



# Creating a Data-Driven School Culture

Steps to find out where you are and map the route to where you want to be

By Patricia Ordóñez-Feliciano

In a school that is not using data effectively, students may not be getting the educational experiences they need to move to the next level of learning, and teachers may not be getting the support they need.

In 2012, I arrived at West Gate Elementary, a Title I school. The school had dropped from a B to a C grade from the Florida Department of Education and was placed on the state's watch list. My first thought was, "How can teachers effectively use data to better address the diverse academic needs of our students?" Our school implemented seven steps to create a collaborative, data-driven culture:

## 1. Create Teacher Buy-in

Teaching without data is like driving without a map. Nevertheless, it is not always easy for teachers to understand the significance of data. When our school district implemented student assessments utilizing an assessment and analytics platform called Unify from Performance Matters, teachers were not just shown how to use the system to access reports, but also *why* the data mattered.

During the face-to-face professional development session, teachers learned how to analyze the reports using data on our school and their own students. We reviewed our state assessment data from the previous

three years and discussed our areas of strength and need, and which areas we should focus on. Then we looked at tools that could be used to monitor students' performance. We had teachers go into the live platform, run the report on their students' performance data, and download it for further analysis and review. This hands-on learning with data about our students helped teachers become interested and invested from the beginning.

## 2. Attend Teacher Trainings

Attending professional development sessions ensures I understand where teachers may be struggling and helps

me know where to provide training or extra support. During our faculty meetings or weekly meetings in professional learning communities (PLCs), I can refer to the training when questions arise.

### 3. Keep It Simple

Avoid inundating teachers with too much information—don't show them every single dashboard and report in the data system. Start with two or three relevant reports they will use most frequently.

### 4. Establish a Support Network

Train a team of leaders who will assist teachers and get them excited about data. Our school has one team leader per grade level. Look for teachers who are comfortable with data, are fast learners, and can effectively convey information. They should also be knowledgeable in the content areas for their grade level and have a good rapport with other teachers.

### 5. Model Data Usage and Decision-Making

Hold regular meetings with team leaders to keep tabs on each team's data and build skills. I meet with my team leaders once a month to dissect the reports and discuss what the data tells us. Then we talk about how we can utilize that information to improve teaching and learning. I model the process that should occur when they review and discuss data with teachers in their PLCs.

### 6. Focus on Growth

It is vital to create a safe environment for data sharing in PLCs and faculty meetings. In our weekly grade-level PLCs, we typically focus on only two or three reports. We can also pull up live data as needed to dig deeper. We can analyze student data and discuss how they performed on every standard on a unit or benchmark assessment. Then teachers can determine whether they need to reteach or incorporate the standard into the next unit. Ask strategic questions that focus on what we can do to support student growth or next steps.

We can also look at student performance by teacher. If one teacher's class performed much higher than the others on a benchmark assessment, we can discuss which resources or teaching methods that teacher used or how much time they spent on one standard versus another. If a class performs lower than the others, we can provide targeted support. The purpose of the data is not to assign blame or to criticize, but to help teachers better meet their students' needs.

### 7. Use Data to Drive Instruction and Professional Development


We noticed our fifth-graders had a dip in their benchmark assessment scores in science compared to the previous year. We asked one of our teachers who had great results to lead the fifth-grade teachers in a lesson and model teaching it. We then gave

the fifth-grade teachers more time to plan and develop their science lessons together. Students' scores have gone up on both the benchmark and unit science assessments.

### Achieving Steady Gains

Since 2012, we have made great strides in our use of data. Our teachers now constantly collect formative assessment data to inform their instruction and interventions, and they take ownership of their students' performance data. They see data as a tool that can empower them in the classroom and in their professional learning. They enthusiastically participate in PLCs and openly share their triumphs and failures, and offer their expertise to their colleagues.

From 2015 to 2016, our school grade rose from a C to a B. In 2016 we were recognized in the top 10 percent of Florida schools improving academic achievement.

With a data-driven culture, we can take immediate action to respond to teachers' and students' needs, and provide the support needed to take our instruction to the next level. We not only have a map to get us to our destination, but we can make continual adjustments to find the best route there and ensure we all arrive together. 

**Patricia Ordóñez-Feliciano** is principal of West Gate Elementary in the School District of Palm Beach County in Florida.

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