The Data Dilemma
By Scott Bray, Ed.S.

For many teachers and administrators, the mere mention of the word “data” raises their anxiety levels. Educators are drowning in a deluge of data, but data collection is not a new phenomenon. Traditionally, schools have collected data in various forms, ranging from attendance reports and lunch counts to discipline records and assessment scores. However, the passage of NCLB (2001) in conjunction with state-mandated assessments has brought a renewed emphasis on data collection and analysis. The challenge facing educators is discovering how to best use the wealth of available data to positively influence instructional decision making and school improvement.

Most people would consider flying a plane without advanced instrumentation and navigational systems to be foolhardy and dangerous. Pilots are expected to consult weather reports, read their instruments, and communicate with the control tower to gain necessary and valuable information to proceed. The same principle holds true for schools and classrooms. Purposeful data collection is essential to help educators identify patterns, areas of strength, and areas for improvement to ensure the instructional needs of all students are met. Whereas, data analysis is not the only tool available to educators concerned with raising student achievement, it is critical for making well-informed instructional decisions.

Data can be used for a variety of purposes, ranging from guiding teachers’ professional development to determining needed curricular and instructional interventions (Education Commission of the States, 2002). Schools engaged in data analysis find their data useful not only in terms of making smarter instructional decisions but also in creating a meaningful dialogue within their school community. A single data set can reveal a multitude of insights depending on who is reviewing and analyzing the data. Data-driven discussions provide dialogue focused on central questions regarding what is and what is...
not working and why. Determining what works helps ensure higher levels of performance and achievement for all students by allowing teachers to plan with a purpose to maximize limited instructional time (Gregory & Kuzmich, 2004).

The abundance of data can be daunting, so it is important to begin with a clear focus. There are four major types of data: achievement, demographic, perception, and school process. Most educators focus on cross-referencing achievement data with demographic data in analyzing and comparing various subgroups’ achievement (Bernhardt, 2004). Collecting and connecting various types of data provides a broader perspective and allows for more informed decision making (Education Commission of the States, 2002).

**Creating a Plan**

Putting data to optimal use requires the creation and implementation of a plan detailing what will be done, by whom, by when, and the measurements used to gauge success. Data teams help facilitate this process by leveraging resources and sharing responsibilities (see the article on creating data teams in this issue of *Link Lines*). Educators must keep the big picture in mind while identifying data patterns and their implications for students and instruction. Establishing priorities at the front end of the process places focus directly on the areas of need. Forming priorities, determining desired end results, and establishing clear measurements needed to evaluate success creates the foundation of the plan.

Analyzing only year-end assessment data is insufficient. Educators must also identify current levels of performance and create a series of intermediate benchmarks tied to the established year-end goals (Hitch & Jenkins, 2004). Intermediate benchmarks representing areas of focus and growth for shorter periods of time are needed. Benchmark data provide insights into student growth and progress toward the desired end results. These check points are also the times when program modifications can be made if needed.

Once a plan has been created with clear action items listing what will be done, by whom, when, and with specific benchmark measurements, execution of the plan becomes critical. Positive energy alone is not enough to get results. Implementation puts decisions into action and pushes them toward completion even as resistance and unexpected obstacles arise (Welch, 2005). A critical component of executing the plan is monitoring progress at set intervals. Collecting new data is the equivalent of hitting the “refresh” button on your Internet browser; it provides the latest, most up-to-date information. New data, whether from benchmark assessments or other sources, offer support for teachers by providing valuable answers to over-arching questions (see Data-Driven Questions box).

Working with data is an ongoing process. Finding time to debrief with team members is essential. Teams need to meet in order to share their findings and to communicate many “soft” measures. Soft measures include time commitments, impact on morale, measures that worked, and those that were less successful (Hitch & Jenkins, 2004). Debriefing also lays the groundwork for the next data cycle. As data collection and use become part of the school culture, it will be easier to know what questions to ask, how to examine data, and how better to support teachers and students (Moody, Russo, & Casey, 2006).
Data patterns and indicators are powerful tools to help educators become better equipped to solve problems and meet the school’s goals. Schools and teachers should attempt to address only a small number of questions to avoid becoming overwhelmed. Instructional leaders should ensure that school data are easily accessed and appear in user-friendly, understandable formats. The collection and organization of data should not consume excessive amounts of time or resources, and the information collected should be relevant, helping teachers identify “the link between teaching practices and student performance so that high achievement levels can be obtained” (Miller, 2000, p. 15).

The most important factor affecting student learning is still the teacher (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Providing support and dedicating time for teachers to work together increases their comfort level with data and results in increased use of data during the decision-making process (Lachat & Smith, 2005). Like well-informed pilots, data-wise educators can move forward to create classrooms where students come to realize their potential and believe in their capacity to master academic material.

**Data-Driven Discussion Questions**

- Where are your widest achievement gaps?
- How persistent have these gaps been?
- Are there significant changes from one year to the next?
- Are there differences worth noting between various demographic groups?
- Are there major differences between major curriculum areas (math, science, social sciences, and English)?

**References**


Collaborative Leadership
Creating and Guiding a Data Team to Support School Improvement
By Lee Anne Sulzberger, M.Ed.

Why Create a Data Team?

The ability to find, organize, and analyze data to meet the goal of success for all students is an expectation of today’s school leaders (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, 1996). Data have the power to reveal what is working well in a school and also to reveal the gaps between what a school hopes to achieve and its current state (Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004). What structures and processes can school leaders establish that will support ongoing and productive discussions about teaching and learning based on data?

Boudett and Moody (2005) note that “the first step in getting serious about using data is to assemble a small group of people who will be responsible for the technical and organizational aspects of data work” (p. 12). Creating a data team has two distinct purposes. First, the data team organizes and prepares data in a user-friendly format so that school staff can dedicate their time to analysis and discussion rather than trying to understand sometimes obscure and complex information. Second, a team approach to data collection and preparation shows that the use of data for improving student achievement is a shared effort within the school (Boudett & Moody, 2005).

Who Is on a Data Team?

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) observe that successful leadership teams typically are comprised of volunteers. Since data teams serve as a leadership team, school leaders should consider assembling a team of volunteers. Boudett and Moody (2005) also note that in addition team members possessing a variety of skills (e.g., organizational, technology, and interpersonal), should also have a “clear understanding of teaching” (p. 13) in order to provide data in a useful format to colleagues.

How Does a Data Team Begin Its Work?

Boudett and Moody (2005) have identified three initial tasks for the data team to complete that will lay the foundation for subsequent work:

- **Create a data inventory**—The data team identifies and summarizes all data available in the school. The following questions can guide the inventory process:
  - What external, internal, and student-specific assessments do we administer?
  - What content areas are assessed with each?
  - What other student-specific information do we gather?
  - When is each type of data collected?
  - How can teachers find these data?
  - How are the data used now?
  - What might be a more effective use of the data?
  - What data do we wish we had?

The inventory can be maintained electronically for easy access and updates.
Examine organization of data—Data teams need to examine how data identified in the inventory are stored and shared. The data team then determines if there is a more efficient and effective way to organize the data.

Identify and evaluate instructional initiatives—A third task of the data team is to develop and share a broader understanding of what information can be considered data. This is done by having the data team identify and catalogue all instructional initiatives within a school. Information such as who is supposed to be implementing the initiative, to what extent the initiative is being implemented, and the evidence used to make that determination can all be captured in a simple chart. The data team can also list other evidence that would be helpful to collect to determine if the instructional initiative is meeting the needs of the school.

Over 20 responsibilities of effective school administrators have been identified (Cotton, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). Since “it would be rare, indeed, to find a single individual who has the capacity or will to master such a complex array of skills” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 99), school leaders may find that creating and leading a team to assist with using data for school improvement is one way to distribute leadership.

References

December 6, 2007
The Keys to Inclusive Education: Proven Practices to Make Inclusion Work sponsored by the T/TACs at W&M and ODU

Presenter: Rachel E. Janney, Ph.D.
Cost: $25
This workshop is designed to give teachers and administrators a basic, shared understanding of the key elements of inclusive education. The emphasis will be on the vision, collaborative teamwork, and action planning required for effective schoolwide inclusion. However, participants also will learn some proven, practical methods and strategies for use by teams of general and special educators who share responsibility for educating students with and without disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

For more information go to http://www.wm.edu/ttac
Teacher-Friendly Data Collection
By Melinda Bright, M.Ed., VDOE T/TAC at James Madison University

Why did you become a teacher? Whatever the reason was, the undeniable reward that keeps many of us motivated once we enter the profession is the heartfelt fulfillment we experience when a child’s face displays understanding. But, what about the struggling student whose face displays frustration? Once upon a time, well-meaning teachers immediately referred struggling students for an evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services. Feelings of inadequacy to meet each and every student’s needs in the general education classroom were abated by choosing this course of action. If a student was indeed found eligible for services, the general educator was often not involved to a great degree in providing for individual needs in the general education classroom. Self-contained classrooms and resource rooms were the places to go for adaptations to the curriculum.

Reform initiatives have demanded a paradigm shift in how schools operate, with emphasis on the achievement of results rather than process and delivery in the classroom. While accountability has always been around, educators are truly being held accountable for student progress at individual and aggregate levels. Many schools across the country are realizing improvement in student learning by using data-driven practices. “Teachers in these schools are finding that intelligent and pervasive uses of data can improve their instructional interventions for students, re-energize their enthusiasm for teaching, and increase their feelings of professional fulfillment and job satisfaction” (McLeod, 2005, p. 1).

Now when a student struggles, teachers are expected to: 1) gather data about skills and levels of performance, 2) study the data to identify the concern, 3) develop a measurable objective, 4) develop and implement an intervention plan, and 5) monitor progress. One of the resulting positive implications of this shift is the necessity to collaborate with others on how to best meet individual student needs. “No educator, no matter how experienced or skilled, is able to meet all the unique instructional needs of every child without the assistance of colleagues” (Ralabate, 2003, p. 14). To enrich collaborative efforts, many schools have teams in place to assist the teacher with this process. These teams are known by different names (e.g., teacher assistance teams, instructional consultation teams, instructional support teams, early intervention teams, etc.), but the purpose is the same – to suggest alternative general education strategies and to help analyze and record observations and assessment data. Realistically this data will be useful should a referral for special education services be deemed necessary. But, more importantly, this process will often afford the struggling student optimal learning conditions with understanding more likely to occur.

Collect Baseline Data
Excellent teachers find it very motivating to have enough information to make the best decisions for the students in their charge. Data from summative yearly assessments inform teachers about areas of need for improved instructional practice, but teachers must also consider formative assessments and their value in driving instruction. Collection of data should begin with baseline to indicate what the student is able to do without the intervention. Baseline data might be collected through classroom-based assessments (e.g., quizzes, tests, rubrics, checklists, portfolios) and observations regarding student learning (Ralabate, 2003). Collecting and analyzing data, seeking input and assistance from other professionals, and collaboratively making decisions about instruction are evidence of a professional learning community.

Identify the Concern
Baseline data will either confirm or deny initial concerns about the struggling student and direct goal-setting. Guidelines for analyzing data to create a specific picture of the concern and state goals in observable terms include:

- visually represent your data,
- look for obvious gaps,
- look for patterns,
- look for gains, and
- recognize competence.
Develop a Measurable Objective

Once the baseline data has been used to more specifically identify the concern, goals can be established for the student, which are relevant to the concern, baseline data, and academic achievement. The acronym SMART reminds us of the essential components of well-defined goals.

S = specific
M = measurable
A = attainable
R = results-oriented
T = time-bound

Develop & Implement an Intervention Plan

This information is used to determine an intervention that addresses what appears to be the main concern. (See the Intervention Strategies Menu insert.) If you are working with a team, decide who will be responsible for implementation of the intervention and consistently document your student’s performance. Be patient. It normally takes at least two weeks to see if an intervention is effective.

Monitor Progress

The data will inform you as to whether or not the objective has been achieved. If so, decide whether to maintain the intervention, stop it, or move to another concern. If the objective is not met, at least you know more about the needs of your student and can choose a different intervention or refer the student for an evaluation for special education services.

McLeod’s diagram below (2005) delineates these essential elements of effective data-driven education.

The current demands on educators are unavoidable, but the attitude with which they are met is a choice. We can complain about legislation that constitutes accountability, the students we work with, the parents and home environment, or we can professionally collaborate to make informed decisions about instruction to positively impact student learning. Educators who choose the latter are experiencing success in closing achievement gaps.

References


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And the Two Shall Become One: Marrying Behavior Intervention Plans and Individualized Education Programs
By Kristin Holst, M.Ed.

It is no secret that a good marriage requires a supreme act of balance. Both partners must come together as a whole in order to function properly. Similarly, in order to be truly effective, it is important to have a marriage between student’s behavioral intervention plans (BIPs) and their individualized education programs (IEPs). Since students are assessed as a whole, it only makes sense that each student has one comprehensive plan. Thus, it is essential that educators meld BIPs and IEPs into one document and stop looking at just parts of the student’s plan.

Educators recognize that academic problems reflect errors in learning or skill deficits that can be addressed through quality instruction. The same holds true for behavior problems. Students with academic skill deficits may require more intense, highly structured, direct instruction or specially designed instruction based upon ongoing assessment. Similarly, students with behavior skill deficits may require more individualized, intensive behavior interventions derived from the results of a functional behavioral assessment (FBA).

Comprehensive positive behavior support plans include strategies that address setting events, antecedents, skill deficits, and consequences (OSEP, n.d.). Teams are typically well versed in designing setting event interventions, antecedent interventions, and consequence interventions. However, skill-building strategies, specifically identifying desired behaviors and teaching replacement behaviors, often pose a greater challenge and subsequently become the least emphasized of the four components. In fact, Killu, Weber, Derby, and Barretto (2006) did a comparison study across 49 states, examining the FBA and BIP resources developed and disseminated by state education agencies. Only 29% of the states surveyed provided information to schools on the development of goals and objectives with specific mastery criteria.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) requires IEP teams to address academic achievement and functional performance. Functional performance encompasses areas such as socialization, communication, personal management, self-determination, and behavior (VDOE, 2005). IEPs should include statements of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional (behavioral) goals (20 U.S.C. §1414). The federal regulations also require IEP teams to design and implement progress monitoring plans for academic and functional (behavioral) goals. Unfortunately, the data concerning progress towards academic and functional goals in IEPs and BIPs are often nonexistent (Etscheidt, 2006).

Despite these mandates, BIPs and IEPs are often viewed as two separate documents. IEP teams address academic weaknesses through designing observable, measurable annual goals. These same teams address behavior skill deficits through BIPs. General statements found on BIPs may include, “Teach the student to increase on-task behavior during independent seatwork,” or “Teach the student self-monitoring skills.” These types of statements do not clearly define what the instruction looks and sounds like. The plans also often neglect specifying the individuals responsible for data collection, as well as the locations, dates, and times of such data collection (Etscheidt, 2006).
What is the simplest way to ensure IEP teams address the instructional component of the BIP, make the interventions clear to all team members, and include a progress monitoring component? One option is to create a seamless document by translating the skill-building strategies listed in the BIP into measurable annual goals (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Building Strategy (Listed on the BIP)</th>
<th>Measurable Annual Goal for Functional Performance (Listed on the IEP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teach Mary to increase on-task behavior during independent seatwork.</td>
<td>By June 2008 when given independent seatwork, Mary will increase her on-task behavior from 0 minutes to 15 minutes. She will (a) ask her teacher to clarify directions if necessary, (b) begin the assignment within 3 minutes, and (c) continue working on the assignment for 15 minutes with no more than one verbal prompt at least two times per school day, as documented daily on a teacher observation log.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach Steven self-monitoring skills.</td>
<td>By June 2008 when given a daily self-monitoring checklist, Steven will document by the end of every class period the number of times he raised his hand to ask for help when needed and bring his checklist to his teacher(s) to see if his results match for five consecutive days documented daily on a teacher observation log.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are many advantages to marrying the IEP and the BIP into one document. This process gives everyone involved a complete picture of the whole student and his or her needs. It also leads to focused and more comprehensive planning for doing what is best for students, ensuring that appropriate supports are in place for student progress. As a plan that holds both academic and behavioral (functional) goals emerges, students, parents, teachers, and administrators will see the benefit and move from “I might” to “I do.”

**References**


The Parent Involvement Priority Project (PIPP) Survey

The federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) annually collects information from each school division in every state in order to meet the monitoring requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act 2004 (IDEA). One area for which information is collected, Federal Monitoring Indicator Eight, measures parents’ satisfaction with school divisions’ efforts to involve parents in planning appropriate special education services for their children. In Virginia, this information is collected via a survey administered through the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) Parent Involvement Priority Project (PIPP). PIPP’s survey, statements to which respondents answer, “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” or “Strongly Disagree,” includes the following items:

1. I am considered an equal partner with teachers and other professionals in planning my child’s program.
2. At the IEP meeting, we discussed how my child will participate in state assessments.
3. In preparation for my child’s transition planning meeting, I was given information about options my child will have after high school.
4. At the IEP meeting, we discussed accommodations and modifications that my child would need.
5. My concerns and recommendations were documented on the IEP.
6. Written justification was given for the extent that my child would not receive services in the regular classroom.
7. I was given information about organizations that offer support for parents of students with disabilities (SWD).
8. I have been asked for my opinion about how well special education services are meeting my child’s needs.
9. I have a good working relationship with my child’s teachers.
10. My child’s evaluation report is written in terms I understand.
11. Written information I receive is written in an understandable way.
12. Teachers are available to speak with me.
13. Teachers treat me as a team member.
14. Teachers and administrators seek out parent input.
15. Teachers and administrators show sensitivity to the needs of SWD and their families.
16. Teachers and administrators encourage me to participate in the decision-making process.
17. Teachers and administrators respect my cultural heritage.
18. Teachers and administrators willingly accept information that I offer about my child.
19. Teachers and administrators ensure that I have fully understood the Procedural Safeguards.
20. The school has a person on staff who can answer parents’ questions.
21. The school communicated regularly with me regarding my child’s progress on IEP goals.
22. The school gives me information with regard to services that address my child’s needs.
23. The school offers parents training about special education issues.
24. The school offers parents ways to communicate with teachers.
25. The school gives parents the help they may need to play an active role in their child’s education.
26. The school provides information on agencies that can assist my child in the transition from school.
27. The school explains what options parents have if they disagree with a decision of the school.

The PIPP survey was mailed in August 2007, to approximately 150,000 parents of students with disabilities. Results will be compiled and reported to school divisions and the public for the first time in spring 2008. School divisions that do not meet Indicator Eight’s requirements will have one year to develop and implement corrective action plans designed to improve parent involvement. Such action plans may include requests for assistance from PIPP consortium agencies that provide training and technical assistance to parents of students with disabilities. (For a complete listing of these agencies, refer to the September-October Link Lines Parent Partnership article entitled The Virginia Parent Involvement Project at http://www.wm.edu/ttac/). Success of divisions’ action plans will be assessed through the 2008 administration of the PIPP survey.
Transition Time
By Debbie Grosser, M. Ed., and Dale Pennell, C.A.S.

This article is the second in a four-part series that addresses the requirement to gather assessment data for the purpose of developing appropriate measurable postsecondary goals and designing transition services for secondary students with disabilities. The Transition Time article in the September/October 2007 issue of Link Lines provides the regulatory requirement to conduct transition assessment, defines and clarifies the purpose of transition assessment, and identifies the scope of data to be collected.

Summarizing Transition Assessment Data in the PLoP

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), the Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLoP) portion of the individualized education program (IEP) is “a written statement for each child with a disability…that includes a statement of the child’s present levels of academic achievement and functional performance …” §300.320(a)(1). Much of the assessment data to be summarized in the PLoP for a student of transition age is captured through transition assessment. Indeed, “the most central and critical use of transition assessment information is as a component of the Present Level of Performance …” (Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000, p. 123).

Guidelines for Summarizing Transition Assessment Data

- Report current levels of academic achievement and functional performance in objective, measurable terms (Sitlington, Newbert, Begun, Lombard, & Leconte, 2007)
- Summarize student interests, preferences, and strengths (IDEA 2004 §400.43(a)(2)) that impact the development of postsecondary goals
- Identify student needs (IDEA 2004 §400.43(a)(2)) that pose barriers to realization of postsecondary goals
- Report only formal and informal data for which documentation is available using the format that follows:
  - State the source of the data
    - Interview – Position of interview source (for example, guidance counselor)
    - Instrument – Name of instrument (for example, Transition Planning Inventory)
    - Record review – Name of document (for example, PERT evaluation summary report)
  - Record the date/s data were collected

The following excerpt from a student’s PLoP illustrates these guidelines:

Robert recently took a formal interest assessment to determine his vocational interests. His top interests lie in Consumer Economics, Service Skilled, and Communication (Career Occupational Preference Survey, March 2007). Following high school, Robert plans to go to culinary school and become a chef. He met with his guidance counselor during his junior year to research options for culinary arts training as well as the requirements for acceptance to such programs. He has decided to pursue a two-year program (student interview, April 2007). Robert currently works 20 hours a week as a carhop at Sonic. His supervisor reports that Robert appears to like his job, is on time, and takes direction well. He gets along with his coworkers and dresses appropriately for work. Robert becomes easily distracted and frustrated during busy times. He does not take initiative and requires continuous prompting (interview with supervisor, June 2007). Results of the Brigance Employability Skills Inventory Robert took in May 2007 indicate that he is able to make most liquid capacity conversions required in culinary arts; however, he has difficulty converting gallons to pints.

Since the PLoP is the foundation upon which the remaining components of the IEP are developed, it follows that a summary of transition assessment results (upon which transition services will be designed) is a critical element of the PLoP.

References
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