



Just for the ASKing!

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's issue focuses on the use of data beyond that obtained from standardized tests.

Data...Beyond THE Test



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

When the analysis of standardized test scores became a constant focus at principal meetings throughout the school year I became frustrated. Again and again, the same results from the previous year's tests were distributed in colored folders or packets and we were asked to pour over the data to determine how to improve scores the following year. We disaggregated the data from every possible angle including item analysis by question, student ethnicity and gender, special education designation, free and reduced lunch qualification, students for whom English was a second language, and history of student scores from previous testing. In turn, we passed the data on to our teachers who spent considerable time individually and collectively analyzing the results by question as well as by strand. The amount of time spent analyzing the data from one standardized test seemed excessive and inordinately time consuming.

School is so much more than a single test score on a reading or a math test given in the spring. I have seen teachers stress themselves out and students reach unhealthy levels of anxiety. I do not mean to minimize the importance of standardized test results. Schools must adhere to the No Child Left Behind legislation and work to ensure that Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is achieved. However, educational leaders must also help teachers understand that data should not be confined to a single event. Data are so much more.

At Just ASK, one overriding, essential question provides the focus for our work. The question is:

What do schools look like when they organize around a commitment to the achievement of high standards by all students?

To respond to this question, schools must use a standards-based planning approach in which these questions are asked:

- What should students know and be able to do?
- How will I, and they, know when they are successful?
- What learning experiences will facilitate their success?
- **Based on data, how do I design and refine the learning experiences?**

Data are everything that happens in the classroom. Examples include the level and number of student responses to questions, how students process their learning, questions that students pose in relation to their

new learning, how students react to the lessons presented by the teacher, informal conversations with students, results from formative assessments, and teacher checks for understanding. Wise teachers ask students for feedback at the end of units by posing questions such as “What helped you learn best?” and “What types of learning experiences would help you in the future.” To ignore these data is to overlook excellent sources of information that should guide future instructional decisions.

Data-driven instruction means that teachers use data to make instructional decisions on a daily, if not a moment by moment, basis. Whether or not the level of learning meets expectations lets the teacher know when changes should be made in the implementation of the lesson. Apollo astronauts made over 20,000 mid-course adjustments on their trip to the moon. Researchers constantly re-evaluate the data they gather in order to determine the next steps to take. Madeline Hunter noted that there is only one thing that a teacher needs to do on a consistent basis and that is to think and make wise instructional decisions. The mid-course adjustments in lessons should be based on data and made in the interest of student learning.

Student learning is the goal. Because of the pressures educators feel to make AYP, they sometimes lose sight of the real purpose of schools: student learning. Worksheets, drills, test preparation, remediation, pull-out programs, and double classes of reading and/or math are practices some schools have adopted. Additionally, an inordinate amount of school funds are spent annually on test prep materials which schools hope will produce the desired test scores. An important question to consider is: Are we neglecting student learning when we use valuable instructional time to prepare students for THE test? We must not lose sight of the fact that focused, meaningful, engaging, and rigorous learning experiences promote student learning and lead to higher test scores.

An important source of data is how our students feel in our classrooms. A teacher who provides a warm and inviting environment will get unimagined results from students. Brain research tells us that a safe, non-threatening environment is essential for student learning. In one classroom I recently visited, the teacher had posted a sign which read: **Mistakes Are Welcome Here.** There is no substitute for human kindness.

Data are much more than numbers. I participated in hundreds of parent conferences, both as a teacher and as an administrator. In so many instances, teachers came to conferences with grade book in hand and reduced a student’s performance to a number or a letter. The most successful teachers were the ones who could look directly at a parent and talk about the student’s accomplishments as well as areas where a student could improve. They did not simply rely on numbers but used descriptors, work samples, and conversations they had had with students to inform parents about their child’s progress. Wise teachers get to know their students so well that they are able to talk about the academic growth they see in their students and not simply reduce them to missing homework assignments or poor quiz grades.

Data about student learning can be gathered by administrators talking to students during classroom visits. Like teachers who are responsible for gathering assessment data on the achievement of their students, administrators have the responsibility of gathering data on the performance of the teachers they supervise. In the hectic life of an administrator, the data used to measure teacher effectiveness can often be reduced to one announced and one unannounced teacher observation per semester. When administrators carry out more frequent, informal visits to classrooms **with a focus on student learning instead of teacher behaviors**, the subsequent data provides powerful information about the impact of teacher behavior on student learning. As administrators interact with students, they can ask a variety of questions including:

- What are you supposed to be learning?
- How is what you are doing now helping you learn?
- How will you and your teacher measure your success?

- What are the next steps for you?
- How do you know what excellent work looks like?
- In what ways do you self-assess your efforts and your work?

How do we measure success? The measure of a school's success should not be limited to data from standardized test scores. Good teachers teach compassion, kindness, and human decency, areas which cannot be measured by a pencil and paper test. Each of us remembers a favorite teacher not so much by what we were taught but how we were treated and encouraged. Although such behaviors are hard to quantify, teachers and administrators should set aside time to reflect on all the ways they touch students' lives. These are successes worthy of celebration.

The teaching-learning process is complicated and multi-layered. Reducing what happens in the classroom on a daily basis to a once-a-year test score is a real disservice to the art of teaching. If we are truly professionals, we must do what other professionals do. Professionals are academically trained, they develop a high degree of knowledge and skill in their field, they immerse themselves in the continual study of their profession, and they use research findings and data to drive their decisions. If we want to be viewed as professionals, we must adhere to practices that provide continuous and valuable data that inform our practice and truly measure student learning on a regular basis.

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