by individuals in self-directed learning. Customized instructions are provided for each type of professional development. Whether using the *Toolkit* in group settings or as part of self-study, all users are encouraged to read the *Getting Started* section first. The *Getting Started* section provides a comprehensive overview of the *Toolkit* and its resources. Completion of this section will ensure that users have a solid foundation and the basic knowledge necessary for successfully completing the remainder of the professional development curriculum.
Introduction

Research, as well as best practice, has shown that school districts that take the time to analyze and use educational data not only have the ability to understand how current practices meet the needs of the larger school community, they also have the information to help teachers inform their practice, monitor the progress of their students, close achievement gaps, and motivate students with the results of their learning. While the use of educational data not only meets the accountability demands of federal mandates, it also increases student achievement.

While federally mandated data collection and testing initiatives provide schools with an abundance of educational data, often it’s not available to educators in a usable format to improve instruction and student achievement. As one Arizona teacher commented, “We always hear about ‘data-driven decisions’ but rarely find the information on how to use the data…” (Sindelar, 2010, p. i).

Some of the reasons schools have not embraced the use of data to improve educational outcomes are rooted in the fact that few states require knowledge of assessment for either teacher or administrator certification, and few universities include courses in assessment in teacher and administrator training programs. Similarly, once teachers have entered the profession, many school districts fail to provide quality professional development in the analysis and use of educational data.

The Education Community Attitudes Toward SIS/LMS Solutions report (Gartner, Inc., 2011) concludes that more than 60% of 1,000+ teachers surveyed in a national study conducted by Gartner, Inc. reported that the professional development about how to effectively use data captured by Student Information System (SIS) and Learning Management System (LMS) applications in their school districts was weak or not available. As Rick Stiggins, a nationally recognized authority on assessment, has stated, we are “a national faculty unschooled in the principles of sound assessment” (Stiggins, 2002, p. 765).
Closing the Gap Professional Development Toolkit Overview

The purpose of the Toolkit is to provide educators with a curricular plan and a set of resources needed for using educational data to strengthen instructional practice and improve student achievement. The Toolkit is the result of a collaborative effort among the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN), and Gartner, Inc. It offers a step-by-step curriculum and a cadre of professional development resources designed for district and school leaders to facilitate their training of other district and school leaders.

The professional development curriculum is divided into five sections and involves educators at all levels in the transformation of a district, school, and/or classroom into a data-driven learning environment. The five sections of the curriculum are:

- Building a Culture for the Effective Use of Educational Data
- Establishing Professional Learning Communities
- Evidence-Based Practices Supporting the Use of Educational Data
- Analyzing Data
- Technologies Enabling the Use of Educational Data

Each section of the curriculum contains resources, including videos, case studies, references to reading materials, as well as specific teaching tools, that are designed to guide educators at all levels through the process of building a data-rich culture. In addition to videos, case studies, and reading materials, each segment of the training curriculum includes five teaching tools designed to move a classroom, a school, or an entire district through the process of collecting and using meaningful educational data to increase student achievement. These teaching tools include:

- **Direct Teach** content that provides the individual with basic information necessary to meet the stated learning objectives.

- A **Checking for Understanding Worksheet** that provides the individual with an opportunity to assess his or her understanding of the Direct Teach content.

- An **Application Worksheet** that provides the individual an opportunity to apply what he or she has learned from information gathered via the Direct Teach information, the Checking for Understanding Worksheet, and the related Section Resources.
Getting Started: *Toolkit* Overview

• A **Facilitator’s Guide** that provides the training facilitator(s) with detailed instructions and related resources that are to be used in teaching each segment of the training.

• A **Facilitator’s Checklist** that assures the facilitator that key topics in the curriculum have been covered, discussed, and understood by the professional development participants.

The *Toolkit* may be implemented as a district initiative, a school initiative, a team initiative, or an individual initiative. Given the need for district support for data collection and analysis resources, school support for scheduling and evaluation, and classroom support for implementation of a data-driven instructional system, the *Toolkit* can be viewed as a comprehensive, three-pronged approach to building a data-rich culture. However, districts and schools that already have some pieces of the curriculum and the related resources in place may choose to simply use segments of the curriculum to strengthen or transition to a more data-rich culture.

While the *Toolkit* may be implemented as a district, school, or team initiative, individuals may want to explore all or a particular portion of the training curriculum on their own. Though the power of an entire district or school using data to increase student achievement is impressive, so is the power of a small team of teachers agreeing to use data and share the results of their teaching, and so is the power of an individual educator who uses data and sees the compelling evidence to practice differently (Sindelar, 2010, p. 13). In this latter instance, the *Toolkit* would be used as a self-directed learning guide that provides a self-paced mode to individuals interested in developing a data-rich culture at the district, school, or classroom level. In addition to the *Direct Teach* content, *Checking for Understanding Worksheet*, and *Application Worksheet* provided for group-facilitated trainings, the *Toolkit* has two supplementary tools for self-directed study:

• A **Self-Directed Learner’s Guide** that provides the individual users with detailed instructions and related resources that are to be used in each segment of the training.

• A **Self-Directed Learner’s Checklist** that assures the individual that key topics in the curriculum have been covered and understood.

In all situations, however, it’s important to remember that merely collecting educational data does nothing to improve learning or increase student achievement. Rather, it’s the systemic use of educational data that enhances learning and increases student achievement.
Characteristics of a Data-Rich Culture

A data-rich culture or data-driven environment is one where educational data is used to support decisions at the district, school, and classroom levels. Districts with a data-rich culture exhibit the following characteristics:

• They have an established vision and supporting goals for how data will be used to improve student achievement.

• They have a standard approach and set of resources for collecting, reporting, and analyzing student data.

• They consistently and regularly use student assessment data to inform and improve policies, interventions, and teaching approaches and to improve communication among teachers, students, and parents.

• They have a mechanism in place to continuously monitor and improve the process of collecting and analyzing data in order to enhance teaching methods and interventions.

There are many paths and approaches to achieving a more data-driven environment, and districts across the United States are at different stages along these paths. This Toolkit aims to present one approach to achieving a more data-driven culture and to provide key steps and critical resources for getting there.
Getting Started: Section Resources

References

