

Three Rules Help Manage Assessment Data

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...”

-Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

We live in the Information Age, when never before has so much data on student learning been so readily available. It is the best of times...

And yet, to harried principals struggling to make sense of the mountains of assessment data, the Information Age may feel like the worst of times...

Mining those data mountains for information that teachers can use to improve student learning is a daily challenge for principals. The problem is not a lack of data, but rather managing all the data in a way that is meaningful to teachers. I am not aware of any guidelines about how to process all the information—that is, how to decide exactly *what* information is needed or *who* needs the information to make decisions; however, I did encounter “rules” for using data during a conversation with Damon Lopez, former principal of Los Penasquitos Elementary School in San Diego.

Lopez believes that in order for teachers to maximize the impact of data gleaned from assessments, principals should honor three rules and ensure that data is 1) easily accessible, 2) purposefully arranged, and 3) publicly discussed. In those schools where “making meaning” of assessment data is a powerful experience, principals take responsibility for creating the necessary structures associated

with the first two rules and insist that teachers commit to the last. Rather than working individually to make meaning of assessment data, the most successful principals have discovered it is far more productive to create the conditions under which *teams of teachers* can make meaning of the data.

Easy Access

For data to add value to our efforts to improve student learning, teachers’ access to the data must be timely. In addition to figuring out *who* needs to know *what* and *when*, the key question for principals to ask is, “What is the most efficient way to get assessment data back to teachers?”

As Kim Marshall, publisher of the highly regarded *Marshall Memo*, suggests, “When turnaround time after interim assessments is long, the results are stale and outdated by the time teachers sit down and discuss them.” Data loses its impact whenever it takes more than 48 hours to return the results of a common assessment to teachers.

Outdated information makes it more difficult for teachers to be effective in adjusting instruction, identifying students who need more time and support or coordinating remedial or

enrichment programs among teachers on the team. To improve the accessibility of data, principals need to shorten the turnaround time for reporting data. ► page 9

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Purposeful Arrangement

The second rule for maximizing the impact of data calls for assessment data to be purposefully arranged, that is, for the assessment data delivered to teacher teams to be presented in a format that is complete, accurate, and straight-forward.

Data should be organized in simple—not simplistic—ways. There are many software packages that quickly, almost instantaneously, provide assessment results in tables, charts, or graphs and make it easy for teachers to digest the results of interim assessments. Author D. M. Griffith observed, “If the message the information is trying to communicate fails to get through to the reader, [the information] is useless. It’s better to be simple and understood than complex and ignored.” What *is* important is that the data is returned to teachers in a format conducive to further discussion.

From time to time, teachers may create their own tables or graphs or request additional formats for organizing assessment results, but the initial data should be received in an arrangement that allows teachers to focus on the results—not the presentation format.

Public Discussion

While principals can address the logistics of making data easily accessible and arranging it purposefully, teacher teams are uniquely equipped to meaningfully engage in the public discussion of assessment data. Indeed, teachers and principals need to embrace the critical importance of publicly discussing the results

of assessments. Each time they discuss an assessment together, teachers benefit from the collective wisdom of their team. Not only do they gain deeper insight into how their students are learning, but also reviewing results as a team has the added benefits of allowing teachers to deepen their content knowledge and to sharpen their pedagogy.

To paraphrase Griffith, assessment data and information on student achievement are relevant, and therefore needed, only if they are used to make a decision. In fact, nothing justifies the giving of an interim assessment—and with it the associated loss of instructional time—unless teachers discuss the results of the assessment and adjust their instruction accordingly.

The Age of Wisdom or Foolishness?

To be sure, the ready availability and discerning management of assessment data can go a long way in contributing to making this the Age of Wisdom for educators seeking to improve students’ learning. Principals who are successful focus their energies on ensuring that the data is 1) easily accessible and 2) purposefully arranged and insist that teachers spend their time 3) publicly discussing the results to ensure that all students learn. ■

References

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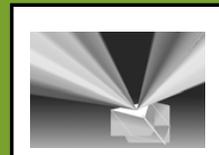
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