Data-Based Decision Making

Data-Based Decision Making empowers elementary principals to become more knowledgeable about using data in their leadership responsibilities. It advocates deep examination of data with a framework of three questions to investigate and eliminate the obstacles that stand in the way of effective data use: What data are you looking for? How will you find the data? How will you use the data? Principals will learn how to use data to clarify decisions, identify solutions, reach struggling learners, strengthen instruction, target resources more effectively, and reexamine their own role as school leader.

Author Edie L. Holcomb also offers principals:

• Guiding questions and protocols to stimulate authentic data discussions along with opportunities for self-reflection
• Information about creating a data-friendly climate and school improvement and data teams
• Considerations for the use of data in implementing differentiated instruction and schoolwide response to intervention programs

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“Data-Based Decision Making reminds school leaders about the power of meaningful data in support of school improvement. Holcomb provides principals with excellent guidelines for using quality data to guide decisions and empowers them with strategies, protocols, and tools that build capacity and engage the entire staff in the process. A must-read for any leader interested in making a difference in student learning.”

—Kim Bailey, PLC Associate, Director of Instructional Support and Staff Development, Capistrano Unified School District, San Juan Capistrano, California

“Holcomb’s design for data use serves as a GPS for identification and effective utilization of specific data for any circumstance a school administrator may encounter. Not only do we learn how the principal can use the data, but also how he or she can then assist teachers in aligning their instruction to the identified needs. The format is user-friendly, and the framework for data-based decision making will allow any principal—from novice to veteran—to positively impact student achievement.”

—Karen Daugherty, Principal, Rose Tree Elementary School, Media, Pennsylvania
Data-Based Decision Making

EDIE L. HOLCOMB

A Joint Publication

Solution Tree  naesp™
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• Gordon Oliver and the staff of Rockwood Elementary in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
• Eva Kubinski of the special education team of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

I am indebted to many and wish all a delightful and determined data journey!

* * *

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Edie L. Holcomb. PhD, has been a principal, district administrator, and university professor and is highly regarded for her ability to link research and practice on issues related to school leadership, improvement, and reform. Her classroom experience includes teaching heterogeneous classes at all grade levels, inclusion of students with multiple disabilities, and coordination of services for gifted and talented students. Her building-level administrative experience ranges from affluent suburban schools to Title I schools with racial and ethnic diversity and English learners (ELs).

At the university level, Dr. Holcomb served as associate director of the National Center for Effective Schools, developing School-Based Instructional Leadership, a training program for site-based teams. As an associate professor of educational administration at Wichita State University in Kansas, she coordinated the principalship course and internships and taught applied inquiry in the field-based doctoral program.

Dr. Holcomb understands the challenges of districts with enrollment ranging from 3,000 to 45,000, having served as director of standards and assessment and later as supervisor of twenty-one schools in the Seattle School District in Washington. She also served as executive director of curriculum and instructional services in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

She has provided technical assistance for implementation of school improvement efforts throughout the United States as well as in Canada, Guam, St. Lucia, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. She helped develop Washington State’s School System Improvement Resource Guide and worked with the Ohio Department of Education on its plans for technical assistance and support for districts and schools identified for improvement under No Child Left Behind. She has also worked with statewide models in Kentucky and Pennsylvania.

Dr. Holcomb holds a BS in elementary education, an MS in gifted education, and an EdS in educational administration. She received a PhD in educational administration from the University of Minnesota.

To learn more about Edie, visit her on the web at www.edieholcomb.org.

To book Edie for professional development, contact pd@solution-tree.com.
In a recent data workshop, I asked participants to describe their feelings about data use in thirty seconds or less. One group penned the following paraphrase of a famous poem to express its sentiments about having plenty of data, but no opportunity to understand and use it:

Data, data, everywhere—in every color ink!
Data, data, everywhere—no time to stop and think!

*Data-Based Decision Making* is designed to help principals become more knowledgeable about how to use data themselves and support the use of data as one of their leadership responsibilities. Teaching and learning occur in the context of community values and in environments created at the school and classroom levels. This book shows principals a broader scope of data use with which they can lead staff to “become more proactive and move beyond the ‘on the surface’ work with data—and investigate ‘below the surface’ issues related to our data” (Creighton, 2007, pp. 1–2).

This book addresses three basic questions regarding data use:

- **What data are you looking for?** This question emphasizes data related to student learning, nonacademic student realities, staff-related information to guide supervision and support, and family or community factors. These data come from multiple sources and multiple years.

- **How will you find the data?** Reports of state assessments come automatically to the attention of school leaders but not necessarily in formats most useful to teachers for planning purposes. Other sources of data may be available, but school leaders do not currently access them for regular discussion. The need for other kinds of data surface as staff members assemble evidence to challenge their assumptions and to demonstrate the efficacy of their decisions. Some of these data are available or can be created at the school site. For other needs, the principal’s connections to district staff are critical to facilitate necessary assistance.

- **How will you use the data?** Each chapter focuses on a specific purpose for data use, as outlined in the chapter overviews that follow. Many of the types of data recommended for use have multiple purposes and may be mentioned in more than one chapter. The application of the data is guided by protocols or questions that the principal may use to stimulate data discussions within the school.

Chapter 1 focuses on current best practices with data use, especially those associated with higher achievement in elementary schools. It also delineates the unique role of the principal and the influence she or he provides on the district, school, classrooms, and teachers.
Chapter 2 describes elements of the school culture and structure that must be considered and strengthened to create a data-friendly context for the work described in the remaining chapters. The previous edition of this Essentials for Principals volume described such factors as preconditions. This edition holds that issues of values, culture, and teamwork within the school are matters for ongoing attention, and that data can actually be used to help build those conditions. The principal should not delay use of data solely on the basis of the context not being ideal but should instead diagnose where steps need to be taken to facilitate the data work. This chapter stresses use of a broad range of data sources to increase the ability to make stronger decisions about both student learning and the environment. It also discusses the three questions of what data to look for, how to find it, and how to use it.

Chapter 3 focuses on data use for schoolwide decision making, a cyclical process that is briefly introduced in chapter 2. This chapter also addresses the three foundational questions about data use within the context of six components of school improvement.

Chapter 4 zeroes in on the use of data to identify and support struggling students. It also emphasizes the need to focus on the most essential concepts and skills (MECS) and clarifies the importance of formative assessment and changes in teacher record keeping. These data uses are linked to implementation of differentiated instruction and organized interventions. Student engagement with evidence of their own learning also depends on authentic, real-time assessment.

Chapter 5 addresses uses of data to strengthen classroom instruction. This chapter describes the intersection of evidence of implementation (from chapter 3) with the principal’s role in teacher evaluation, supervision, and professional development. Once again, the text reinforces the necessity of developing assessment practices that provide usable, credible data.

Finally, chapter 6 focuses on the principal’s own use of data for professional growth. It synthesizes the principal’s responsibilities from earlier chapters in rubric form as a self-assessment tool. This chapter also provides examples of principals’ goals related to data use, school improvement, and other aspects of leadership practice.

The three basic questions of data use (what kind, how to find, and how to use) are common elements throughout this book. Each chapter also closes with a section on your role as principal as it relates to data-based decision making. These sections include prompts for you to journal to record the observations, insights, and needs that surface. The book will be of most value if you take this step seriously, because your journaling becomes anecdotal data that will shape your goals and next steps.

The same group of workshop participants who expressed their sentiments about having plenty of data, but no opportunity to understand and use it, had a different outlook at the end of our workshop together. They shared their new learning about data use in a cheer, complete with makeshift pom-poms and not-so-agile leg kicks:
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Instructions</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give me a D!</td>
<td>D!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give me an A!</td>
<td>A!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give me a T!</td>
<td>T!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give me an A!</td>
<td>A!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does it spell?</td>
<td>DATA!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is it FOR?</td>
<td>STUDENT LEARNING!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This book, written specifically for elementary principals, will help practitioners move their schools toward more and more intentional data use, which, in turn, will support greater student success.
CHAPTER 1

Data, Decisions, and the Principal in the Middle

Data-based decision making is an essential part of principalship. The phrase “data for decision making” has been used so often in discussions of school improvement efforts that it has nearly become a meaningless mantra. The good news is that people no longer argue about whether you should use data. Effective use of data has been repeatedly tied to successful efforts to increase levels of student achievement. More data are available to support principals’ and teachers’ efforts to improve student achievement, and educators have become more sophisticated in their use of data. The increased emphasis on data use has prompted more training and heightened educators’ awareness of how data can be used to help diagnose problems and identify possible solutions. Many schools have experienced an increase in the use of data, the types of data used, and the number of ways in which data are used.

The bad news is that schools sometimes use the wrong data in the wrong ways while neglecting other vital and useful information. The danger is a tendency to generate data for the sake of having more data, without creating the context in which those data will become useful information.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) goal was and is correct and critical: its public focus on equity has provided visibility and a forum for advocacy groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Council of La Raza, the Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights, and the National Center for Learning Disabilities (Shirley, 2009). In many schools and districts, the use of disaggregated data on state assessments has raised awareness of previously hidden or ignored achievement gaps. Though much remains to be done to close those gaps (Barr & Parrett, 2007), their reality is now abundantly clear.

The public visibility of state assessment systems and results has begun to build a sense of collective responsibility in another way. When state-mandated tests were given only in reading and math and at only one grade at each level—elementary, middle, and high—those test results were often given only to the teachers of the tested subjects or grades. Now, with the entire school judged as having made adequate yearly progress (AYP) or not and with data provided for more students, additional staff members participate in data discussions.
Developing a student-focused school culture calls for the use of data in conjunction with a stated mission. Such a culture necessitates an active dialogue among professionals about the moral purpose at the heart of the endeavor. Authentic involvement in articulating our shared beliefs represents one part of the picture. It must be accompanied by courageous identification and analysis of data aligned with each lofty phrase to determine whether an organization actually walks its talk. The pressures on schools since enactment of NCLB and the implication that the sole mission of a school is to ensure reading and math proficiency have overshadowed more general discussions of beliefs and values. As many educators have said, “Since NCLB, we don’t have to bother with a mission statement any more. We just have to meet AYP.”

In much the same way, assessment and accountability reports have focused the school’s entire attention on the fundamental skills of reading and math. No one argues that these subject areas are crucial building blocks for present and future learning, but this narrow focus has led to school improvement plans that target only reading and math and ignore all other factors known to make a school a better, more effective learning organization.

Knapp, Swinnerton, Copland, and Monpas-Huber (2006) discuss this evolution in the use of data:

> An argument can be made that educational leaders have always had “data” of some kind available to them when making decisions intended to improve teaching and learning. Effective leaders gathered whatever information they could readily access, and then drawing on accumulated experience, intuition, and political acumen, they chose the wisest course of action to pursue. The data they collected was likely impressionistic and rarely systematic, complete, or sufficiently nuanced to carry the weight of important decisions. (p. 2)

Chapter 2 will outline a weighty set of data, and chapter 3 will describe a systematic process for effective uses of data in decision-making.

**Effective Uses of Data**

A review of literature on data use through the mid-2000s yielded twenty practices that were prevalent among schools and districts with consistent high achievement or significant gains (Holcomb, 2004). These high-performing organizations were characterized by:

1. Creating a culture of collective responsibility for all students
2. Understanding that assessment is an integral part of the instructional process
3. Testing their results against their espoused mission
4. Using data to stimulate equity conversations
5. Making clear distinctions between inputs (by adults) and outcomes (for students)
6. Using both objective and subjective (perceptual) data appropriately
7. Providing user-friendly data visuals
8. Focusing on the most critical priorities to conserve time, energy, and money
9. Drilling down for student- and skill-specific data in priority areas
10. Planning forward as students rise to the next grade or school, to respond to individual skill gaps
11. Planning backward to fill gaps revealed in the instructional program
12. Examining research, best practices, and exemplary schools
13. Reflecting on their practice by analyzing curriculum and instructional strategies
14. Selecting proven strategies for implementation
15. Identifying and planning for student populations with specific needs
16. Providing or developing formative assessments to balance large-scale, high-stakes tests
17. Monitoring rates of progress over time for both individual students and cohort groups
18. Gathering evidence about implementation of improvement strategies and their impact on student learning
19. Consolidating multiple plans
20. Taking the initiative to generate their own data and tell their own story, rather than relying on state reports and media coverage

Reports on data use have continued to underscore the value of utilizing data for the purposes of school culture building and decision making. A six-year study sponsored by the Wallace Foundation adds perspectives from the late 2000s. A seventeen-page section of Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson’s (2010) report *Learning From Leadership* focuses specifically on “data use in schools and districts.” After examining test data, conducting classroom observations, and gathering perceptual data from a wide range of respondents in 9 states, 43 school districts, and 180 elementary, middle, and high schools, Louis et al. (2010) write that “most principals have and use considerable amounts of evidence about the status of individual students and their student populations,” but “very few principals have systematically collected evidence about the school and classroom conditions that would need to change for achievement to improve” (p. 179).

**Types of Data Used by Principals and Teachers**

All but one principal in the *Learning From Leadership* study referred to state-mandated assessment results when identifying the types of data used in their schools. Sixteen of the twenty-seven principals also referred to district-mandated measures of student achievement. A few talked about development of diagnostic and formative assessments used by teachers to track student performance and to provide targeted interventions. High data-use schools particularly emphasized development and systematic use of diagnostic and formative assessments of student learning.
The principals in the study also referred to evidence about their students as a group, including mobility rates, attendance, graduation rates, eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, and students with various disabilities. At a minimum, they used these data to comply with policy requirements for reporting student test results and for allocating student and district resources. Less frequently, school and district personnel used student background information for help in interpreting student and school performance data. This complex use of data was more likely in high data-use schools.

**High Data-Use Schools**

One central finding of the *Learning From Leadership* study was that “high and low data-use schools differed little in respect to the data available to them. Differences were more evident in the uses schools made of the available data” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 191, italics added). Data uses more typical of high data-use schools than of low data-use schools include:

- Using data to monitor the outcomes of school improvement plans
- Using formative assessments of student progress at regular intervals throughout the year
- Using data in making decisions about professional development plans
- Using data in conversations with parents about student performance and programming
- Using data to move beyond problem identification to problem solving; gathering additional data to better understand the causes or factors related to the problems in question

Differences in data use between elementary and secondary schools were even more marked and paralleled the differences between high and low data use. When all schools were considered together, “the typical approaches to data use by districts and principals had no measurable influence on student learning. . . . *In elementary schools, however, data use may account for a significant proportion of the variation in student achievement, over and above the effects of student diversity, poverty and school size*” (p. 196, italics added).

**The Position of the Principal**

Figure 1.1 illustrates the unique position of the principal, her spheres of influence at the individual school site, and her connections with the district. All of the relationships shown here represent venues in which the principal must make and communicate decisions. These decisions can be better reached, explained, and evaluated using data.

**The Principal at the Site**

At the building level (right side of fig. 1.1), the principal works with many constituents outside the school through formal structures and individual interactions. Organizations like the parent teacher association (PTA) or a school council often represent families and community members. In addition, the principal meets with individual parents and needs to be aware of informal clusters (such as native-language groups) within the school attendance area.
At the school site, the principal is more directly in charge of the formal structures for school-wide decision making. Such structures include a school improvement/leadership team (SI/LT) that addresses problem solving and planning around issues broader than individual classrooms. In all but the smallest elementary schools, the SI/LT should be supported by a data team with the more specific charge of gathering and displaying data needed for use at the school and classroom levels. These structures are further described in chapter 2.

The principal’s most numerous and frequent interactions are with staff who work in the school. Figure 1.1 is far from complete, allowing space for just three of the many types of staff who support students in a variety of ways. One group of certificated (licensed) staff members consists of general education teachers who have their own classrooms or who serve all students in art, music, physical education, library, media, and so on. A second group of certificated staff includes teachers with specialized expertise to match specific student needs, such as special education and English learners (ELs). Classified (that is, noncertificated) staff provide a broad range of services for students, such as clerical, nutritional, custodial, and instructional. Pause in your reading and take time to personalize figure 1.1 so that it represents how the staff at your school would describe their groups. (See the reproducible template Position of the Principal on page 12.) Each group must be represented on the school improvement/leadership team. In addition, the principal should discuss data with small groups and individuals within the school as part of the ongoing supervisory relationship.

The fourth constituency represented in figure 1.1 is the student body. Some elementary schools have a formal student council structure, particularly for upper grades. The principal also interacts with all students informally in common spaces, with individuals in both commendation and consequence modes, and in the process of visiting classrooms. The role of data use with students includes
gathering their perceptions, providing them with timely and meaningful feedback, and engaging them with evidence of their own progress.

**The Principal as Connection to the District**

Many principalship books focus on leadership at the school site and do not address the reality of the principal as middle management. The principal must accept full ownership for what occurs at the school while operating within policies, procedures, programs, and performance expectations established at the district level. The arrows in figure 1.1 do not flow from the district to the principal; rather, they represent the district as another sphere for the principal to influence. The principal, in collaboration with his or her colleagues, must communicate needs, participate in district committees, and ask how data are used in district decision making.

Large school districts often have two organizational divisions: operations and instruction. The operations departments may include finance, legal, human resources, technology, and often the superintendent’s office. The instructional side deals with curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development. Pause at this time and consider your direct supervisor’s location within the organizational structure of the district. If, as principal, you report to operations, it is even more critical that you take the initiative and devote intentional time and energy to bridge and influence what occurs on the instructional side—for example, with regard to the **most essential concepts and skills (MECS)**, a term used frequently in this book. The prioritized learning targets, the MECS, cannot be chosen at will by individual teachers or schools, especially in systems where middle schools receive students from more than one site or where students are mobile within the district.

The types of data use described in this chapter may also generate the need for district help in accessing data sources and in providing technological support to set up record-keeping processes and to create user-friendly data displays. More sophisticated use of data at the school level must inform district decisions about data warehousing and will likely impact policies about grading and student placement. The data-skillful principal will be able to influence the district context on behalf of his or her school and students by asking questions about how data is used in district decisions and by presenting data that clearly describes the school’s needs, decisions, and programs.

**Your Role as Principal**

Already in this chapter, the discussion of figure 1.1 prompted you to reflect on the constituents you serve at the school level, how they perceive their individual and group identities, and how they are represented in the formal decision-making structures in your school. Take time to journal your observations as part of your anecdotal data collection. You will further reflect on these observations as you read chapter 2 and when you complete the self-assessment in chapter 6.

The discussion of figure 1.1 also prompted you to think about your reporting relationship as well as involvement with district-level data use and decision making. Journal about your linkages to those structures. Unless you lead the only elementary school in the district, you also need to consider how you and your colleagues might share the load of being directly involved in district
committees and how you share those experiences and gather reactions from each other. Some principals have—in good faith and because of the crushing load of work in limited time—entrusted the instructional work in their school to district curriculum consultants and district-based instructional coaches. These individuals have valuable expertise and connections to the classroom context, and they provide a valuable service. But you must not become disconnected from, or delegate to others, the instructional leadership role for your school.

Finally, you must assess your own assessment literacy. Michael Fullan (2003) describes assessment literacy as:

- Ability to gather dependable student data
- Capacity to examine student data and make sense of it
- Ability to make changes in teaching and schools derived from those data
- Commitment to communicate effectively and to engage in external assessment discussions

You need not have the statistical expertise of the data analysts in the state and district assessment departments, but you do need confidence and competence to hear and respond to teacher questions and concerns. You should also access your district connections to answer questions of a more technical nature.

The bottom line is this: it makes sense to use data to clarify decisions, identify alternative solutions to problems, and target resources more effectively. The real question is not whether to integrate the use of data into school leadership but how. At the same time, the reality is that identifying good data and using it effectively is a complex process—a challenge with which many schools still struggle. According to the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2006), “Data-driven decision making . . . reminds practitioners that their plans have a greater likelihood of succeeding if the goals and strategies within them are based on solid information and not on hunches or habit” (p. 1).

The purpose of this book is to help principals and schools grow beyond the proverbial description of being data rich and information poor—past being data-driven to perceiving their work as data-guided, or better yet, data-enriched. Almost anything you decide and do, you can decide and do better with skillful use of appropriate data.
Position of the Principal

Directions: Customize this figure using the groups and roles in your school and district. This figure can also be used in staff discussions that focus on how, when, where, and by whom data is used in your setting.
Data-Based Decision Making

“Data-Based Decision Making reminds school leaders about the power of meaningful data in support of school improvement. Holcomb provides principals with excellent guidelines for using quality data to guide decisions and empowers them with strategies, protocols, and tools that build capacity and engage the entire staff in the process. A must-read for any leader interested in making a difference in student learning.”
—Kim Bailey, PLC Associate, Director of Instructional Support and Staff Development, Capistrano Unified School District, San Juan Capistrano, California

“Holcomb’s design for data use serves as a GPS for identification and effective utilization of specific data for any circumstance a school administrator may encounter. Not only do we learn how the principal can use the data, but also how he or she can then assist teachers in aligning their instruction to the identified needs. The format is user-friendly, and the framework for data-based decision making will allow any principal—from novice to veteran—to positively impact student achievement.”
—Karen Daugherty, Principal, Rose Tree Elementary School, Media, Pennsylvania

Data-Based Decision Making empowers elementary principals to become more knowledgeable about using data in their leadership responsibilities. It advocates deep examination of data with a framework of three questions to investigate and eliminate the obstacles that stand in the way of effective data use: What data are you looking for? How will you find the data? How will you use the data? Principals will learn how to use data to clarify decisions, identify solutions, reach struggling learners, strengthen instruction, target resources more effectively, and reexamine their own role as school leader.

Author Edie L. Holcomb also offers principals:

• Guiding questions and protocols to stimulate authentic data discussions along with opportunities for self-reflection
• Information about creating a data-friendly climate and school improvement and data teams
• Considerations for the use of data in implementing differentiated instruction and schoolwide response to intervention programs

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