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I am pleased to present to you this newest edition of the New Superintendents Journal. If you have not already done so, please fill out the membership form on the last page of this journal or join AASA online (http://aasa.org/join.aspx) today. As you begin your superintendency, you will benefit from the camaraderie, support, professional development and resources that AASA offers you and your entire leadership team.

We believe that miracles happen every day in public education. But miracles take hard work. Roll up your sleeves and join us in the trenches.

With all best wishes for the year ahead,

Daniel Domenech, Executive Director
AASA, The School Superintendents Association
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ABOUT AASA
AASA, The School Superintendents Association, founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders in the United States and around the world. AASA’s mission is to support and develop effective school system leaders who are dedicated to the highest quality public education for all children. For more information, visit www.AASA.org.

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Quantifying the Successes of Public Schools

An economist measures the significant fiscal impact of a school district and its graduates on its metropolitan region

By Michael L. Walden

We live in an era when everybody has to prove themselves. Maybe blame it on globalization, a frugal consumer or a tight-fisted taxpayer, but every public body and government office is increasingly being pushed to show what it does justifies its costs.

Of course, such justification is not new to the business world. Business success is measured by the size of the profits, which is just the difference between a business’ revenues (what it receives from sales) and its costs. If a business doesn’t make a profit, it won’t last long — or if it does endure, it will be under new management. Private businesses rise and fall as profits and losses change where resources and talent go.

The attitude of proving yourself has been coming speedily to the public sector. Politicians frequently run on a platform of “bringing business principles to government,” implying that government and government agencies can be run like proprietary companies.

But can they? Government doesn’t exist to make a profit. Indeed, a strong argument can be made that government exists to perform those functions that private companies can’t do and make a profit.

So does this mean government agencies should throw up their hands and say, “Our success and performance can’t be measured”? Of course not. While profits may not be an appropriate metric for government, other measures can be developed and used. Indeed, for decades, performance-based budgeting has been applied to evaluate the degree to which government programs and agencies are meeting their stated goals in a cost-efficient manner.

Applied to Schools

The same thinking is applied to public education. In today’s times of tight budgets and higher expectations, public schools are being asked to justify their budgets and their performance like never before. While not necessarily calling for a profit calculation, citizens, parents, elected officials and some in the news media want reference points for judging the value of the spending in public schools.

Several standards have been developed, including graduation rate, dropout rate, scores on standardized tests and admissions to higher educational institutions. However, these measures are difficult to translate into dollar terms. While not every outcome can be “monetized,” if dollar values can be developed and applied, they are easy for stakeholders to comprehend and easy to compare to other factors, such as costs.

For these reasons, it is important for public schools to develop approximate monetary values of their outcomes. Previous research indicates these outcomes are centered in three areas: (1) the economic value of degrees awarded by public schools; (2) the reduction in future public costs associated with graduates of public schools; and (3) the economic impact on local wealth of successful public schools.

Economic value of degrees awarded by public schools. The idea here is simple. Perhaps like never before in history, our economy now values education. The evidence clearly shows the workplace values — and therefore pays — someone with a master’s degree more than someone with a bachelor’s degree, someone with a bachelor’s degree more than...
MEETING CHALLENGES

someone with a high school degree and — importantly for public schools — someone with a high school degree more than a high school dropout.

Therefore, we can expect a person graduating from high school to earn more than someone who did not graduate. But the value of the high school degree is more than the one-year difference in earnings. The value of the high school degree is the difference in the lifetime earnings of a high school graduate and nongraduate.

Yet there’s more. Research also shows that high school graduates who performed better in high school (for example, better scores on standardized tests or a high GPA) have better academic performance in college and a greater likelihood of attaining a college degree. So public schools that improve the academic performance of their graduates can claim some of the additional lifetime earnings of those graduates who go on to receive college degrees.

Reduction in future public costs. Another positive outcome of public schools is the impact of their graduates on future public costs, particularly public costs for crime control and health care. Again, the evidence is clear. Public costs for crime control and health care are lower for high school graduates than for high school dropouts.

Two possible reasons exist. First, the education students acquire in high school may teach them how to better care for themselves and lead to safe and healthy lifestyles. Second, because high school graduates have higher lifetime earnings than high school dropouts, graduates have more motivation to stay healthy and safe in order to achieve those earnings.

Economic impact on local wealth. Public schools can have an impact on local wealth, primarily property wealth, in two ways.

First, as local schools generate graduates who remain in the local economy, those graduates will spend more money due to their higher earnings. This additional spending creates more local economic activity, which, in turn, makes local property more valuable. So there is a positive relationship between the higher spending from high school graduates (as compared to high school dropouts) and local property values. Economists call this relationship “capitalization,” meaning the additional spending is capitalized into local property values.

The second effect comes from school quality as indicated by various performance measures. A substantial body of literature has found that home buyers prefer to locate in towns and cities with better-quality schools, and they are willing to pay a higher price to live in such locations. This means the value of better — performing schools will also be capitalized into local property values.

VIRGINIA BEACH’S CASE

In 2011, the Virginia Beach City Public School system, under the leadership of Superintendent James Merrill, decided to directly confront the issue of valuing the school system’s work. He commissioned me, a professional economist, to undertake a study of the economic impact of the Virginia Beach City Schools on the metropolitan Virginia Beach economy.

The Virginia Beach City Public School system is the third largest public school system in Virginia and among the 50 largest systems in the country. It serves approximately 70,000 students in 85 schools. It is located in the vibrant and growing Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News metropolitan area, which has a population of more than 1.6 million.

In my over-three-decade career, I had conducted numerous impact studies for private ventures and public institutions. Most of my work with public institutions had been with universities and colleges or state government. I had never done an economic impact study for a public school district.

In fact, in my literature review for the Virginia Beach study, I found few comprehensive economic studies for public schools along the lines of the outcomes discussed above. Most of the work focused on the impact of inputs rather than outputs (see sidebar to the right).
“Data driven.” That’s what we educators like to call ourselves. We wouldn’t dream of setting instructional priorities, examining instructional practices and crafting school improvement plans without meaningful data points in hand.

Yet ironically, on another level — a level that really matters — we often find ourselves moving to the “storyteller” role, relying heavily on our anecdotal arsenal to make our case. I find this tendency often surfaces when educators are talking to the funders of public education — state legislators, county boards of supervisors and city councils. The problem is our funders have heard it all before, and our anecdotes of “children are our future” are getting stale.

I am a firm believer in the old one-two punch: (1) Make a heartfelt statement; and (2) back it up with evidence. That’s where the data come into play.

A NO-WIN SITUATION

As background, it’s important to recognize that in Virginia, school systems are fiscally dependent. We have no taxing authority. We rely on our state and local governments for funding.

With the sagging economy and the resulting decrease in financial support, we face a no-win situation. These bodies typically are not known for their largesse. Beyond that, however, we are seeing an overall reduced commitment to public education in general. The priority has become economic development activities rather than education.

In Virginia Beach, public school educators long have sounded the trumpet that our schools are the greatest economic development engine our city has. At the risk of that being a one-note tune, we set out to find the evidence to support our claim.

We secured the services of a renowned economist, Michael Walden of North Carolina State University, to help us quantitatively measure the impact of our 69,400 students and 10,500 staff members on the city’s economy.

CENTRAL FINDINGS

Here are a few of Walden’s findings, which were included in his report to us in June 2011:

Owing to improved student performance in the school district between 2007 and 2010, city of Virginia Beach property values are between $2.8 and $9.5 billion higher than they would be without the improvement. In addition, the annual property tax revenues are between $28 and $86 million higher than they would be otherwise.

The additional spending of each Virginia Beach graduating class adds $60 million to the region’s property values.

Each recent graduating class collectively will realize an increase in its lifetime earnings of $800 to $900 million due to receiving a high school diploma.

Each recent graduating class is associated with a lifetime reduction in public crime costs and public health costs of between $260 and $280 million (in 2011) when compared to those who do not complete high school.

SPLIT REACTION

Given the positive tone of Walden’s report, supporting as it did our contention that the public schools were the most powerful economic engine the city of Virginia Beach has, we were eager to share these impressive findings.

We took it public at our annual school board retreat last July, where Walden formally presented his report. The story was immediately picked up by our local newspaper, The Virginian-Pilot, which published it under the headline, “Study: Good test scores bolster Va. Beach tax revenue.” In tandem with this story, our school board chair forwarded copies of the report to members of the city council and the city’s administrative team along with a letter explaining its significance.

We published the report on our district website, featured it in a pullout section of our parent/community newsletter in August and ran an article about the study in our employee newsletter. Across the board, the reaction from our myriad stakeholders was positive. In fact, they were pleased to have such concrete data to bolster their advocacy efforts. Clearly, the report was worth the $21,000 cost.

In addition, I included details of the report in my speeches and presentations to staff and community on a regular basis. The word about our efforts to quantify the city’s return on investment definitely got out. Education Week did a story last December on the report titled “Payoff is $1.53 for every $1 invested.”

I must admit that although the data were even more impressive than we anticipated, the response from our city leaders has been a collective “so what?” I choose to believe that is because they have quietly seen the value of our schools all along. But in a time of competing priorities, unfunded mandates and battles over shrinking budget dollars, it’s important to remind our community of the importance of our schools. So now, even when advocates for public education aren’t necessarily being heard, we must ensure the data points speak for themselves, loudly.

James Merrill is superintendent of the Virginia Beach City Public Schools in Virginia Beach, Va.

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MEETING CHALLENGES

The Virginia Beach City Public Schools was enthusiastic about the study. The data and information I needed to complete the work were provided promptly, and the analysis was completed in time for the school district’s retreat in July 2011.

SUBSTANTIVE FINDINGS

The first impact addressed by our study — the additional earnings of Virginia Beach’s high school graduates — was calculated in the following way. Using graduates from the last five graduating classes, a work lifetime of 47 years (age 18 to 65) was assumed. The most recent national data showed an annual earnings increment of $9,000 between a high school graduate and high school dropout.

This annual salary bump, owing to the high school degree, was converted to a single value today for each graduating class using a technique called present value. The concept of present value accounts for the lower value of future dollars due to continuing inflation. An appropriate long-term interest rate was used to discount, or reduce, the levels of future dollars.

The result was that each of Virginia Beach’s recent graduating classes would be expected to realize a total increment to their lifetime income of between $800 and $900 million, depending on the number of graduates. Also, we estimated the recent improved performance (in GPA) of Virginia Beach graduates added another $20 million in value due to the greater likelihood of those graduates entering and graduating from college.

Of course, it is impossible to apportion these economic benefits between the training provided by the school district and the innate skills and talents of the students. Researchers have struggled with this issue for decades without finding a suitable solution.

The expected savings in public crime control and health care costs were also substantial for Virginia Beach graduates. Applying monetary values found in other studies, each of the recent graduating classes would be expected to save between $260 and $280 million (in discounted dollars) in these costs over their lifetime.

The two impacts of Virginia Beach graduates on the local real estate market also were calculated in our study.

The additional spending associated with each graduating class was calibrated to add $60 million to regional property values. More important, however, was the estimated impact of the improved performance of Virginia Beach students on the attractiveness of Virginia Beach property to buyers.

By all measures (SAT, ACT and GPA scores), the school district’s students have increased their academic performance in recent years. Using a range of empirically derived linkages between public school student performance and local property values, it was calculated that the higher academic performance meant property values in the city of Virginia Beach were between $2.8 billion and $9.5 billion higher than they would have been without the student gains.

The Virginia Beach City Public Schools was enthusiastic about the study. The data and information I needed to complete the work were provided promptly, and the analysis was completed in time for the school district’s retreat in July 2011.

BENEFITS AND COSTS

In summary, the major findings I derived for the Virginia Beach City Public Schools were these. For an annual budget of almost $700 million, each year’s graduates earn between $800 and $900 million more over their lifetime (expressed in today’s dollars), they reduce future crime control and public health care costs between $260 and $280 million over their lifetime (again expressed in today’s dollars), and they add $60 million to local property values due to greater spending.

Moreover, the recent enhanced performance in student academic results is estimated to have added between $2.8 and $9.5 billion to local property values as a result of making Virginia Beach a more desirable location for home buyers.

These are numbers the Virginia Beach City Public Schools can tout. They are numbers citizens, parents and public decision makers can understand. Public schools are being asked to defend their performance and expenditures. They can, and they should!
Measuring the Impact of Inputs

The Virginia Beach City Public Schools study focused on the impact of outcomes, or results, of the institution, and as argued in the accompanying article, this is the proper focus.

However, supporters and decision makers also may be interested in the impact of inputs used by the school system. That is, how big is spending by the school system on construction and operating functions, and what broader effects does this spending have on the local economy?

These effects also can be measured, and they were measured in the Virginia Beach study in two ways. First, the effects were measured simply in terms of the raw numbers. The school district has an annual operating budget of near $700 million, most of which is spent in the regional economy, for a total impact of $1.55. Also, every $1 million spent in the capital budget was associated with another 55 cents spent in the regional economy, meaning a total impact of $1.55.

But the impact on the local economy don’t stop here. Salaries and other local expenditures will be re-spent in the local economy, thereby generating new incomes and additional jobs. In economics, these are called the “multiplier effects.” However, multiplier effects are limited because there will be substantial “leakage” of dollars when purchases are made from companies located outside the region.

Still, the multiplier effects from the Virginia Beach schools were found to be substantial. Every $1 spent in the district’s operating budget resulted in another 53 cents spent in the regional economy, meaning a total spending impact of $1.53. Likewise, every job in the school district was found to be associated with an additional 0.64 regional jobs.

Similar results were found for the Virginia Beach capital budget. Every $1 spent in the system’s capital budget was associated with another 55 cents spent in the regional economy, for a total impact of $1.55.

Additional Resources

Economist Michael Walden relied on existing research to make several significant points in his study of the school district’s fiscal impact.

In making the point about lower public costs for crime control and health care for high school graduates than for high school dropouts, he relied on the following:


In stating the case that home buyers prefer to locate in communities with better-quality schools and are willing to pay a higher price to live in such locations, he relied on these recent studies:

“Nonlinear Effects of School Quality on House Prices” by Abbigail J. Chiado, Rubén Hernández-Murillo and Michael T. Owyang, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review, May/June 2010;

“School Quality and Residential Property Values: Evidence from Vancouver Rezoning” by John Ries and Tsur Somerville, The Review of Economics and Statistics, November 2010; and


A full version of Walden’s study, “The Economic Impact of the Virginia Beach City Public School System,” can be accessed at www.vbschools.com/administration/Lowdown/pdfs/virginiabeachstudy.pdf.

Also, every $1 million spent in the capital budget was associated with 12.6 regional jobs.

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Building a Healthy Organization

The author applies his model for teamwork to the meeting rooms of school leadership, promoting higher productivity and better morale

*By Patrick Lencioni*

Organizational health is a topic that’s been of interest since I was a child, though I certainly did not know it at the time. I’d hear my dad talk about the illogical and problematic things that management in his company did, and it bothered me. Later, when I started working in a strategic management consulting firm, I quickly came to the conclusion that dysfunction prevented clients from implementing our recommendations within their organizations.

As a result, I decided I would refocus my career to address those issues. Since then, I have been fascinated by how much an organization can grow and succeed and differentiate itself from competitors, if it becomes healthier.

For the last 15 years, my firm has been helping organizations become healthier and maximize their human potential by using the model outlined in my latest book, *The Advantage*, which is the culmination of my previous books and models. Schools and school districts have embraced the model and enjoyed the competitive advantage organizational health brings. In short, healthy organizations are free from politics and confusion and foster an environment where productivity and morale soar.

FOUR DISCIPLINES

With the many changes and challenges facing our public education system today, never has there been a better time for school leaders to roll up their sleeves and begin building a healthy organization. To start such an undertaking, one should understand four key steps.

Build a cohesive leadership team. The first step is all about getting the leaders of the organization to behave in a functional, cohesive way. If the people responsible for running an organization — whether a corporation, department within the corporation, restaurant, church or school — are behaving in dysfunctional ways, then that dysfunction will prevail.

Create clarity. The second step is to ensure the members of the leadership team are intellectually aligned around six simple but critical questions. They must be clear on why the organization exists and what its most important priority is for the next few months. Leaders must eliminate any gaps that may exist between them, so that people one, two or three levels below have complete clarity about what they should do to make the organization successful.

Overcommunicate clarity. Only after the first two disciplines are in process can an organization take the third step — overcommunicating the answers to the six questions. Leaders of healthy organizations constantly, and I mean constantly, repeat themselves and reinforce what is true and important. They always err on the side of saying too much, rather than too little. This quality alone sets leaders of healthy organizations apart from others.

Reinforce clarity. Finally, in addition to overcommunicating, leaders must ensure the answers to the six critical questions are reinforced repeatedly using simple human systems. This means any process involving people, from hiring and firing to performance management and decision making, is designed to intentionally support and emphasize the uniqueness of the organization.

It is worth noting that the forum where this model lives is in our meetings. Bad meetings are the birthplace of unhealthy organizations, and good meetings are the origin of cohesion, clarity and communication.

A few simple changes to the frequency and style of
meetings likely will be needed. That said, a school or district can leap forward quickly by addressing the first discipline, creating a cohesive executive team.

THE COHESIVE TEAM

The first and most vital step to building a healthy organization is creating a cohesive leadership team. Without an aligned team at the top, an organization will never come near to reaching its full potential.

The team must commit to themselves and each other to do the ongoing work required to develop and maintain a high-performing team. Once it is established that building a cohesive team is a priority, team members must master five behaviors (originally outlined in my business fable The Five Dysfunctions of a Team).

BEHAVIOR 1: BUILDING TRUST.

Members of truly great teams must trust one another. The kind of trust that is necessary to build a great team is what I call “vulnerability-based trust.” This happens when members get to a point where they are completely comfortable being transparent, honest and naked with one another, where they can say and mean things like “I messed up,” “I need help,” or “Your idea is better than mine.”

When everyone on a team knows that everyone else is vulnerable enough to say and mean those things and that no one is hiding his or her mistakes, they develop a common trust. They speak more freely and fearlessly with one another and don’t waste time and energy putting on airs.

One reader, the founder and CEO of IDEA Public Schools, Tom Torkelson, used many of the tenets of organizational health to make an enormous impact in the low-income community of Rio Grande City, Texas. In 2000, the first IDEA charter school opened, and from the onset Torkelson wanted to build a high-performing culture to bring opportunity to children in the community.

Torkelson’s team tackled the issue of trust early on. “At that first off-site, I told everyone that they were going to tell each team member the behavior that most harms our team and organization,” he said. “There was a chilly silence with people glancing at each other. I was the first to receive feedback and thanked everyone for their comments and committed to some next steps.”

Then the rest of his team followed. At the next off-site, the team members reviewed the commitments. “After a discussion, the team told me I was not fulfilling mine. I joked that I never should have made that commitment in the first place,” Torkelson said. “We laughed about it and continued on, setting the stage for folks to be more vulnerable.”

The level of trust and candor the team developed ultimately helped transform their team and propel their organization.

The results of Torkelson’s work have been amazing. He states, “The work we did around organizational health has literally given kids the opportunity to go to college.” What started out as a single charter school has grown to 28 schools serving 13,000 students. Torkelson said the schools have sent 100 percent of their graduates to four-year colleges over the last six years.

BEHAVIOR 2: MASTERING CONFLICT.

Great teams do not shy away from conflict. I am not talking about the conflict that centers around people or personality. I advocate for productive ideological conflict, or the willingness to disagree, even passionately if necessary, around important issues and decisions. But this can only happen when trust exists. When team members trust one another and can be vulnerable, the fear of unhealthy conflict diminishes. When there is trust, conflict simply becomes the pursuit of truth.

Oliver Sicat, chief portfolio officer for the Chicago Public Schools, has been using the tenets of
organizational health in his career in education since 2006. Before joining the Chicago district, he built a high-performing culture using the team and organizational health models for UIC College Prep, the charter school he founded at University of Illinois at Chicago. Sicat has a unique perspective on using conflict in both settings, first in a school with 70 employees and 800 students and now in a district with 40,000 employees and 400,000 students.

When he built the team at UIC College Prep, addressing conflict was a new concept, but team members quickly adopted it because the school’s new leadership team had a shared interest in building a healthy culture. With the help of a Table Group consultant, Sicat explained the benefits of productive conflict to his team and outlined how to implement the concept.

The leadership team learned how to have difficult conversations and then used the behavior in role playing. The new skill helped team members to have productive conflict, enabling them to get their best ideas out on the table. UIC Prep’s success was highly visible early on, with 100 percent of its students, nearly 90 percent of them from low-income households, going to college. The school’s ACT scores were the highest in Chicago in its first year.

When he took this approach into his district-wide role, Sicat definitely found it more challenging. As chief portfolio officer, he oversees the leadership of both public and charter schools. “In the larger settings, many people seemed to think there is no reason to push out ideas because the more you are on the margin, the more likely you are to draw negative attention to yourself. So, yes, this group was very resistant to the concept of conflict,” he said.

His team spent considerable time revisiting the topic of trust and addressed many misconceptions about conflict to make the case for why non-political conflict is both healthy and necessary. Team members also used role playing in their learning. They were shown how to identify and unearth conflict. At the end of their initial training, their role play involved discussing two unspoken sources of conflict currently on the team.

“Even the process of naming it and being able to work on issues openly helped us to work more productively with one another to achieve our mission,” Sicat said. “Learning these skills helped us to restructure a few teams, collaborate more and generally improved the dynamics of our communication.”

His work has been publically recognized for making swift strategic decisions in the areas of school openings and closures, and his collaborative approach to working with district and charter schools has been noted and supported by the Gates Foundation.

BEHAVIOR 3: ACHIEVING COMMITMENT.

The reason conflict is so important is because teams cannot achieve commitment without it. People will not actively commit to a decision if they have not had the opportunity to provide input, ask questions and understand the rationale behind it. I like to tell clients, “If people don’t weigh in, they can’t buy in.”

Once a leadership team is able to put issues on the table, the leader must feel comfortable being the person to break ties when a natural consensus doesn’t result. When doing so, leaders need to tell their team how they arrived at the decision and how their team members’ input influenced them.

Sicat also employed various strategies to make firm commitments with the teams he leads. Getting commitment from the larger group, he concedes, is more challenging but definitely doable. He has found that having the necessary conflict and idea sharing is essential in this process.
“If team members are all able to get their ideas out and fairly acknowledged, commitments are more readily accepted and promoted,” he said.

Over the years, Sicat also found that closing meetings with firm commitments is essential. To do this, commitments need to be written down and reviewed before the end of the meeting.

**BEHAVIOR 4: EMBRACING ACCOUNTABILITY.**

Even well-intentioned members of a team must be held accountable if the team is going to stick to its decisions and accomplish its goals. In order for accountability to take root, team members need to buy into the decision and commit to the plan of action in the first place.

Once the decision is made, peer-to-peer accountability is essential. This occurs when team members are able to confront one another about not fulfilling their commitment versus not saying anything or talking it out with the leader. It is an adult form of peer pressure. People don’t want to let down their peers.

Bruce Hibbard, superintendent of the 11,280-student New Albany Floyd County Consolidated School Corporation in New Albany, Ind., has done extensive work around organizational health, and both his leadership team and district are enjoying the benefits. By developing trust, having productive conflict and making commitments, the leadership team meetings in the district became livelier, and quality decisions resulted.

“Our meetings provide an open forum for all of us to keep each other in check and ask direct questions,” Hibbard said.

One way this behavior became more natural for his team was doing something he calls the “team effectiveness exercise.” In this activity, team members share one skill or benefit each of their colleagues brings to the team along with one aspect of the teammate’s work or behavior that needs improvement. “As simple as this sounds,” Hibbard says, “my team was amazed by the quality of the direct, honest and helpful feedback that was shared.”

**BEHAVIOR 5: FOCUSING ON RESULTS.**

The ultimate point of building greater trust, conflict, commitment and accountability is one thing — the achievement of results. As obvious as this sounds, many distractions take leadership teams off course. Team members develop a stronger loyalty to the team they lead, instead of the leadership team.

For a school district, this is a tough one. Putting the goals of the district above and beyond the goals of a particular school or initiative may prove challenging. Making goals public and actionable helps team members stay focused.

Hibbard, who has been superintendent since 2010, had a relentless focus on results, especially student learning. When he took over the district, state test scores were dismal. After working on the team and understanding where the district was headed, it became clear that student learning, test results and future opportunity needed to improve.

The leadership team in New Albany Floyd County established public goals and a process for achieving them. The district rallied support from administrators, teachers and even students. They established a series of mini-assessments every four weeks to track progress and encourage learning. All students had binders where they graphed and proudly shared their progress.

The results also were shared at grade-level, school and district events where key learnings were discussed. Between 2009 and 2012, the district’s percentage of students proficient in math rose from 68 percent to 89 percent, and in English the scores jumped from 69 percent to 82 percent proficiency.
“We are now aligned, focused and providing kids the opportunities they need for a bright future,” Hibbard said.

This kind of public goal and collective focus can yield results in the toughest of circumstances.

FORWARD LEAPS

With minimal resources and a focused leadership team, many schools and districts leap forward using The Advantage model as their road map. Addressing teamwork yields initial positive results and prompts the organization to continue with its work around the other three disciplines.

To begin an initiative, the only real requirement needed is a dedicated and focused leadership team, one that is willing to go through the necessary steps to create and sustain a healthy organization. Typically, a team begins by going off site for two days to freely tackle the exercises and difficult conversations required for change and growth.

From there, the tenets of organizational health should be integrated into the fabric of the organization. Once the four disciplines are established and ingrained into the culture, there’s no limit to achievement.

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Charlotte Danielson is an expert on good teaching, having analyzed the performance of what distinguished, proficient and underperforming teachers do (or don’t do). Her detailed rubrics on teaching reveal the benefits to teachers, students and administrators when a common standard of practice is shared.

Policymakers and educators across the country have embraced her work as they improve their teacher evaluation systems. Many use her framework as a foundation.

In a recent interview with School Administrator, Danielson talked about what needs fixing in teacher evaluation, how superintendents can support teachers’ and principals’ work, and what components make up a strong evaluation system.

How has your work evolved over the past 15 years?

DANIELSON: When I published the Framework for Teaching in 1996, it provided the first detailed description of good teaching. It retains the same architecture, the same 22 components, but I’ve added clarity by creating critical attributes for different levels of performance and providing examples from classroom practice.

From the beginning, the framework was an instrument for teacher evaluation. It allows observers, evaluators and supervisors to use precise language to distinguish teacher performance from one level to the next. And it allows teachers to understand the criteria on which they will be evaluated and to reflect on practice.

The tool grew out of my experience with high-stakes assessment projects, including the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and a project at Educational Testing Service called Praxis III, which was an observation-based assessment used for teacher licensing. What they had in common were clear standards of practice.

Districts use different models to evaluate teacher effectiveness. Do you think growth models in use today evaluate individual teacher effectiveness fairly and accurately?

DANIELSON: The short answer is no.

Essentially, there are two approaches to assessing teacher effectiveness. One is the work of teachers, that is, how well they do the work of teaching. That’s what my framework permits.

The second major approach is, as you suggest, based on the results teachers get with students. How well do their students learn? Ultimately, that is the bottom line, of course. It’s why we have schools.

The challenge is there must be measures of student learning that, in fact, are valid, reliable and fair to teachers. One truth is many factors contribute to student learning, in addition to the quality of teaching in a given year. Those things must be taken into account if it’s going to be fair to teachers.

Two questions in this debate are “What do you count as evidence of student learning?” and “How can you fairly attribute it to the work of individual teachers?”
In my view, nobody on the planet has figured this out because it’s extremely difficult to do.

**Can you explain the difficulties?**

**DANIELSON:** Let’s say I teach 4th grade and my students’ scores on pre-post assessments in reading have increased a lot. I’m happy, my principal’s happy, and the parents are happy.

But it’s hard to know that I was the one who actually caused that gain. It could well be there’s a reading specialist in the building. Or it might be last year’s teacher had some great strategies and students are still using them.

It might not have much to do with me. So until somebody has figured that out, we’d better not be making high-stakes decisions about teachers’ performance.

There also are psychometric and measurement challenges that one confronts when addressing teacher practices. They have mostly to do with the training of evaluators. The good news is we now know how to do that, as a result of our research. That’s not the case with the measures of student learning.

**Why is your framework more effective than other models?**

**DANIELSON:** My framework has been used and refined over 15 years. The language has tightened. Another thing is that my framework for teaching has been used in several very large, independent research studies. One was done by the Consortium on Chicago School Research. The other was Measures of Effective Teaching [the MET study], funded by the Gates Foundation.

In the MET study, something like 23,000 lessons were captured on video and then analyzed according to five observation protocols, of which mine was one. The research found my framework had predictive validity. That means when teachers perform well [on the framework] as judged by trained and certified assessors, their students perform better and learn more than the students in the classrooms of teachers who don’t perform so well.

I don’t think other models have been subjected to that level of scrutiny.

**Your framework identifies 22 essential attributes of good teaching. Should a teacher focus on one component as more important?**

**DANIELSON:** We don’t yet have data that show which components of the framework are most highly correlated with student learning. The heart of my framework is student engagement and everything that supports that process, but other things are important, as well. For instance, classroom organization and manageable routines and procedures are not trivial matters, especially for beginning and first-year teachers. They make student engagement possible.

I don’t think you can do these things in isolation.

**What can school district leaders take away from the results of the MET study?**

**DANIELSON:** They need an evaluation instrument that is valid, rigorous and reliable. The second thing is it’s essential people be trained to a sufficient level to make accurate, consistent judgments about a teacher’s performance. We know how to do this. For the MET study, we trained observers, entirely online, and they took a test. They passed at astonishing rates, about 93 percent.

But they found they need that training. That’s because the thinking you have to engage in when you’re being specific about whether a teacher is performing at a Level 2 [basic] or a Level 3 [proficient] is different from what most people have ever had to do.
What lessons have district leaders learned from past implementation efforts?

DANIELSON: When my framework was first published, a large urban district wanted to revise its evaluation system. It had been a terrible system — top down, punitive and arbitrary. They revised it based on my book and, you know what, it was top down and punitive! All they did was exchange one set of evaluative criteria with another. They did nothing to change the culture of teacher evaluation. The teachers were understandably very upset.

It’s more likely teacher evaluation reform will succeed when efforts start small and build over time. Ideally, districts could take a year and talk about the framework as a tool to improve instruction before using it as an evaluation tool. Districts and state efforts that are successful include pilot projects to allow people sufficient time to gain a deep understanding of the framework and what good teaching looks like.

Changes of this scope are complex. How do you change the culture and capacity of a district?

DANIELSON: It’s an instructional leadership issue and a professional development issue. It involves professional learning and conversations with site administrators and teachers. The more conversation the better.

Site administrators as instructional leaders must appreciate the role of school culture, a professional culture, a culture of professional inquiry. They must define teaching as not just what you do with your kids for six hours a day but also about building a professional culture in which everybody is still learning.

One central theme of your work is that the teacher evaluation can serve as an opportunity for professional development.

DANIELSON: That’s true. Evaluation of teacher practice has to identify teachers who are truly performing below standard and need to be coached or maybe even dismissed. That has to be part of what any evaluation system is capable of doing. But we have to be able to create educative systems that actually result in learning, that are worth doing from the standpoint of teachers.

In my framework, the principal and teacher are engaged in conversation. They compare notes on what happened in the classroom around questioning and discussion and how that differs at four levels — unsatisfactory, basic, proficient or distinguished.

We know this model vastly improves the professional conversation around teacher practice.

It’s about training and training and training. The unions understand this well. And, in some places, they’re actually bargaining for it.

Do you have advice for superintendents?

DANIELSON: It’s the superintendent who sends the signals. The message for superintendents has to be to make the supervision of instruction and the improvement of teaching the most important priorities of site administrators.

Superintendents are the ones who help principals organize their time. They must work out with principals how to, if not reassign some duties they do now, at least re-establish principals’ priorities.

It might be a matter of enlisting people to do the jobs in the school that require management, but not instructional leadership. There’s no doubt building management has to happen. But it may not take someone with a Ph.D. to do it.

So, instructional leadership is a personnel challenge for superintendents, and one of resource allocation.
How do superintendents support principals and teachers? You’ve talked about the need for professional development and professional conversations.

DANIELSON: My experience is many principals still don’t understand what instructional leadership means or how to do it. Many teachers and, indeed, some administrators lack understanding of what student engagement is. They think so long as the kids are busy, they are engaged. Yet it’s a more evolved concept than that. Student engagement looks at the nature of kids’ thinking.

So these are PD issues. Superintendents must help teachers and principals find time to collaborate. And not only to have the time to talk, but the skills to have professional conversations. Most administrator preparation programs don’t do a good job at teaching these skills. In many places, that’s the missing piece.

Superintendents are the ones who can ensure evaluation system procedures invite teachers to engage in activities that we know promote professional learning. Those things include teachers’ self-assessment, reflection on practice and engaging in professional conversation. These processes should be embedded in the evaluation system.

How often should teachers be observed?

DANIELSON: Frequent, unannounced and brief observations let you keep your finger on the pulse of teaching in your school. It’s actually better if some observations are not part of the formal evaluation process because you develop a professional community where everyone uses the same definition of teaching, not just a system for personnel decisions. So the more observations, the better. And the more conversation, the better.

If you can manage three short observations, that’s a lot better than one longer one. Peers, department heads, mentors or coaches can serve as observers. When schools do this, it builds the professional conversation about practice. You all become more effective because you know the challenges you face.

For evaluative purposes, you want a sampling that represents typical teaching, which the MET study found required at least three — and better, four — observations by a trained and certified assessor to be reliable. Now, most schools can’t manage that. I mean, that’s a real burden on personnel. Time is a limiting factor.

Let’s focus on a related topic: classroom observation. What does rigorous training for classroom observers entail?

DANIELSON: In our training we show (people) multiple examples of teaching practice, multiple videos for all 22 components of my framework and examples of each performance level. We have examples for, say, a proficient level of questioning and discussion skills, and a video reflecting high proficient but not distinguished, or low proficient but not basic. Then participants review written rationales and annotations for why an example was rated at that level.

We have something over 100 videos. That’s a tremendous resource for administrators, certainly, and, indeed, for teachers, to understand what practice looks like at the general levels.

How much time does it take to do a quality classroom observation?

DANIELSON: One surprising finding of the MET study is that if you do shorter observations you get as accurate a picture of what’s going on in a classroom, in fact slightly more accurate than one 45-minute observation period. It’s also a bit of a surprise that the MET study found it didn’t matter which 18 minutes you observe: the beginning, middle or end of a lesson.
MEETING CHALLENGES

These findings are good news for evaluators and observers. Obviously, shorter, frequent observations permit observers to see a much bigger sample of teaching. An observer may view a math lesson, a social studies lesson and a reading lesson at the elementary level. Or, at the secondary level, different class periods within the day. Shorter observations also make scheduling them more manageable.

While many states and many bargaining agreements mandate that for evaluation purposes the observer must stay for a full period, the encouraging thing is that observers don’t have to stay for an entire class period for observations to be statistically valid.

How brief? What does an observer look for during a classroom visit?

DANIELSON: Five minutes and 10 minutes is long enough time to sense the nature of learning that’s going on.

If we believe learning is done by the learner through this active intellectual process, then we have to care about not only what the teacher is doing, but also what the students are doing. What is the nature of their tasks? Of the learning? Do they have to think? Do they have to use their minds?

Administrators face an enormous paperwork burden. How can they cope?

DANIELSON: I’ve partnered with a software company to design online tools that help administrators. They’ve developed an iPad app that helps with assessment of observers. Many vendors sense there is money to be made and are getting into the act. I’ve partnered with just one company so that I could ensure a high quality product.

In response to demand, the Danielson Group also developed a commercial version of the online training and certification test for administrators and observers that we used in the MET study.

You’ve acknowledged that time is a limiting factor. What did you mean?

DANIELSON: State policymakers have set aggressive timelines for implementation of new teacher evaluation systems.

Administrators are simultaneously working on aligning curriculum and assessment with the Common Core. These are challenging, time-consuming tasks.

It’s understandable that administrators can feel overwhelmed. The pressure to move quickly to employ the framework as an evaluation tool is very real.

However, moving too quickly makes everyone nervous and can be self-defeating.

What will be the Common Core’s impact on teacher evaluation?

DANIELSON: If new assessments are true to what the standards say, they are going to be extremely rigorous. The Common Core standards represent extremely high-level learning, much higher than what we’ve had in this country for all but the most elite and best-prepared students. I frankly welcome that.

But those are going to set other things in motion. If you have very rigorous assessments and a huge failure rate, that presents a challenge for a lot of teachers. So the rollout of all these changes will have at least as big an impact as anything I’ve been doing.
Imagine that you hopped in a time machine and traveled 10 years into the future. What impact do you think you would find from the new teacher evaluation methods?

**DANIELSON:** That’s an interesting question. Well, one possibility is that, 10 years from now, nothing will have changed. People will be onto the next “best” thing.

On the other hand, it’s a healthy development to be thinking hard about teacher quality and considering what it means and how you strengthen it.

I would love to come back in 10 years, from my warm beach, and discover that teaching is better than it was. And find that teachers are more thoughtful, and administrators have time to talk with their staff about what they’re doing and what the kids are learning.

That would be delicious.

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Data-Savvy School Systems

Five districts where collecting sound data on students was just the starting point for improving instruction and raising academics

By Heather Zavadsky

A team of 4th-grade teachers in California’s Sacramento City Unified School District collaboratively examines student writing products using a rubric that outlines elements in high-quality persuasive writing. The teachers analyze how they taught and assigned the written work in relationship to what the students produced. They focus on what a few of the teachers did differently to yield high-quality papers.

Then the teachers develop a short reteach lesson to take students through the task of revising their writing.

This meeting of the 4th-grade team is part of an instructional “problem of practice” identified by teachers based on weaknesses they discovered through three data sources — formative and summative tests and student work.

While school districts are improving their use of data to identify academic intervention needs, few are able to connect data to teaching and learning similar to the teachers in Sacramento. One common element found across high-improvement school districts is their ability to leverage the right information to better all decision-making processes. Of course, data alone cannot spark improvement. The keys to their success are changes in practice and culture resulting in a system that wants, values, trusts and uses multiple sources of data to affect teaching and learning.

Through my research and work with more than a dozen high-improvement school districts, I’ve identified four essential elements of strong performance management systems that, leveraged in concert, can improve wholesale student instruction and move the needle in places where it has been chronically stuck.

BASIC COMPONENTS

Performance management refers to the systemic use of all types of data and includes much more than just monitoring student achievement. It means obtaining information to improve district practices at all levels, instructional and operational. Many great resources describe the systems, tools and practices that work best to build an effective performance management system.

In brief, the basic components include:

COMPREHENSIVE DATA SYSTEMS. A user-friendly one-stop shop provides detailed information on the instructional and operational needs of students, teachers, schools and central office. The best data systems are easy to query and allow users to connect summative and formative assessment data and student record information, such as transcripts, absences and discipline data. They also connect to curricula or standards, with some that even provide sample lesson plans.

CONTINUOUS MONITORING SYSTEMS AND TOOLS. Good formative assessments provide at least quarterly diagnostic information on what was taught. Additionally, structured walk-through processes conducted by a team with rubrics targeting specific instructional objectives or approaches help monitor curriculum implementation and support needs.

STRUCTURED TIME AND TOOLS TO EXAMINE AND DISCUSS DATA. Monitoring progress of stated goals and strategies in the district strategic plan and using scorecards and/or dashboards to examine multiple data sources with one tool helps structure and organize progress monitoring. Providing
FOUR REASONS DATA ARE USED INCONSISTENTLY IN CLASSROOMS

By Marian Kisch

Today’s education climate calls for greater accountability and proven student achievement through data analysis and reporting. Since 2002, more than $515 million has been awarded to states to establish systems for local school districts to effectively collect and use data to improve classroom instruction.

Student information systems, or SISs, enable school districts to gather and organize student demographics, schedules, enrollment, grades and attendance. Learning management systems, or LMSs, help plan, manage, track, report, develop and deliver course content. These are systems that can provide the needed data for the classroom.

Gartner Inc., an information technology research firm, has collaborated with AASA and the Consortium for School Networking, on a study, “Closing the Gap: Turning SIS/LMS Data Into Action.” The partners surveyed more than 1,750 teachers, principals and district leaders. The study found data are not used consistently across classrooms for four key reasons:

1. Existing technology solutions in student information systems and learning management systems meet the needs of district leaders more than teachers. The surveys indicate that the data from the SIS and LMS solutions aren’t used commonly for enhancing instruction. Forty-seven percent of school district leaders said they were satisfied with the current use of SIS, and 75 percent were satisfied with their ability to support policies and planning for curricula and teacher performance. But they also say SIS is not effective in supporting state reporting requirements.

Three-fourths of teachers use a student information system daily, while only one-third use a learning management system daily. Teachers use LMS less than 50 percent of the time for content development and delivery — lesson plans, class participation, student messaging and student portfolios. Few teachers believed they got full value from the data in their SIS solutions.

2. District personnel disagree on their satisfaction with training on the use of data. School and district leaders insist various training options are available to teachers to support their use of data, especially in terms of applying assessment results to classroom practice.

3. Teachers disagree, contending that training in the application of data is weak and doesn’t provide instruction on incorporating the data in their classrooms. Seventy-one percent report that the data collected do not solve problems in their classroom, and 62 percent say data are not easy to incorporate into the curriculum.

Seventy percent of teachers also cite ineffective tools with no shortcuts, and 66 percent view the menu options and selections as “one size fits all.” They also complain about the time it takes to input data and the lack of information on how to tap into many of the installed functions.

4. Districts do not emphasize the use of data in the classroom as part of selection and implementation processes. According to the surveys, most school staff believe technology leaders are the ones responsible for selecting student information and learning management systems. As such, they “own” the project. Teachers are somewhat more involved in the selection and use of LMS initiatives.

Regarding implementation, 38 percent of technology leaders admit no specific practices exist in their district to encourage use of data in the classrooms, with 70 percent reporting little focus on how teachers should use data generated by student assessments.

The current education culture presents barriers to increased usage, affecting student learning. Teachers, principals and district leaders agree on this point, according to the survey: Mistrust can stifle the use of data. Some teachers believe the data will be used to monitor them and that tie-ins to student achievement could affect performance reviews, pay and employment.

District leaders admit that expectations have not been well communicated, which prevents teachers from understanding how the data will actually be used.

Teachers and district leaders agree that too much emphasis is being placed on standardized content and test scores instead of individualized teaching and learning.

Data Effectiveness

What will improve the use of student information? According to Ivy Anderson, a Gartner managing partner and program executive, all stakeholders must focus on achieving the long-term benefits of using student information and learning management solutions.

“In order for data to be used effectively in the classroom,” she says, “teachers need training to learn how to use the SIS/LMS solutions technology and professional development on how to set goals to enhance instructional efforts with the use of that data. It must be explained from the teacher’s point of view.”

Results of the surveys, as well as helpful tools and resources on using data more effectively, are available at www.turningdataintoaction.org.

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scheduled time and specific processes to review and discuss data at all system levels also must be in place.

CULTURE OF DATA TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY. Data are not useful without a culture that trusts, desires, shares and displays data. This culture must be nurtured at all levels and reflected in conversations and actions. Data should be used as a flashlight, not a hammer.

The key to success is using all the elements together to raise the quality of instruction for students. Having a great data system but no time to review and discuss data likely will not work. All the pieces need to be in place and used across the entire system. Even actions that seem unrelated to instruction, such as creating bus schedules, allocating resources and organizing central-office structures, have an impact on the classroom.

YIELDING PROOF

Several school districts have pulled together these elements effectively and incorporated them across the central-office, school-leadership and classroom levels to improve teaching and learning. The proof is in their outcome data — they all have yielded increased student achievement, even in chronically low-performing turnaround schools.

IMPROVING SCHOOLS THROUGH AN ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK. In 2009, Denver Public Schools launched an innovative improvement/turndown strategy that yielded systemwide achievement increases, including the movement of six turnaround schools out of the state’s lowest performance category (“Does Not Meet Standards”). An important driver of Denver’s success was the district’s creation and use of the School Performance Framework, which pulls together multiple data sources to assess the organizational health and effectiveness of each school.

Denver’s leaders developed the framework to gain more nuanced information about school performance beyond what they received from the state to better inform their intervention process for improving chronically struggling schools. The framework has undergone several improvements. In 2011-12, the indicators used for each school included student progress over time; student achievement (percentage proficient or above); postsecondary readiness (on-time graduation rates); student engagement and satisfaction (attendance and satisfaction survey data); re-enrollment; and parent satisfaction.

The School Performance Framework variables are rolled up into color-coded ratings that range from “Distinguished” (blue) to “Accredited on Probation” (red). A red rating means the school needs some type of support and triggers an external diagnostic review and then intervention planning by a committee that examines the framework and reviews diagnostic data to identify problems and solutions.

Color-coded maps are posted everywhere in the district so that school performance within the five-level coding system can be grasped in a glance. The result of this system is a unified and clear definition of the established performance bands and desired targets, performance transparency and the understanding that multiple data points should be examined together to fully understand school performance.

MANAGING PERFORMANCE THROUGH A STATE-LEVEL PILOT. The Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District is a small, rural district at the southernmost tip of Texas in the Rio Grande Valley. Despite high rates of poverty and a large English as a second language population, the 31,000-student district has dramatically increased its graduation rate, reduced the dropout rate, raised success in advanced courses and increased the number of students who are enrolled dually in college and high school by carefully tracking those data elements from their current system.

Pharr-San Juan-Alamo fully takes advantage of opportunities to strengthen its systems and practices. Taking data use to the next level, the district became a participant in the Texas Student Data System pilot in
MEETING CHALLENGES

2011-12. The pilot data system consists of dashboards designed in Texas by educators and experts to provide timely actionable student data to appropriate stakeholders at the district, campus, classroom and student levels. Sample data include attendance and discipline information; formative and summative assessments and grades; student potential for advanced courses and college readiness; and student transcript data. Negative trends are highlighted by red colors and flags.

Although Pharr-San Juan-Alamo is just in its second year of implementation, the district has found the dashboards to be effective for obtaining weekly information on student and teacher progress, which has helped them focus more on prevention rather than intervention. With the dashboards, the district can determine if a student is experiencing a short-term performance blip or something more extensive that educators will address through an individualized intervention plan. The district’s leaders believe the system enables them to look at multiple triggers that can affect students in one tool and on a much timelier basis than previously possible.

USING DATA TO CREATE AND MONITOR LARGE-SCALE INTERVENTIONS. Long Beach, Calif., Unified School District is known for long-term stability in leadership and performance. Already quite data savvy, the 84,000-student district continues to improve its data systems and data use to push those schools that perform below the district average. When Long Beach leaders found a uniform performance drop between 5th and 6th grades in its eight targeted, low-performing K-8 schools, district leaders moved all 6th graders from those schools (approximately 2,000 kids) into a self-contained 6th-grade academy.

This unique approach put the students under one roof and provided flexibility to address student needs all day long. With no bells or defined class periods, students could spend a half day or full day in reading with a literacy specialist if needed.

Using data to refine student interventions, academy leaders used formative assessment results to match student needs with teacher strengths. If a student were struggling with fractions, he or she was paired with a teacher whose classroom work yielded high assessment scores in fractions. After a few weeks, students were reassessed and regrouped as needed.

In 2010-11, the math proficiency rate of 6th graders in Long Beach’s target schools moved from 32 percent to 46 percent, just a few percentage points below the district and state averages. With the success of this intervention, the district’s leaders are considering which aspects of the model might be scaled to other schools.

USING DATA TO CHANGE INSTRUCTION. Many school districts now use formative assessments to better target instruction and interventions. However, few get down to the level of analyzing student work as does Sacramento, Calif., City Unified School District. In addition to creating strong data and accountability systems and practices, the 44,000-student district adopted a data inquiry model similar to the Data Wise process developed at Harvard by Richard Murnane, Elizabeth City and Kathryn Parker Boudett.

Sacramento’s data inquiry model incorporates the four essential performance management elements referenced above but differs through the addition of several follow-up steps. In this process, teachers and principals are trained to use growth data at all system levels to identify instructional weaknesses in six chronically low-performing schools called Priority Schools.

Sacramento leaders and teachers connect the growth data to instruction by creating a data overview that combines various data sources; identifying problem areas; examining student work in collaborative groups; and comparing student work to what teachers identified as “high-quality” products. Discussions between instructional team members focus on distilling instructional assignments into a discrete set of tasks for students. The result is a more concise understanding of how to design, assign and teach instructional tasks, increased expectations for student work and a common understanding of what high-quality teaching and learning look like.
MEETING CHALLENGES

The change in instruction is easily seen in notebooks that document improvements in student work and is evidenced in the state assessment results of Sacramento’s Priority Schools. During the first implementation year, all six Priority Schools made gains in composite math and English language scores. Now the district is focusing on scaling the practice districtwide.

USING DATA FOR COURSE-PLACEMENT INTERVENTION. The Garden Grove, Calif., Unified School District, the 2004 recipient of the Broad Prize for Urban Education, has shown steady performance increases for several years. Still, district leaders continue to examine all types of data.

For the past few years, the 48,500-student district, which is located near Anaheim, has focused on better preparing students for college and skilled careers. In addition to raising instructional rigor throughout its preK-12 curriculum, the district also focused on correct course placement for students, a process that began by eliminating many remedial courses and creating bridge-building supports to help students succeed with more difficult work.

Data has played an important role. It was used to identify the overall problem and potential solutions and to help the district better match student academic needs to courses. One approach was to have counselors and teachers more closely examine formative assessment results and daily grades to determine which students could succeed in more advanced courses with supports in place.

“It’s not just the quiet kids that sit in the front row that should be eligible for those courses,” stated one Garden Grove leader. “Counselors and teachers need to use multiple sources of evidence to identify students that, with some supports, can succeed in advanced courses.”

During that process, discrepancies were found between course grades and formative assessments, making it clear grades often do not reflect achievement.

Subsequently, the district invested significant time unpacking the issues and setting more uniform grading standards. The result was a better match between the two data sources and more reliable course placement data.

In addition to placing students in courses, the district also uses flexible grouping to match student needs to teacher strengths, similar to Long Beach. For example, using the district’s Schoolwide Intervention Model, struggling readers are grouped by reading level for intensive two-hour instructional blocks. Students are assessed frequently, and instruction is adjusted accordingly.

These two of many data uses employed by Garden Grove have contributed to the district’s steady improvement under the California assessment system.

MULTIPLE SOURCES

Data-based decision making is effective when applied systemically using the essential elements of performance management. Teaching and learning cannot improve without multiple data sources to better explain the needs of students, teachers, schools and districts. Once those data sources are acquired, it is important to have user-friendly tools and time to examine data and devise appropriate and timely interventions.

Experience and lessons learned from others can help uncover the many important uses of data systems, tools and practices. Denver, Garden Grove, Sacramento, Long Beach and Pharr-San Juan-Alamo represent data-savvy districts that continue to expand their ability to use data to have an impact on students systemwide.

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Aligning Common Core, One Bite at a Time

Based on his work inside districts, the author promotes local staff designs, contributing to buy-in and regular feedback

By Joseph T. Crawford

In a small suburban district in the Midwest, the superintendent was outlining his plans for aligning the curriculum to the Common Core State Standards. The process had begun, he explained, so he and his staff were set to spend the next three years on math, then three years on English language arts and so on.

I struggled with the concept of consuming that much time to do the alignment work, suggesting a first draft in all K-12 subject areas could be in place following three days of staff development. But I could tell my words were falling on deaf ears.

The Common Core State Standards are complex and enormous and will take longer than three days to develop comprehensive plans. They will have a huge impact on teaching and learning in public education. This superintendent, like many others working in the public schools, seemed convinced an elaborate, drawn-out process is requisite before moving forward on this initiative’s implementation.

While the Common Core’s complexity and enormity cannot be denied, it is much like the old adage about how to eat an elephant. Answer: One bite at a time. That is what we need to do — begin eating our elephant, the Common Core State Standards, one bite at a time and involve our entire staff in this great feast. I suggest involving the full staff or a representative group in following the proven research and practices of Larry Ainsworth, Larry Lezotte, Doug Reeves, Mike Schmoker and others to align the school district’s curriculum, instruction and assessments to the Common Core.

Staff must be allowed to focus on their own grade level or course and provided sufficient time to come to know and understand the standards. They can then design a curriculum based on those expectations that can be learned in the 175 days of instruction we are provided. Once the grade-level and course-level expectations are set, the expectations are vertically articulated, and the first draft of the document is ready for initial implementation.

Depending on the size of your district, this work will be done by a task force of teachers representing the entire district. In a small Midwestern rural community I worked with, the entire staff of about 80 teachers was on the task force, while another larger district with about 5,000 students appointed a cross-section of about 35 teachers from all grade levels, buildings and disciplines. The size and structure of the local district drive the design of the task force.

DEFINING PROCESS

The process of aligning your curriculum, instruction and assessment to the Common Core State Standards is more fully defined in my books Using Power Standards to Build an Aligned Curriculum and Aligning Your Curriculum to the Common Core State Standards. This curriculum alignment process develops a product — a complete K-12 curriculum in English language arts and math (or any other subject) in about three days of staff development. That product, based on the CCSS and developed by your own teaching staff, includes within-year and end-of-year learning targets, which all students are expected to know and be able to achieve and all teachers will be held accountable to teach.

This alignment process, modeled after the Power Standards work of Reeves and Ainsworth, enables your teachers to begin the alignment conversation with the Common Core. The grade-level/course-level
teams then go through the activities known as prioritizing (identifying the most important, most critical learnings), unpacking (identifying the explicit and implicit domain skills) and powering (identifying the essential skills).

These decisions are used to identify the most important, most critical learnings for the grade level or course. The task force members then use these prioritized learnings to write local Common Core standards, or end-of-year learning targets based on the Common Core and state assessment system. The task force has defined a learnable (that is the key here — learnable) curriculum of the most important skills as outlined in the Common Core State Standards and state assessment system. To stress the point, I frequently quip that I took on an ambitious agenda — teaching my dog to whistle. The problem is he never learned it.

We smile. Yet today’s curriculum system is similarly flawed. We keep trying to teach kids the entire book even when they aren’t learning it. To fix this problem, the local teaching staff develops learnable end-of-year curriculum expectations that all students must learn in an allotted time.

Current textbooks and curriculum guides are not used. Instead, the task force looks at the CCSS and the state assessment system (at least until 2014, when the national assessment is due to be implemented) as the basis for identifying these most critical learnings, which will be the foundation for the new curriculum documents.

Which standards contained within the Common Core and assessed in our current state assessment system are so important and so critical that all students must master those skills? These become the end-of-year learning expectations that every teacher will focus on for the year and are called Local CCS Standards. As several of our partner school districts in Illinois discovered, while the math concept of probability may not be mentioned in the CCSS until 6th grade, it is assessed in Illinois beginning in 3rd grade, so accommodations need to be made. You will need to make those same judgments in your particular state, at least until 2014.

These particular CCSS-based skills are now assigned to specific grade levels and courses. Before finalizing these end-of-year learning targets, the skills must be vertically articulated with the grade level and course above and below the assigned grade level. First grade meets with kindergarten, then 2nd grade to ensure the learning expectations represent a natural progression of skills and the domains within the Common Core are adequately covered. Once the grade-level articulation is complete, the task force then finalizes its grade-level or course end-of-year targets.

The task force then deliberately sequences the end-of-year learning expectations into quarterly learning expectations. These quarterly learning expectations are deliberately scaffolded by the task force to best reflect the way students learn to ensure the end-of-year learning expectations will be met.

These instructional objectives deliberately define and sequence the learning, determining both what is to be learned and when it is to be learned. This helps to better ensure the end-of-year learning expectations will be mastered by all. This also standardizes instructional expectations across grade levels and courses.

CONSISTENT APPLICATION

The school district now has a complete set of K-12 learning expectations, aligned to the Common Core and state assessment system. Additionally, all of these learning targets are in plain language that teachers, parents and students can understand. The targets represent a learnable number of skills, as Mike Schmoker advocates in his latest book, Focus, and are scaffolded or sequenced to best reflect how children learn, not how the chapters in the text are arranged.
AN EARLY-IMPLEMENTATION DISTRICT PROMOTES STAFF LEARNING

By Jim D. Rollins

A new era of education reform is at the schoolhouse door — the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Our school district is up to the challenge, and based on early experiences, our teachers and principals are excited about the potential payoff of this new initiative.

The Springdale School District, located in northwest Arkansas with about 21,000 students, has been the fastest-growing school system in Arkansas for more than a decade. The schools have become highly diverse and significantly poorer. That translates to the fact that we are educating a student body with numerous needs (cultural, health, language acquisition, educational, etc.).

For the last two years, implementing the Common Core State Standards has been our focus. During 2011-12, our district put in place the new standards in grades K-2. The teachers in these grades worked as a professional learning community to sort, select, innovate, implement, reflect and refine their work. This year we are creating fully developed units to support implementation, driven by the lack of existing resources that address the learning expectations.

EXTERNAL SUPPORT

Several examples of the challenges we confronted and the continuous-learning opportunities that helped us to address them stand out.

ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL. To understand what students are expected to know and be able to do, the district studied the documents provided by Achieve (www.achieve.org), The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (www.parcconline.org), the Publishers' Criteria (www.corestandards.org/assets/Publishers_Criteria_for_3-12.pdf) and, of course, the Common Core frameworks documents themselves.

Shifts in the mathematics classroom have begun with the training and implementation of Cognitively Guided Instruction, which is a process for getting students engaged in mathematical thinking. The CGI model of curriculum development and instruction aligns with the Common Core. With an increased emphasis on mathematical practices, the problem-posing elements of CGI allow students to engage in the abstract reasoning, modeling and perseverance in problem solving that are inherent in the expectations for the Common Core State Standards.

Additionally, the downward shift in the level of mathematics for each grade level, particularly in the middle school, has required additional professional development for some teachers. The district has brought in experts in mathematics from the University of Arkansas to build up the content knowledge of our faculty, especially in the teaching of algebra and pre-algebra.

The shifts in the English language arts classroom require the realignment of materials to be used in the reading process. Each elementary and middle school is organizing units of study that use anchor books as suggested by the CCSS frameworks documents. In transitioning to literacy activities that lead to college- and career-readiness literacy levels, we are piloting instructional units from the Common Core Curriculum Maps project. This Gates Foundation-funded model has been used as a blueprint for getting students into the habits of mind required by the CCSS.

Teachers have received training in analytical reading and argumentative writing. Students now work on much more complex texts and arrive at a deeper understanding of the relationships among them.

Because effective writing skills are essential in the Common Core, all teachers are setting greater expectations for students to express their learning via “quick writes” or more formal research writing as required by the standards.

SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL. The next phase of our implementation of the Common Core State Standards is to ensure the faculty in grades 9-12 who teach science, social studies and career/technical subjects understand the requirements for their classrooms. The standards emphasize what we have long known — that the development of a student to be college- and career-ready is a shared responsibility across all content areas.

Toward this end, Springdale’s junior high and high school teachers are excited participants in two Gates Foundation-funded initiatives led by the Southern Regional Education Board.

The Literacy Design Collaborative provides training and tools (template tasks, modules and rubrics) that enable teachers to infuse Common Core literacy standards into science and technical courses while shifting to a more student-centered instructional model.

The Mathematics Design Collaborative provides similar training and tools for embedding Common Core math standards and strategies into both academic and career/technical courses. Teacher-developed modules in both projects will create an avenue for aligning our district’s curriculum to Common Core State Standards as we move toward 2013-14 implementation in grades 9-12.
CHALLENGES ABOUND

The Common Core State Standards are more complex than they first appear. In the past, when new curriculum documents came forward from the Arkansas Department of Education, only minor changes were observed at the school level. The new standards are asking teachers to teach for a much greater depth of understanding on fewer topics. This is requiring a reconstruction of their lesson designs.

Additionally, we have not yet found a sufficient number of ready-made resources that align with the Common Core. Our existing reading and math books do not match up with the expectations for the new skills and higher levels of thinking demanded by the Common Core. Our faculty members are investing large amounts of time developing new instructional materials.

We are challenged to bring our parents along with us. Students’ work in the classroom is different, homework is not based on worksheets, and student assessments are not the same. This has caused some parents to question what is going on at school. While we have hosted parents meetings about these breaks from the norm, until every parent hears it, our communicating is not finished.

Change brings its own set of challenges. It is wise to keep everything as transparent as possible. It is important to stay connected to the instructional changes that are occurring in the classroom. Then, when questions arise in the community, we can answer with confidence that students are becoming college- and career-ready in our improved learning environments.

ENORMOUS POTENTIAL

The impetus behind any meaningful change initiative is to constantly work toward school improvement, higher student achievement and better preparation of our students for a successful future. I like to say, “We are getting better at getting better,” and we are.

Our school district is continuously addressing the increased needs of our growing, highly diverse and increasingly poorer student body because our teachers, administrators, parents and school district partners are committed to the school system that serves our young people.

The Common Core State Standards offer enormous potential to move our schools forward.

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The grade-level or course expectations generally are less than three pages long and address skills only, not content. The instructional materials, strategies and other resources are contained in the curriculum-mapping section and are shared electronically by teachers as they are developed and proven effective.

By deliberately involving teachers and administrators on the local level in this curriculum and instruction alignment process and allowing them the time and trust to develop curricula aligned to the Common Core, you maximize local expertise in the CCSS and the design of related materials. Their work begins with the CCSS, and this process enables them to use those standards to build realistic curriculum expectations. These learning expectations are standards-based and not content-based.

While the initial product takes just three days of staff development, that is only the beginning of the journey. Once the local curriculum documents are complete, the real work begins — consistently implementing those documents across the district in every classroom and regularly gathering feedback to improve the documents. Several of our partner school districts schedule quarterly meetings for the group of local experts to review feedback on the instructional objectives, assessments and every phase of the project. This ensures the plan, do, check, act cycle is followed and keeps teachers in the loop.

ONWARD TO ASSESSMENTS

The final link in building this system for curriculum, instruction and assessment then becomes the development of local common, formative assessments based exclusively on the within-year learning targets (instructional objectives). All teachers agreed to teach these specific skills, at this level of Bloom's Taxonomy, to all of our students. Now we find out if that worked. Which students learned which skills, and which did not? Once teachers have these data, the design of the tutorial system makes sense. Which instructional strategies worked? Which did not?
The locally developed assessments based on the intended curriculum (instructional objectives) also close the loop on the curriculum-instruction-assessment cycle. The local curriculum was shared with parents, students, everyone. The same skills were taught at approximately the same time by all teachers, and now teachers will gauge the outcomes using the same assessments and criteria for mastery. By assessing students on skills that were just taught, on the level of Bloom’s Taxonomy at which those skills were expected to be learned, the playing field is significantly leveled. There are no surprises for the students or anyone else, just fair and honest assessment of the intended curriculum. This is something most national assessments cannot do because they are not aligned to the specific skills just taught.

A small school district in Illinois with whom I worked posted the instructional objectives on poster board in the front of every classroom. The objectives became the basis for instruction, and the assessments were known by all to be tied to these instructional objectives. The poster specifically showed all students the skills they will need to demonstrate on the next assessment.

One of our large high school partners found this tactic to be useful, leading to a sharp drop in the number of D’s and F’s.

Again, the whole point is to follow a process that allows your own staff to learn, grow, design and improve their own curriculum documents and build local expertise on the Common Core State Standards. By involving your staff at the local level in the design and structure of these new curriculum expectations and using a continuous improvement cycle of plan, do, check, act, you have improved the expertise of your own staff members and created buy-in through ownership of the work and constant feedback to improve. Let’s all get to work on eating our latest elephant and begin taking it one bite at a time, then sharing our feast with the entire staff.

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A Rural County Journeys to the Common Core

A four-step collaborative process to put standards in place in small districts in central California

By Pansy T. Ceballos

Small, rural school districts face a special challenge when implementing the next generation of academic standards known as the Common Core State Standards.

This is the task facing the instructional consultants with the Tulare County Office of Education. The county, located in central California with its dominant agricultural economy, has 45 school districts enrolling 98,000 students. About 25 percent are English language learners, and only 57 percent of the high school graduates continue their education at postsecondary institutions. Thirty of the districts operate a single school.

Many of these schools have limited access to instructional resource personnel, which defines the model of service provided by the county office, an education service agency. The Tulare County Office of Education meets the rural districts’ needs through content experts, who provide expertise and support on using instructional practices. The county office has six English language arts consultants, four math consultants and one consultant each for social studies, science and technology.

In working with the small school systems, the consultants develop and implement a multilayered system of support. What has resulted over the past two years is a model for districts to follow as they begin to transition from the current state standards to the recently adopted California Common Core State Standards.

The team of consultants initiated its work by exploring these questions: How will we support Common Core implementation with the limited resources available at these small schools? How will we prepare teachers for this major change? What will principals need to lead the changes in teaching practices and assessment called for by the new standards?

Our four-step plan supports the belief that you learn the work by doing the work.

STEP 1: BUILDING AWARENESS

Building a deep understanding of and enthusiasm for the new Common Core State Standards was an important first step. Before leadership teams in each district could develop implementation plans, they first had to understand fully the depth and rigor of the new standards.

Our consultants dedicated considerable time to in-depth study of the standards to develop their own expertise. This meant hours analyzing the standards and the supporting appendices, including foundational research. This deep study included a review of the professional literature and attendance at professional conferences in and out of state where we learned from nationally recognized leaders.

Richly informed, the consultants then designed two distinct professional development tracks. Administrators in each district were offered full-day, K-12 overview sessions, one day for English language arts and the other for math. For teachers, we developed two-day, grade-level-specific workshops for both math and English. The first overview sessions were offered in summer 2011 and have been repeated every three to four months, since districts are beginning their transition to CCSS at different points in time. Districts commonly stagger attendance of their staff members at the training sessions due to budget constraints or scheduling logistics.
These workshops deepen staff understanding of the standards and new assessments and help staff realize CCSS implementation is not about throwing everything out and starting from scratch, but rather building on what already is working and weeding out practices that are no longer appropriate. Educators returned to their sites and planned collaboratively for CCSS implementation.

Simply stated: Understand the work.

STEP 2: MAPPING THE JOURNEY

The next step is to develop a sample CCSS implementation-planning template to guide districts in their work. The sample implementation template devised by the county consultants recommended planning actions in each district (http://commoncore.tcoe.org). As the consultants prepared their organizational plan, they explored the professional development needs that districts might encounter. For every recommended action noted on the template, a professional development session or resource was provided.

The creation of these resources, tools and training sessions became the essence of Tulare County’s organizational plan and work.

District and site teams attended half-day sessions or worked on an individual basis with consultants to develop their own plans. The importance of inviting representatives from various stakeholder groups (teachers of all subjects, instructional technology personnel, counselors, etc.) in this process was recommended.

Once plans were developed, districts publicized them to showcase both transparency and the collaborative effort endorsed by the team. The districts were encouraged to develop both long- and short-term goals, along with a process to ensure these working documents would be updated and revised. The California Department of Education developed a similar planning tool. Both tools incorporated timelines and identified who would be responsible for document changes and professional development considerations.

School districts chose the tool appropriate for them, making modifications as needed. The message our county office conveyed was that there wasn’t one right method or path for Common Core standards implementation. Rather, districts were encouraged to develop customized plans that were strategic, intentional and, most importantly, attainable.

At this point, several districts, including Cutler-Orosi Joint Unified School District (K-12), Alta Vista School District (K-8) and Tulare Joint Union High School District (9-12), partnered with the county office of education in moving forward. As other counties and organizations learned of our work, we extended an invitation for them to join us in this collaboration, and several did.

In the Sundale Union School District (K-8), Tulare City School District (preK-8) and Dinuba Unified School District (K-12), teachers have been meeting by grade levels to plan for the Common Core. Each district adopted the template developed by our county office’s Action Plan for Implementation of the CCSS.

Educators from these districts are attending CCSS updates, planning professional development timelines for teachers, reviewing technology needs, making reports to parents and school boards, and determining the additional training and resources teachers will need. Some already have revised pacing guides and aligned report cards to the CCSS.

The schools select the areas they want to address first, which makes the action plan specific to the locality and the staff. The template gives administrators and teachers enough guidance and a way to jump in and start the work.

Simply stated: Plan the work.

STEP 3: DESIGNING AND DEVELOPING

Once implementation plans were in place, the consultants and practitioners began the true work of
the Common Core. Districts were encouraged to form collaborative work groups to take on various aspects of implementation. By doing so, not only would the load be distributed, but more importantly, teachers and staff could contribute and build a sense of ownership in the implementation process.

School districts followed various pathways at this stage. A Tulare County high school district chose to include department chairs of both content and elective courses, counselors, IT personnel and administrators in the development phase. Team members made decisions about necessary changes in professional development, materials, course descriptions and assessments. On the other hand, an elementary district decided to focus solely on the development of writing skills in math and language arts and across the curriculum. This included the development of lessons, tasks and rubrics.

Similarly, the county’s consultants jointly developed an array of resources and Phase 2 CCSS Professional Development Sessions. The sessions included content, grade-level and topic-specific workshops, such as collaborative conversations, the continuum of literacy and vocabulary development.

This fall, teachers participated in collaborative instructional planning workshops. The intent of these workshops was twofold: Teachers would develop their skills in designing rigorous and meaningful instructional units for use in their own classrooms and share their work in an open manner. These practices will especially benefit teachers from the county’s small rural schools. Similarly, administrative training focused on CCSS instructional practices and the new assessments.

To assist fellow educators in Tulare County schools, the county office of education began a repository of information and resources (http://commoncore.tcoe.org). In addition to a set of well-received tools we developed, the repository houses presentations, videos and links to other sites that support implementation of the CCSS. The consultants organized the information after sifting through a plethora of sources and corolling relevant resources.

In addition, the partnering districts and the consultants used cloud-based applications, such as Dropbox, to develop and share site-specific CCSS lesson plans and assessment tasks. The use of cloud-based technology promoted continuous collaboration and access for districts in remote, rural areas of the county.

*Simply stated: Do the work.*

**STEP 4: ALIGNING AND SUSTAINING THE WORK**

The final step in the process involves both “looking around” and “looking ahead.” Looking around involves the process of systems alignment, while looking ahead is focused on sustainment, reflection and evolution of systems.

An analysis of existing practices, procedures and supporting documents for a district’s Common Core implementation plan is a vital yet often overlooked step. Once districts in Tulare County have taken on the new work, they are encouraged to inventory what already is in place and determine what is or is not supportive of, or in alignment with, the desired outcomes of their plan.

Some alignment work already tackled includes the revision of the report card and instructional pacing calendar. Other areas for consideration might be parent education and outreach to community resources. Our county consultants are in the process of aligning their work to that of their partners, including institutions of higher education, school-to-career programs, early childhood education, after-school programs and migrant education.

The need to give all of our students the greatest chance to meet the new standards has created a renewed sense of urgency to take advantage of every moment we have with students. Not only are we asking teachers to instruct differently, but also, the tasks given to students must challenge them to think and produce at a higher level.
In Tulare County, we see these challenging tasks as four types of outcomes: presentation, performance, problem solving and projects, or a combination of the “Four P’s.” To this end, the county office of education is aligning its sponsored student events, which include History Day, Math Super Bowl and CyberQuest, to the Common Core’s anchor standards for mathematical practices and college and career readiness.

Tulare County districts are encouraged to participate in at least one county-sponsored event as a means of providing students with real-world, application-based experiences. A guide explaining the alignment is available at http://commoncore.tcoe.org and www.tcoe.org/ERS/StudentEventsBrochure.shtm.

Finally, once a plan is in place, it must be sustained and extended. School districts must develop systems to communicate effectively, archive tools and data, collaborate, assess and disseminate what they have discovered. Time must be allotted for revisiting the systems, and the organization leaders need to be responsive and ready to adapt.

In Tulare County, we support districts in this effort by exploring, initiating and facilitating professional networks and collaborative efforts. We recognize we must continue to build capacity through shifts in how we deliver professional development.

Simply stated: Synchronize and support the evolution of the work.

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Contributing to this article were colleagues Charlene Stringham, educational resource services administrator; Connie Smith, director of early childhood education programs; and Guadalupe Solis, assistant superintendent of instructional services.
Next-Generation Assessments Aligned to the Common Core

Transitioning to online assessments in English language arts and math in 2014–15 to gauge students’ learning

By Joseph L. Willhoft

Imagine an elementary school in Chapel Hill, N.C., a few years from now. A 5th grader named Alicia prepares to take a test, but there are no No. 2 pencils and no machine-readable bubble sheets. Instead, Alicia and her classmates are seated in front of laptops that allow them to access the assessment online.

The questions are different, too. Instead Alicia and her classmates are not just answering a test item such as “Divide 1/4 by 3.” They will also be asked to respond to real-world scenarios and justify their approach to solving problems with written responses and diagrams. In addition to demonstrating their knowledge of mathematical operations, students will be asked to explain what problems require division with fractions, for example, as opposed to multiplication.

This assessment is one of several fairly short tests that Alicia will take throughout the school year. Her teacher calls them “pulse checks,” and they provide important feedback about what skills Alicia and her classmates have mastered. The teachers at Alicia’s school analyze this information in monthly meetings to make sure the entire school is on track, and Alicia’s parents have access to online reports about their daughter’s progress before she takes a final year-end exam.

In Alicia’s school, these assessments are not treated as the final word on her success. Rather they are one more tool that helps everyone assess Alicia’s progress. The assessment is not a goal but a means to ensuring she receives the support she needs.

While there are few statewide tests today that look like the one Alicia and her classmates are taking, that soon will change in schools across the country. Thanks to the Common Core State Standards and the development of new assessments aligned to the standards, the public education system is undergoing a transformation — and administrators can help make this vision a reality.

PERIODIC AND ADAPTIVE

Today, more than 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards. The standards, however, are just one part of a cohesive system that supports student growth and learning.

Educators also need new tools to measure whether students are mastering the knowledge and skills needed for success in college and careers, as well as resources and support to help them meet these goals. At the heart of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium’s work is a vision of assessment as an integral part of an aligned system of standards, curriculum, instruction and professional development, all focused on preparing students for college and career. The consortium is a state-led initiative developing next-generation assessments aligned to the Common Core (see page 32).

Smarter Balanced is developing next-generation assessments in English language arts/literacy and mathematics that will be implemented in the 2014–15 school year. These assessments will provide a more complete, more efficient measurement of student progress — with periodic checks to help evaluate what students need to stay on the path to success and tools to help educators continuously improve instruction.
In addition to being delivered online, Smarter Balanced assessments will be computer-adaptive. A computer-adaptive test adjusts the difficulty of questions based on student responses, providing a uniquely tailored set of items for each student. Adaptive assessments provide more accurate measures of student achievement, giving educators richer information about where students excel and where they need support.

Administrators will play an important role in preparing districts for the transition over the next two years. A successful transition will require planning for technology readiness, real-world field testing, and training and professional development. In addition, teachers and parents will have many questions and will need resources and information about the assessments. Smarter Balanced is working with states to provide support in each of these areas, and administrators will have a critical role to play in preparing for the transition.

TECHNOLOGY READINESS

For many states and school districts, one of the most significant changes will be the switch to online delivery of the assessments. While computerized assessments have many advantages, including faster turnaround of results and flexibility for more sophisticated assessment items, they also require thoughtful planning of technology resources.

Smarter Balanced and the other assessment consortium, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, have developed a technology-readiness tool to assess local capacity in instructional technology. Earlier this year, states worked with districts and schools to collect baseline information on the technology resources available in schools. This information is guiding the design of the assessments to ensure they reflect the reality of technology readiness in schools and districts.

Tight budgets mean few districts will be able to invest in new technology. In many cases, however, existing technology resources and infrastructure will be sufficient for the new assessments. Computers may be able to be repurposed for instruction and assessment, and many tablets and other computing devices will be able to administer the assessments. What’s more, the Smarter Balanced summative assessment will be administered during the last 12 weeks of the school year, allowing one computer lab to support many students.

Administrators can prepare their districts for online assessments by working closely with schools, with district assessment coordinators and with state information technology coordinators to develop and implement technology plans.

Additionally, each member state has appointed a state readiness coordinator, an individual or a team working with districts and schools to set up local users and provide support. District staff can use these coordinators as a resource to prepare schools to use the technology-readiness tool.

Finally, future data-collection opportunities through the technology-readiness tool will allow schools to provide updated information and help produce an accurate picture of their technology capabilities and needs.

PILOT AND FIELD TESTING

In 2013 and 2014, Smarter Balanced will conduct two rounds of real-world testing of the assessments. In early 2013, Smarter Balanced will pilot several thousand test items and performance tasks. The pilot test will determine whether the items and tasks that will make up the end-of-year summative assessments and the periodic interim assessments are performing as intended.

The pilot test also is an opportunity for schools and teachers to gain experience administering the new assessments and to provide feedback that will inform the development of additional items and performance tasks for the field test in early 2014.

All schools in Smarter Balanced member states will be eligible to participate in the 2013 pilot test, and
administrators should encourage their schools to take part in this important exercise. They can work closely with their principals to determine which grades or classrooms would be most appropriate to participate in the pilot test.

PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION

The Common Core State Standards and next-generation assessments provide an opportunity for educators in different schools, districts and states to collaborate like never before. Teachers and school leaders will have access to assessment results within weeks, allowing them to adjust lesson plans and address learning challenges.

Administrators can help shape environments and provide professional development opportunities that allow teachers to work together and share best practices. Creating opportunities for collaboration across subjects, grades and schools will help ensure that educators use and view the new assessments differently.

Many resources are available for administrators to share with teachers and principals to help them adapt and align lessons to the Common Core State Standards.

Smarter Balanced recognizes that teachers need better tools and training to make the most of the information from the assessments. Working with teams of teachers from each member state, the consortium will develop a digital library with research-based, formative-assessment strategies and practices, including instructional best practices for each grade level and strategies for collaboration. The digital library also will include training about implementing the assessment system, interpreting results and using data to improve instruction.

COMMUNICATING PUBLICLY

As well-positioned advocates for children’s education, school district administrators have a role to play in informing school boards, parents and other stakeholders about the importance and implications of next-generation assessments. Communicating early and regularly about the Common Core and the new assessment system will ensure everyone is driving toward the same goal of college and career readiness for all students.

Specifically, it is beneficial to communicate that improved assessments are a critical step in implementing the Common Core. The new assessments will provide real-time feedback for teachers, students and parents about whether students are meeting the new standards.

Smarter Balanced believes that a high-quality system of assessments can improve teaching and learning and help all students graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college and the workplace. To do that, educators need more than just a score at the end of the year, when it is too late make a difference. Smarter Balanced will give teachers new tools to monitor student progress, as well as resources to meet each student’s unique needs.

In addition, Smarter Balanced has created a suite of materials that can be especially helpful when administrators speak to board members, parents or other community members. These materials can be found on www.smarterbalanced.org and include sample assessment items and performance tasks and fact sheets offering a general overview and audience-specific details. The site also has newsletters and updates on the consortium’s progress.

LOOKING AHEAD

The American public education system could look quite different to Alicia and her classmates in a couple of years, but much work remains before then.

Across the country, this work is already under way. The implementation of the Common Core State Standards and next-generation assessments is part of a larger shift toward preparing all students for college, careers and success in an ever-changing global economy. As Connecticut’s education
commissioner, Stefan Pryor, told the Hartford Courant in July, “In the real world, the tasks that we are asked to perform in the workplace or in life do not involve bubble sheets. They involve research, analysis and the use of items that we find in the real world.”

What is Smarter Balanced?

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education awarded grants to two state consortia, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, to develop next-generation assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards for implementation in 2014–15.

The Smarter Balanced assessment system includes formative, interim and summative components that work together to provide actionable information to improve teaching and learning. The assessment system is designed to give states maximum flexibility to meet local needs — through optional interim assessments and on-demand formative strategies and practices — while covering the full depth and breadth of knowledge and skills in the Common Core State Standards for students in grades 3–8 and 11.

Both the year-end summative assessment and interim assessments will be computer adaptive and include innovative items and performance tasks to measure the skills and knowledge that students need to be college- and career-ready. The optional interim assessments can be used to benchmark student progress throughout the year, and educators will have the flexibility to administer an assessment on an entire grade’s worth of subject matter or a subset of concepts.

Smarter Balanced is composed of 25 member states that educate approximately 19 million students from Hawaii to Maine. Twenty-one governing states play an active role in making decisions and steering the direction of the assessments. Four advisory states play a nonbinding, participatory role.


Joe Willhoft is executive director of Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium in Olympia, Wash.

E-mail: Info@SmarterBalanced.org

Additional Resources

Joe Willhoft suggested these resources about the assessments connected to the Common Core State Standards.

The Council of the Great City Schools created “Parent Roadmaps to the Common Core Standards” (www.cgcs.org/Page/244) in English language arts/literacy and mathematics to provide guidance to parents about what their children will be learning and how they can support that learning in grades K-8.

The James B. Hunt Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy and the Council of Chief State School Officers partnered to produce a series of videos (www.youtube.com/user/TheHuntInstitute) that provide short introductions to the CCSS, their guiding principles and how they will inform the concepts taught at each grade level.

The National PTA created grade-by-grade guides for mathematics and English language arts/literacy (www.pta.org/4446.htm) to help parents understand the Common Core State Standards.

Student Achievement Partners (www.achievethecore.org) provides a variety of free and easy-to-use tools, resources and research to help with implementing the CCSS.
Common Sticking Points About Differentiation

10 of the familiar ‘yes, but …’ refrains and how you can address teachers’ hesitancy to moving forward

By Carol Ann Tomlinson and Marcia B. Imbeau

A typical classroom today is a jigsaw puzzle of learners. It is not unusual for a teacher to have in one class students from multiple cultures, bringing with them varied degrees of proficiency with English and an impressive array of learning exceptionalities (both identified and not identified), as well as a broad array of economic backgrounds.

That set of descriptors doesn’t account for students’ varied learning strengths, entry points into any given segment of the curriculum, dreams and interests or approaches to learning.

There are three approaches schools and teachers can take to deal with this common span of academic diversity. One is to place students in heterogeneous settings and do little to attend to student differences. The second is to track or group the students homogeneously by ability, what we perceive to be their potential as learners. The third is to create heterogeneous classrooms designed to attend to learner variance. The third option advocates differentiating instruction in heterogeneous classrooms.

Option one — heterogeneity without attention to its reality — has been tried and found wanting over generations, even when student populations were far less varied than those in contemporary schools and those likely to be in schools of the future. Some educators suggest that as long as teachers “teach well,” a one-size-fits-all approach can succeed. That is likely not the case for the students who do not understand the language of the teacher and text, students who already know the content before the teacher “teaches it well,” students who have significant gaps in prerequisite knowledge, and so on.

Option two — ability grouping and tracking — not only has a poor record in terms of student achievement, but also too often creates classes stratified by race and economic status in an era where there are evident benefits to bringing diverse individuals together. In addition, this approach frequently results in educators misjudging student capacity and teaching down to those students perceived to be less able. Again, this approach is counterproductive when the nation’s clear mandate is to raise the level of challenge and proficiency for all students.

Approach number three, which we now refer to as differentiated instruction, is the comparative newcomer on the scene. Early research on differentiation is promising and, when implemented correctly, it is solidly rooted in sound educational theory and research. Most teachers report seeing the need for differentiation in their classes. Nonetheless, translating that perception into practice is daunting. Human beings are not prone to embrace change.

Thus even with the recognition of student differences and the conclusion that those differences matter in teaching and learning, the prospect of rethinking teaching and learning often results in a predictable rash of “Yes, buts …” when teachers consider developing and applying the principles and skills of differentiation.

SENSIBLE ANSWERS

Over the years, we’ve undoubtedly heard most of the “Yes, buts …,” as well as some responses to them. It’s important for education leaders to understand both teacher hesitancy to change and the power of meaningful change. There are straightforward answers to most “Yes, buts ….” A few are more legitimate.
No. 1: “I can’t differentiate instruction because I have to cover the standards for everyone.”

RESPONSE: Differentiation is an instructional approach and does not dictate curricula, although it does suggest, based on much research and visible evidence, that student learning is far more durable and purposeful when curricula is meaning-rich than when it they are a list of data. The primary goal of differentiation, however, is to help teachers develop and use multiple pathways for students to learn whatever they teach, including content standards.

No. 2: “I can’t differentiate instruction because the standardized test is not differentiated.”

RESPONSE: Research clearly indicates that students will typically perform better on standardized tests when they have had the opportunity to learn in preferred modes, even if the test is not in their preferred mode. That is the case both because they learned the content better and because they entered the testing situation with greater confidence in themselves as learners. There’s little logic in teaching students in a way that’s awkward for them just so they will be prepared for a test that is awkward for them.

No. 3: “I can’t differentiate instruction because I’m already too busy and have absolutely no extra time for planning.”

RESPONSE: The idea is not to plan everything the way you always have and then plan differentiation on top of that. The goal is to plan instruction in a differentiated fashion from the outset. In addition, it’s essential for teachers to pace themselves and to move into new ways of thinking about teaching and learning at a level that produces growth and change without being overwhelming. If you have an hour to plan tomorrow’s lesson, spend the hour planning an effectively differentiated approach.

No. 4: “I can’t differentiate instruction because I teach too many students.”

RESPONSE: This comment is made variously by teachers with 20 or 25 or 30 or 35 students in their classrooms. The number of students does not seem to dictate the response. In fact, it’s been stated by teachers whose enrollment went from 12 in the past year to 15 in the current year. There also are teachers who regularly differentiate with 40 or more students in their classrooms. Would it be beneficial if teacher-student ratios were lower? It’s hard not to advocate for that, and yet research indicates teachers typically do not differentiate more when class sizes are reduced.

No. 5: “I can’t differentiate instruction because I only have one textbook.”

RESPONSE: So many instructional materials exist beyond the textbook. Usually, the school district has old or otherwise unused textbooks that contain material on the same topics as a current text but are written at different readability levels. The Internet opens the world in terms of readiness, interest and even learning-profile options. Media specialists are valuable resources for matching materials to student needs. Or teachers can just use the textbook differently with different students based on current learning needs.

No. 6: “I can’t differentiate instruction because my classroom is too small.”

RESPONSE: It would be great to teach in a spatially generous setting. Many teachers don’t and won’t have that luxury. Again, a small room size doesn’t seem to be a discourager for teachers who mean to differentiate instruction, although those teachers undoubtedly would love to have a larger room. And a larger room does not seem to be an automatic catalyst for student-focused instruction.

No. 7: “I can’t differentiate instruction because it won’t prepare students for college.”

RESPONSE: If students were developmentally ready for college at 6 or 12 or even 16, we should send them on. They are not. Effective differentiation should, in fact, prepare students for education after
K-12 by ensuring they learn the content, habits of mind and self-awareness necessary for continuing learning.

**No. 8:** “I can’t differentiate instruction because parents won’t accept it.”

**RESPONSE:** Few parents recoil at the idea of teachers who genuinely care about the growth of their students and who are willing to invest in making sure students have the most productive year possible. That’s what differentiation aims to do. Communicating that effectively to parents, and then following through, is more likely to generate allies than enemies for teachers.

**No. 9:** “I could differentiate if my students were older (and therefore more responsible), but they are only 7, 9, 11, 16, 18.”

**RESPONSE:** Students learn to be responsible and self-guided in classrooms where teachers approach teaching those skills with the same seriousness they use to ensure student mastery of the subjects they teach. Students in any setting and of any age can learn to be effective partners for one another and for the teacher in a flexibly managed classroom. In fact, the place in which nearly all students work effectively with a balance of structure and freedom ideal for a differentiated classroom is kindergarten.

**No. 10:** “I don’t see how I can differentiate because our district (or principal) requires us to use a pacing guide and scripted texts and we’re sanctioned if we deviate from either of them.”

**RESPONSE:** This common “Yes, but ...” statement is more difficult to answer. Sadly, it is something teachers encounter with frequency in today’s schools — and thus, something school leaders need to understand and avoid.

Only one meaningful response exists: “I apologize. I did not intend to create conditions in which you cannot be responsive to the needs of the students you teach. Please use both documents as guides and not as impediments to effective teaching. By all means, do not abandon your professional judgment.”

Asking teachers to attend to the evident differences their students bring into the classroom and simultaneously not to modify either instruction or time frames is not feasible, and it places teachers in the untenable position of choosing between wholly incompatible directives.

**PREDICTABLE OBJECTIONS**

These 10 “Yes, buts ...” are not only common, but predictable. They are characteristic of novices in any field and feel like a safety net in the face of a call to disrupt the generally comfortable routines we’ve established. To the degree teachers are able to cling to them, they are justified in their sense that this differentiation thing is impractical — at least in “my classroom.”

Nonetheless, many teachers who initially subscribe to the “Yes, buts ...” grow increasingly uncomfortable in the face of student frustration and stagnation. Those teachers risk implementing student-focused approaches in their classroom and often have two realizations. First, their students are the beneficiaries of their efforts. Second, addressing their students’ needs wasn’t nearly as foreboding as they had assumed it would be.

Incrementally, but steadily, these teachers learn to be more responsive to the students they teach, and positive student outcomes encourage continued teacher development. Somewhere in that process, the “Yes, buts ...” cease to serve a purpose and become an artifact of the past. In other words, propelled by a sense of necessity and nurtured by a sense of accomplishment, many teachers answer their own “Yes, buts ...” through increasingly effective practices.

Wise education leaders empathize with the difficulty of making significant changes in teaching practices. They also provide the persistent, intelligent encouragement and support teachers need to make those
changes. They celebrate progress and redirect missteps. They also avoid sending mixed signals to teachers about their roles as professionals in recognizing and responding to the varied needs of the students they teach.

Carol Tomlinson is the William Clay Parrish Jr. professor and chair of educational leadership, foundations and policy at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Va.

E-mail: cat3y@virginia.edu.

Marcia Imbeau is an associate professor of special education curriculum and instruction at University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Ark.

Additional Resources

Readers who want more information about the use of differentiated practices can access the following:


Institutes on Academic Diversity at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, runs professional development sessions on differentiating instruction. http://curry.virginia.edu

*Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom* by Carol Ann Tomlinson and Marcia B. Imbeau, ASCD, Alexandria, Va.

www.differentiationcentral.com, a website maintained by Carol Tomlinson that contains videos, current resources, links to other sources and information on upcoming institutes on differentiation in K-12 education.
Secrets of Success on AASA Connect

✔ Want to Give Students a Postsecondary Advantage?
   Find out what one school district did to help graduates earn the highest ACT composite score in their area.

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   Learn how this school district increased their capacity to serve students and families without adding staff.

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*AASA Connect* (aasaconnect.com) serves as a companion to the AASA main website and provides members one-of-a-kind resources specific to superintendents, as well as new opportunities to interact with fellow school administrators, AASA staff and experts in areas related to educational leadership.

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