9 steps to take in using data to cultivate school transformation

Assistant principals can mine data for insights into school and student progress, and can use those insights to create action plans and lead school transformation. Alongside principals and teachers, you can build data capabilities to access the objective, fact-based keys to unlocking student growth and school improvement.

1. BUILD THE DATA TEAM
A strong data team allows scrutiny of data from varying perspectives.

- Data teams include principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and a teacher leader from each grade. Include student services personnel to address non-academic issues such as attendance.
- Turn leadership teams into data teams. Over the summer, review state assessments and devise skeleton improvement plans. Then, the instructional leadership team can formulate next steps.
2. COLLECT THE DATA
The million-dollar question: In a world groaning with data, how do you know which provides a true snapshot of the school and its students?

- Use evidence to measure and understand the impact of leadership actions.
- Don’t be afraid to collect the wrong evidence; if it doesn’t work, try something new.
- Take advantage of programs’ utilization data. One team discovered that a reading program wasn’t being used efficiently, and brought in a company representative for training.
- Consider qualitative data. Qualitative data comes from efforts such as interim assessments, formative assessments, and student writing assignments.
- Review quantitative data to yield insights. Numbers-based, quantitative data informs instructional planning and day-to-day tasks.

3. CHOOSE STUDENT DATA
Choosing data to scrutinize for student growth can be “messy and muddy,” in the words of one principal. When life gives you mud, make mud pies.

- Start the school year with the freshest data on hand—often the latest state assessments. Then, revisit the previous year’s data to check for gains and find out what’s needed to make gains in the current year.
- Think in tiers: Break the data down by standard and grade level, and hand it off to PLCs to drill down...
for students who don’t master the standards. Use those findings to plan interventions.

- Don’t overlook data from high-performing students or those at basic proficiency. They can be encouraged to grow and develop goals.

4. ANALYZE STUDENT DATA
Extracting meaning from numbers can be a point of frustration, but data can be shaped to tell a story.

- Align state test data with school-based achievement data. Then, look for outliers among students to determine whether in-house assessments missed something.
- Align data findings with standards and curriculum to make sure the concepts teachers are presenting actually result in student knowledge.
- Look at data dives not as searching for numbers, but as mining for explanations.
- At interim assessment time, review test data by the standards taught. What depth of knowledge was the assessment measuring? Identify plans of action for the weakest standards.
- Track data over time and across grade levels to determine whether, for instance, a second-grade intervention shows positive results at fourth grade.

5. USE DATA FOR TEACHER GROWTH
Data can also guide teacher professional development and coaching.
■ Review multiple years of data to reveal trends to address with individual teachers.
■ Analyze individual student growth to reveal gaps in teacher effectiveness.
■ When having difficult discussions with teachers, reflect on the meaning of the numbers for students. If only four students achieve proficiency out of 23, ask the teacher to consider the factors that kept the other 19 behind.
■ Have teachers review grade-level data to find areas where a cross-curricular approach might help close achievement gaps.
■ Keep data relevant by giving teachers opportunities to share items demonstrating their tracking methods.

6. EMPOWER TEACHERS TO USE DATA
The rubber hits the road when data helps raise student achievement.

■ Enlist teacher leaders to design protocols for monitoring and utilizing data. When asked to serve as leaders in math and ELA inquiry, two teachers at one school took ownership of data inquiry in a way that is now a model for other schools.
■ Perform regular data dives to train and refresh teachers on everyday data utilization. Remind them where to find data and how to use it to impact instruction.

7. USE DATA AS A RESOURCE GUIDE
Data analysis is a useful pursuit when the numbers inform viable action plans and help assistant principals target limited resources.

■ Reflect and decide where the greatest area of need is and what resources will be required. Plan activities to address the need, create actionable steps toward implementation, and evaluate impact using evidence.
■ Distribute resources to the areas of greatest need by tiering teachers based on data showing classroom progress and building plans for those who need additional assistance.
■ Empower teachers to write their own mini-assessments based on data findings and unpack standards to reveal what students need to know and when.

8. LEVERAGE DATA WALLS
It might look like little more than a colorful array of sticky notes or spreadsheet entries, but an effectively managed data wall can be a dynamic tool for school improvement.

■ A physical data wall with moveable elements is a valuable tool for teachers who are visual and tactile learners.
■ Employ data walls to spark conversations—and perhaps healthy competition—among teachers.
■ Electronic data walls allow assistant principals to answer parent questions without consulting teachers first. Coaches can use them to target teacher supports.

9. DISSEMINATE THE DATA
Data belongs to the school community, and it can be wielded for powerful effect.
What processes are in place empowering PLCs to act on data findings?

- Work with the school community to develop dissemination practices. Create a consensus on the information they want to see and how it’s shared.
- Share data with individual students and set goals within the lens of a growth mindset (e.g., “It’s not that you can’t do something. You just haven’t done it yet.”)
- Share data sets (with individual findings redacted) with parent leaders and groups to build an understanding of school progress and goals.
- Put data in the school newsletter and consider creating a “State of the School” document to inform parents about the progress made.
- Incorporate data into communications with potential community partners, soliciting support by sharing school successes, goals, and needs.
- Celebrate the gains and successes the data reveals.

Reflection Questions:

- Have I looked closely enough within my school talent to tap those who can enhance our data analysis and utilization capabilities?
- Am I using the right data for the right reasons? Can I justify the purpose for scrutinizing each strand of data brought to my teams?
- Am I matching and overlaying data sets to find the mismatches or alignments that tell a story?
- How well am I training and refreshing my teachers on finding data, analyzing it, and using the results to adjust classroom practices?

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