In the introduction to Leading Schools in a Data-Rich World, Michael Fullan characterizes the book as “simultaneously deep and practical.” This description fits well with the authors’ intent in writing it. They have both been long involved with issues of school improvement and characterize themselves as “data advocates [but] not data obsessed.” They are also clear in their belief that, “schools need much more than data to improve.” Data analysis, while providing a critical support for school-improvement efforts, must be accompanied by deep understanding and hard work.

Earl and Katz see effective data use as an important element of professional learning communities. In such schools, educators collaborate to solve problems, a setting the authors characterize as a “culture of inquiry.” An important role for principals is helping teachers and other staff members develop an “inquiry habit of mind.” They need to feel comfortable with having the sometimes difficult discussions focused on problems identified through data use, and they need to consider themselves capable of identifying solutions.

In one chapter, the authors write directly to educators who feel they “cannot do this ‘data stuff’ because they are no good with math.” They stress that “data literacy is not the same as ‘crunching numbers’” and go on to describe what they mean by data literacy. It is a thinking process—a process of:

- Standing back and deciding what you need to know and why;
- Collecting or locating the necessary data;
- Finding ways to link key data sources, ensuring that the data are worth considering;
- Being aware of the limitations of the data;
- Thinking about what the results mean; and
- Systematically considering an issue from a range of perspectives so that you feel you have sufficient evidence to explain, support, and also challenge your point of view.

This structure for using data is logical, practical, and, as Earl and Katz mean it to be, an approach that can help develop an inquiry habit of mind in school staff members.

A particularly helpful aspect of the book is its use of school-based examples to demonstrate concepts. Blank templates for use in the process are also provided. The companion Facilitator’s Guide has also been developed. Included in this guide are exercises and discussion questions organized around seven key topics—for example, Capacities for Using Data for Decision Making. Although the authors have designed the set of seven modules as a workshop intended to take a significant amount of time, each of them could form the basis for a school-improvement team’s discussion.