

Data Sprouts Success

Empower assistant principals with
experience in instructional leadership

By Elizabeth Duffrin





Using data to drive instruction and school improvement is recognized as an approach that can pay off in higher student achievement. Yet assistant principals in *Principal* magazine's readership identified learning to use data as a need that often goes unmet in their development as instructional leaders.

To gain insights on how to best use data and share instructional leadership, we turned to Prince George's County Public Schools in Maryland. The district participated in the Principal Pipeline Initiative, supported by The Wallace Foundation, and placed special emphasis on helping current and future leaders use data to drive school improvement.

Improving instructional leadership skills among assistant principals and teacher leaders was a priority. "As a principal, you can't do this job by yourself," says Charity Magruder, principal of Stephen Decatur Middle School. "The only way you can succeed is to empower others to improve their practice."

We asked principals and assistant principals from Prince George's County to elaborate on the strategies that they used to remove barriers to data use and make assistant principals and teacher leaders into skilled instructional leaders. Here's what they said:

1. EMPOWER TEAMS

The sheer volume of data that needs analyzing can be an obstacle, making a team approach necessary. Magruder has teacher leaders for each subject area and grade level conduct data dives during Thursday planning sessions. On Tuesdays, teams at each grade level share and critique lesson plans they created or modified using the results.

She and her two assistant principals divvy up meetings to support teachers as needed. "She really challenges us to be instructional leaders and not just managers," says assistant principal Marcellus Clement.

2. REHEARSE DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis can easily go astray due to misjudgments or misinterpretation. Before assistant principals work with teachers to analyze data, principals say it's important that they examine the data and model the conversations they want teachers to have.

"If I am the instructional leader, I have to get dirty first so I know where the pitfalls are and where the misconceptions



Three Barriers to School Data Use

School leaders face obstacles in making use of the information data provides, says Jason Grissom, associate professor at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, who studies data use in K–12 education. These obstacles fall into three main categories, he says: “barriers to access, barriers to analysis, and barriers to action.”

Educators first need access to timely and useful data from their district and their own data collection systems, he says. Then they need to know how to analyze the data and make meaning from it, plus take sufficient time to plot their next steps. Mindsets are important, too: Without faith in what the data tells them, educators are unlikely to use it to inform practice.

could be,” says Chelsea Hill, principal of Adelphi Elementary School. Leadership should know “where you want the conversation to go. If you don’t, teachers can walk away feeling it’s a waste of time.”

3. USE A DATA ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

A data analysis protocol provides step-by-step guidance for achieving insights that can be translated into action. In reviewing data with her leadership team, Hill begins with an “I Notice, I Wonder” protocol. A discussion about unit math assessments, for example, begins with “I notice” statements about trends in the data. Next come “I wonder” statements, such as, “I wonder how Ms. Jones tells children to break down a multistep problem.”

The protocol grounds the discussion in fact and offers a chance to identify obstacles to student learning. “Sometimes we want to jump quickly to next steps,” Hill says. “But that time to sit and notice can be the time when we have discoveries that lead to higher student achievement.”

If the data is complicated, Maryam Thomas, principal of Ernest Everett Just Middle School, launches analysis with observations about how the data is organized: What is the graph or chart about? What’s on the X axis and Y axis? While it sounds simple, she says, it prevents misunderstandings that result in unusable observations. Comfort with data varies widely, she adds, so “a standardized approach is critical.”

4. EXAMINE STUDENT WORK

Student work is a rich source of data for use in finding out where students struggle. At Adelphi, teacher leaders lead planning meetings; each brings a sample assignment from a student who excelled, a sample assignment performed at the proficient level, and one from a student who struggled. “You’re examining the task and the student performance and giving feedback to the teacher,” Hill says.

Adelphi assistant principal Leslie Nash-Ruffin says that supporting these meetings has been the most valuable part of her development as an instructional leader. The conversation in which teachers engage while thinking through challenges “is really powerful,” she says.

5. OVERCOME TEACHERS’ FEAR OF DATA ANALYSIS

Resistance to what the data might reveal is a barrier to improved instruction. Disappointing numbers “can feel like an attack,” says Hill. She urges teachers to view data impersonally, as a tool. “The data is your compass,” she tells them. “If your compass is telling you to go north and you go south, you’re not going to get the results you’re looking for.”

Wanda Williams, principal of Oxon Hill Elementary School, says she gets teachers’ buy-in by having them set their own goals for student growth on district assessments. If a teacher sets a goal too low, she gently probes to find out why. Williams can then offer her advice and follow up with classroom observation and coaching.



NOTES

What barriers to discussing data do teachers at our school face?

Dotted lines for taking notes.

In his assistant principal role at Stephen Decatur, Clement reduces resistance to observational classroom data by inviting teacher feedback: “If a teacher says to me, ‘I don’t agree with that,’ I say, ‘tell me why.’ I always like to hear what teachers are thinking.”

6. USE OBSERVATION TO IMPROVE TEACHING

During the first two weeks of school at Ernest Everett Just, Thomas and her assistant principals visit classrooms together and calibrate their feedback to offer consistent expectations to teachers throughout the year. “We have to assess teachers rigorously because

that’s the only way to get to the type of learning experiences that will move the needle on achievement,” she says.

To be effective, feedback must be consistent and delivered with respect. Thomas leads with praise, identifies small improvements teachers can make quickly, and asks questions that provoke deeper thought. Approach teachers as “more of a thought partner than a supervisor,” she says. “It’s not just, ‘Hey, take this feedback,’ but ‘Try this strategy.’”

When it’s time for evaluations, objective evidence makes difficult discussions more productive. “The challenges [to ratings] were based on emotions,” Thomas says.

7. COMMUNICATE DATA TO STUDENTS AND PARENTS

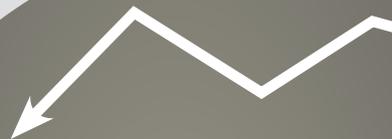
Parents can better support school goals for student achievement when they understand the data. After the first quarterly district assessments each fall, Oxon Hill Elementary hosts a Data Night where parents learn to interpret their children’s results. Teachers at each grade level then lead workshops with activities parents can use at home to reinforce needed skills.

At Melwood Elementary, teachers assess student work with rubrics that provide clear feedback, and students use similar devices to assess their own work and that of their peers, too. “A check and a smiley face—that means nothing,” says principal Andrew Dalton. “Children learn more in an environment where they take ownership of their learning, and they can only take ownership if they understand what they are supposed to learn.”

8. CELEBRATE SUCCESSSES

Analyzing data to improve practice is hard work. “You can turn people off if you don’t celebrate the small successes,” says Williams. She scoured Oxon Hill’s attendance and standardized test score data last year and handed out achievement certificates to teachers at a celebratory event. “I tried to find something good in the data [for] each and every grade level,” she says. “You’ve got to make [data] fun. You’ve got to make people want to look at it.” 🌱

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Key Considerations:

- Build links between leadership and data teams.
- Include support services personnel in data teams.
- Create frameworks for reviewing quantitative data objectively.
- Apply data results to advise use of resources and finances.