



Helping Principals Use Data to Improve Student Achievement

By Sara Vitaska

Statewide longitudinal data systems track student information over time.

Access to good data is essential to improve teaching and learning.

A multi-state survey of 1,000 principals provided insight into data use.

Under the federal No Child Left Behind law and similarly demanding state requirements, principals face public pressure to turn around low-performing schools and significantly improve student achievement. Research confirms that high-quality school leadership is second only to teacher quality among school-related factors in its effect on student achievement, especially in high-need schools. In an era of increased accountability and global competitiveness, it is vital that policymakers and practitioners develop robust statewide longitudinal data systems that track student information over time and provide timely, valid, relevant and user-friendly data to improve student achievement.

Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems. Access to good data is essential to improve teaching and learning. Good data systems collect the most relevant information on individual student performance from prekindergarten through 12th grade and into postsecondary education. This kind of data enables teachers to tailor instruction and target interventions to improve student achievement. Principals can analyze school data to monitor and evaluate students' progress, develop a school vision, target action plans, direct professional development, and create a school culture in which data are viewed as a school improvement tool. In addition to accessing good data, teachers and principals also need training to analyze and use the data appropriately. Good data also provide policymakers with information to evaluate which policy initiatives seem to work. Although states have made great progress in developing longitudinal data systems, significant work remains.

Using Data to Improve Student Achievement. In 2007, with support from The Wallace Foundation, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, New Mexico and Ohio developed and administered surveys to more than 1,000 principals to determine how they use data to improve student achievement. The survey gleaned important insights about what kinds of data are most important to principals, the most difficult policy questions facing principals once the data are available, the level of state support available on data use, and the degree to which preparation and certification programs prepared principals to deal effectively with data.

The surveys found the most important data for principals include absentee rates and special needs/disability information; adequate yearly progress results (a measure of progress under the No Child Left Behind Act) and individual student proficiency results from state assessments; the effectiveness of instructional practices; school safety indicators; and the level and adequacy of funding.

Statewide longitudinal data systems track:

- Enrollment and demographic information
- Test scores
- Courses completed and grades earned
- College readiness test scores
- Graduation and dropout rates

Common Policy Questions Principals Have After Student Achievement Data Are Gathered and Analyzed

- What instructional strategies do I need to implement when students are not achieving academic standards?
- What can I do to make my teachers more effective?
- How do I find more financial resources for my school?
- Do I have the right people in the right positions to make a difference for student success?
- How do I help students with issues such as health, poverty and mobility?

Nearly 25 percent of principals surveyed in Georgia and Kentucky, 36 percent in Ohio and 40 percent in New Mexico reported that they receive “less support than they need or no support” to answer their most pressing policy question. The level of adequate support from the state in using data ranged from 62 percent in Kentucky to only 10 percent in New Mexico. Finally, 43 percent of principals in Georgia, 54 percent in Kentucky, 38 percent in Ohio, and 28 percent in New Mexico completely or somewhat agreed that their preparation or certification program prepared them to use data effectively.

Principals face common policy questions regarding student achievement data.

State Action

Georgia and Ohio require leaders to know how to use data to make decisions, while New Mexico includes accountability literacy—the ability to understand and use accountability data for school improvement, communication and advocacy—in its updated principal evaluation standards, which are linked to higher salaries. Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan and Ohio train principals on how to use data in their principal preparation programs. New Mexico has developed a data use training program for principals under its statewide Principal Support Network. Georgia and Kentucky require training on data use in their licensure and certification requirements. In Michigan, data informed decision making has become an integral part of the school improvement process, and Ohio has identified data and the decision-making process as one of the six areas in the Ohio Leadership Development Framework. New Mexico also requires that annual test data be delivered to school districts by August 5 each year.

How State Legislatures Can Help Principals Use Data

- Invest in development of good longitudinal data systems.
- Ensure that statewide standards for school leaders include data use.
- Incorporate data use into licensure and certification requirements.
- Evaluate school leaders on data competencies.
- Incorporate data use into principal preparation programs and mentoring and induction programs.
- Provide principals with ongoing training and support on data use.
- Ensure that annual test data be delivered to school districts in a timely manner for schools to monitor and evaluate student progress.

Policymakers can continue to help principals gain access to and use longitudinal data.

Resources

Celio, Mary Beth, and James Harvey. *Buried Treasure: Developing a Management Guide from Mountains of School Data*. Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington’s Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2006; www.wallacefoundation.org/NR/rdonlyres/FD8C137C-EF16-41B3-A13F-B375BF3DB3EB/0/Buried_Treasure.pdf.

Data Quality Campaign. *Tapping into the Power of Longitudinal Data: A Guide for School Leaders*. Austin, Texas: The Data Quality Campaign, 2008; www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/publications-tapping_into_the_power_of_longitudinal_data-a_guide_for_school_leaders-010108.pdf.

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The Wallace Foundation
www.wallacefoundation.org

Data Quality Campaign
www.dataqualitycampaign.org

Data Informed Decision-Making
Online Resource Kit
www.ccsso.org/DID_Toolkit/wsb4183984302/index.html