Principals Want to Know

A tip sheet for principals that focuses on critical issues faced in schools.
Drawn from existing resources, these tips are designed to su…

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Using Data

The Question:

"I know that effective use of data is important to school improvement planning, but I am no expert in data analysis. What is my role as a principal in using data in my school?"

The Answer:

Here are five Tips for Success:

1. Establish the purpose for data use
2. Provide structures to support and promote data use
3. Support professional learning on data use for staff
4. Build a culture of inquiry
5. Seek opportunities to build your own competence and confidence

1. ESTABLISH THE PURPOSE FOR DATA USE

Teachers know they need to be accountable for student achievement, to be able to report to parents on progress and to be seen by the public as achieving the broad educational goals. These external measures of accountability, however, are not likely enough to inspire all teachers to get deeply involved in data collection and analysis.

When data is collected from a variety of sources (e.g., student achievement data, student work samples, anecdotal records based on observation) and is directly connected to their daily work, teachers will be more likely to engage fully. The following purposes illustrate this:

- Identifying the learning needs of students to inform changes in instructional practice; and
- Evaluating the effectiveness of current practice to make changes that are likely to be effective.

2. PROVIDE STRUCTURES TO SUPPORT AND PROMOTE DATA USE

Supportive structures include the following:

- Focused conversations on instructional improvement where using data is essential. These may occur in school-wide Professional Learning Communities or smaller groups looking at specific learning issues. Common planning time for small subject or grade groups can help create the opportunities for these conversations;
- Opportunities for collaborative inquiry (e.g., the Professional Learning Cycle or the Teaching Learning Critical Pathway

"The implementation of data-informed decision-making cannot occur without leadership and supporting conditions such as tools for generating

3. SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ON DATA USE FOR STAFF

There may be formal opportunities like district staff development sessions or external training programs that can be accessed by teachers with the principal's support.

As well, many school staffs include data experts who can be tapped to share their expertise with others in small groups or one-on-one meetings. The principal's role is to uncover this expertise through discussions with teachers in Annual Learning Plan meetings or other conversations with teachers about their interests and passions.

Much learning takes place by doing; as teachers work together to analyze data, they will be better able to identify where they need support as the work becomes more complex. Be prepared to adjust resources to respond to these needs.

4. BUILD A CULTURE OF INQUIRY

A supportive condition for this culture of inquiry is a collaborative learning environment. (See 2K: Moving to Public Practice, Ideas into Action: Promoting Collaborative Learning Cultures and the Collaborative Inquiry Continuum)

Trust and respect are essential: teachers need to trust the principal and each other that when data uncover teaching areas needing attention, this will not be used to assign blame or to evaluate teaching performance. It's about solving problems, not passing judgement.

Some tips for nurturing a culture of inquiry:
- Value deep understanding, allowing for a range of outcomes and search for increased understanding and clarity;
- Reserve judgement and tolerate ambiguity during the process;
- Pose increasingly focused questions; and
- Encourage staff to challenge interpretations of data that are inconsistent with their thinking and experience (adapted from Ideas into Action: Using Data)

Be relentless in your quest to bring inquiry and data analysis to all forums where student achievement is being, or should be, discussed.

> "It is important to intentionally cultivate and practice an inquiry habit of mind – a habit of using inquiry to engage in evidence-informed thinking about the current state, the ideal state, how to bridge the gap, and what progress is being made."
>
> Katz, Earl and Ben Jaafar, 2009 in Ideas into Action: Using Data

5. SEEK OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD YOUR OWN COMPETENCE AND CONFIDENCE