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the education blog

How data can support your
school improvement efforts

nwea

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School improvement is arduous work, work that can't be left to luck or a one-size-fits-all approach. How you use data—from interim assessments and more—can be a game changer.

This Best of *Teach. Learn. Grow.* eBook brings together the expertise of four NWEA School Improvement professionals to help you put the data you have to good use.

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3 ways to support ambitious instruction in your school

Robert Thornell

For school leaders, the task of rebuilding faith in the education system may never have been greater than it is today. As communities and schools struggle to recover from the challenges faced during the pandemic, a wide net may be cast to help explain the perceived decrease in student performance. This is not a new net.

When schools struggle, a familiar group of the usual suspects is blamed. It is easy to target the students, the teachers, or even the curriculum. When searching for ways to improve school performance, sometimes the simplest solutions are overlooked in favor of more complex or popular courses of action.

Despite the many distractions, successful school leaders can focus on key components of school improvement and keep the work simple. [The University of Chicago's 5Essentials©](#) research has identified key areas necessary for school improvement:

1. Supportive environment

2. Ambitious instruction

3. Involved families

4. Effective leaders

5. Collaborative teachers

UChicago's model provides a tool for assessing each area as well as accessing professional coaching to improve. In this post, I'd like to focus on the incredible value of ambitious instruction and how principals can support it in their school.

What is ambitious instruction?

Ambitious instruction is defined by 5Essentials as follows: "Classes are challenging and engaging. The instruction is clear, well-structured, aligned across grade levels, and encourages students to build and apply knowledge. When combined with a supportive environment, ambitious instruction has the most direct effect on student learning."

A school leader must be capable of understanding and supporting this kind of instruction. The [research is pretty clear on the characteristics of a great principal](#). The consistent set of characteristics commonly found in the literature regarding [top qualities of effective principals](#) almost always includes some reference to supporting high-quality instruction.

Leaders who are able to identify and support ambitious instruction on their campus have a great opportunity to remove the assumptions regarding poor performance at their school and prove that the usual suspects are not the cause, nor should they be made the scapegoats. I believe there are three primary ways to support ambitious instruction in a school.

1. Prioritize curriculum

One of my favorite questions to ask educators is, "What are the expectations for lesson planning?" The answers vary greatly, and the responses are always telling.

Think for a moment and reflect on how you would answer that question on your own campus and how your teachers might respond as well. Do the answers align?

The question, on the surface, may seem like a simple one, but it has a great deal to do with the learning culture that a principal provides for the campus. Some principals have strict expectations for lesson plans complete with fancy templates, but they may not always be able to really unpack what the teacher intends for their students to learn.

There are countless ways to design lesson plan templates to help your teachers guide and plan for their instruction. Start by keeping it simple. Curriculum documents may have numerous details and wording necessary to satisfy some district- or state-level expectations, but when it comes to the nuts and bolts of the classroom, teachers should focus on a few basic questions that meet the needs of their entire class and provide time for responsive planning.

- **What am I going to teach?** Teachers are going to take the curriculum and make this decision regardless, so it is important that they can articulate it and how it meets an ambitious level for their class. All students should have access to the grade-level curriculum.

- **How are the students going to be assessed?** While the word "assessment" can sometimes be used as a bad word in education, as the instructional leader you must be bold enough to ask the question. The response can be formative, summative, or ongoing, but being accountable for learning means that we can clearly determine if students learned what was intended.

- **How will I teach this lesson?** Once a teacher has determined what they are going to teach and how they are going to assess the learning, the next consideration should be to develop the instructional plan.

- **How will I use data to respond to student needs?** Part of equity within the curriculum is not making changes to the curriculum but, instead, adjusting instruction to respond to student needs.

Principals can positively influence curriculum and lesson design by setting high expectations for professional learning communities (PLCs). Some campus leaders set up PLCs and get out of the way. In some rare cases, that may be the best thing to do. The most effective schools, however, have instructional leaders who participate and expect certain activities to occur in PLCs. Here are a few things for principals to consider that would help teachers plan for ambitious instruction:

- **Allow enough time.** Often, teachers are not given the appropriate time to explore or utilize their PLC. Principals must be creative in their planning and expectations to make sure teachers have enough time to work in PLCs.

- **Set clear expectations.** No matter if a team meets daily, weekly, or monthly, determining the agenda and sticking to it is very important. Have you done enough capacity building to allow teachers to lead themselves?

- **Attend yourself.** In a healthy learning culture, PLCs are not private or exclusive and they should never become so. While teachers need autonomy and time to work, a bold instructional leader should create time to participate as a PLC member and learn with teachers. This can be a tricky role to navigate for some, but it is also an effective way to build credibility as a leader.

Reflective question: What would your staff say is most important to you when it comes to lesson planning and lesson design? Why?

2. Carve out time to observe instruction

Recognizing and assessing quality instruction is a paramount skill for all instructional leaders, and instructional rounds are a way to achieve this. Walking the campus and classrooms and seeing students and teachers working and learning together can be a highlight of any principal's day. To truly impact teaching, however, leaders must have an honest, critical eye and follow a few basic guidelines:

- **Be forthcoming.** Observing quality instruction should never be a surprise, though that does not mean you have to tell teachers every time you are doing walk-throughs. What it does mean is that all staff deserve to know the purpose of the walk-through and what is expected. "Key practices for a successful classroom walkthrough" advocates transparency in the walk-through process so that staff members do not see the process as a trap. To achieve this, clearly establish a series of walk-through protocols, preferably around your campus goals or needs. For example, if your campus goal revolves around students developing ownership of their learning, design a consistent set of look-fors that identifies agreed-upon characteristics of student ownership.

- **Watch students, too.** The second component of a well-designed walk-through should also include intentionally observing what the students are doing—not what the teacher asked them to do, but what they are actually doing.

- **Evaluate cultural responsiveness.** Another benefit of classroom visits is helping a leader recognize and assess the cultural responsiveness of a classroom. An exceptional leader must have a moral compass that leads their campus to a place where learning for all students is valued.

Reflective question: What would your staff say you are looking for when you come into their classroom? What about your students?

3. Be intentional about assessment

One of our biggest challenges as educators remains trying to determine what data is most important and then using it to improve our craft. If teachers and students do not believe in an assessment, the data it provides (no matter how accurate) will be rendered useless. It can be incredibly difficult to build trust in assessment, but assessment literacy provides a basis for building that needed trust and credibility.

Challenge yourself to think differently about information overload and how to provide teachers with confidence in assessment by placing time and effort into how to use formative assessment in particular to impact instruction. When the investment of time and expertise has gone into high-quality curriculum and planning, and if the instruction has been responsive to student needs, then the information gathered can and should drive both the assessment and the next steps for learning.

Developing a culture of inquiry around practices and results allows teachers to develop ways to trust data and school leaders and provides time and space to complete a cycle of learning that includes curriculum, instruction, and assessment on the pathway to improved ambitious instruction in the classroom and across your campus.

Reflective question: How does data inform teaching and learning on your campus? What evidence do you have to show its impact?

Aiming for equity

The role of a school leader is perpetually changing by the week, day, or even minute. The ebb and flow of the job can be stressful and demanding, so much so that many principals find it difficult to focus on being an instructional leader even when they want to. But remember, it is easy for any principal to fill each day with the countless number of questions or distractions that come their way. It is those same distractions that can keep a principal from meeting perhaps the single most important goal of their job: ensuring that all students are learning and growing thanks to the ambitious instruction they so richly deserve.

Culturally responsive and sustaining education: What it is, why it matters, and how to do it

Jordan Grant

Education can feel like a sea of buzz words, including terms like "personalized learning," "differentiation," "formative assessment," and "culturally responsive teaching." These instructional trends can take off while the terms often mean very different things to different people.

The trouble with many terms but few clear definitions can be, unsurprisingly, confusion. And whenever confusion appears, ineffectiveness can sometimes be close behind.

"Culturally responsive and sustaining education" is one of those terms. It's a critical term that focuses on one of the most important things in education: ensuring we're meeting the needs of *all* students. Equity is much easier to accomplish when we understand and know how to embrace differences.

I'd like to dig into what, exactly, "culturally responsive and sustaining education" is, why it matters, and how you can work toward it in your school or district so you can achieve your goals of equity for all.

What is "culturally responsive and sustaining education"?

Geneva Gay, of the University of Washington, defines the first half of the term—"culturally responsive"—in her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*: "Culturally responsive teaching is a means for unleashing the higher learning potentials of ethnically diverse students by simultaneously cultivating their academic and psychosocial abilities." In other words, culturally responsive teaching considers students' culture to be an asset to their learning and embraces it in the classroom.

You might be wondering, then, what "culturally sustaining" means. In "Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice," Django Paris, of Michigan State, challenges educators to consider expanding the idea of culturally responsive teaching to account for multiple and shifting student identities. Examples include students' gender, sexuality, immigration status, and linguistic identities. You can read a more detailed definition in his 2017 interview with EdWeek.

Why does education need to be culturally responsive *and* culturally sustaining?

The short answer to this question is that culturally responsive and sustaining education helps students by improving outcomes, including achievement and well-being. It has been shown to help with student engagement, attendance, grades, graduation rates, and civic participation.

The longer answer is this: People often discuss the disconcerting achievement gap between white students and students of color, in particular Black and Hispanic students. Yet the term "achievement gap" alone isn't doing enough to acknowledge systemic inequities and effectively begin to address them. In fact, it places undue burden for learning on students: it is *they* who aren't achieving enough, versus we who aren't giving them enough opportunities to succeed.

In *The Opportunity Myth*, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) suggests we shift the cause of the problem (the students, as the achievement gap implies) to the resources and opportunities that are offered to students (as the term "opportunity gap" stresses). While traditional education maintains the status quo, culturally responsive and sustaining education offers a method to close the opportunity gap by asking that educators hold high expectations for *all* students and put the onus on the adults. When implementing culturally responsive and sustaining education, schools must ensure all students have access to supports for success.

How do we make culturally responsive and sustaining practices part of a school?

Guidance on culturally responsive and sustaining practices is becoming easier to find. The free resource "Transforming our public schools," for example, offers helpful advice on curriculum, school climate, community engagement, and more. Gloria Ladson-Billings, formerly of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, also outlines some of the main things educators can do to incorporate culturally responsive and sustaining practices in her book *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*:

- Encourage relationships between students and teachers

- Create a collaborative learning environment

- Leverage students' strengths

- Connect learning to students' interests and goals

This list may sound daunting, but remember, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. What's important is not to get so overwhelmed that you delay starting. Instead, act now in whatever way you can. Here are some potential next steps.

Suggestions for school administrators

- Revisit your language policy to ensure your school is offering appropriate translation for families

- Check that you have some family events held outside of school hours to allow working families to attend

- Assess whether your student dress code welcomes different hairstyles and expressions of self

Suggestions for teachers

- Start your next unit by assessing what students already know and what they would like to know

- Choose a student in class that you feel disconnected from and dedicate time to getting to know them better

Big-picture planning

Every school and district has a different context, so we encourage you to use the ideas in this post as a springboard and consider what you can start doing tomorrow, however small. NWEA is committed to supporting schools in their journey toward equitable education. To find out more about how we can support you with culturally responsive and sustaining education, visit NWEA.org/school-improvement.

6 ways to use data with more focus and purpose

Maria Wallevand

We've all seen some of those marketing-worthy gems posted on a school website or back-to-school banner after a survey is sent to families: "90% of our parents strongly agree/agree that their children enjoy coming to school!" "92% of parents strongly agree/agree that they have at least one staff member they feel comfortable contacting if they have an idea or concern!"

As wonderful as these data points may be, simply sharing them doesn't do much to provide insight into comprehensive school improvement. Stats like these are just stats, meaningless without more context, and they fall short of becoming a sustaining pillar of a school's improvement efforts if we don't dig deeper with focus and purpose.

The drive to use data

In Chapter 1 of *Transforming Teaching and Learning Through Data-Driven Decision Making*, Ellen Mandinach and Sharnell Jackson outline how and why our schools have become so data driven. With the development of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) as the research branch of the Department of Education, they explain, educators got the message that, "it was time for the field to increase its rigor and become an evidence-based discipline." This quest for increased rigor in the educational research community eventually made its way into districts, schools, and classrooms in what ultimately became accountability and compliance measures. Since then, Mandinach and Jackson go on to say, "a fundamental philosophical shift has occurred from data for compliance to the principles of data for continuous improvement." They quote Arne Duncan, the Obama administration's secretary of education: "Our best teachers today are using real time data in ways that would have been unimaginable just five years ago."

The truth is, teachers have always worked to know their students, regardless of federal, state, or local mandates. Through their observations, assessments, and questioning, they develop an awareness of where each student is and enact a learning plan. In the name of continuous improvement and supporting teachers' needs, districts and schools have begun adopting, adapting, and developing tools for formal and informal assessments. Whether the tools are adopted and purchased by committee, introduced through a curriculum program, or brought on in a new teacher's or administrator's toolkit of favorites, this myriad of tools can sometimes lead

> Fatigue and confusion can lead to random acts that seem based on data—but aren't really—instead of the focused and purposeful approaches more likely to result in sustained school improvement efforts.

to testing fatigue and data confusion, despite the best of intentions. This is where the shift to data-driven education can become problematic. Fatigue and confusion can lead to random acts that seem based on data—but aren't really—instead of the focused and purposeful approaches more likely to result in sustained school improvement efforts.

How to use data differently

Traditionally, it is academic data that provides the keystone for school improvement plans, but many of these plans, due to the limitations of collected data, have little scope and often become stagnant, lack relevance, and fall short of the desired outcomes. To create the conditions for sustained improvement, we need to have a clear picture of the current reality in our schools. This means cleaning up our data practices and looking at our schools holistically. To see the big picture, it's important to focus on four guiding elements that define how the work we do in schools should look: practices, protocols, processes, and systems. When present, well-articulated, and used consistently, these elements provide the underpinnings to meaningful improvement practices and guard against random data acts that take time and focus away from student learning and continuous improvement. My colleague Richard Jeffrey Rhodes explores this part of the data effort in more depth in his article _"Examining school improvement through a holistic lens."_

Here are some suggestions for viewing your own school's data more holistically and ensuring decisions are made with focus and purpose.

1. **Ensure that you are utilizing high-quality assessments.** Your assessments should match the rigor and content aligned to your standards. MAP® Growth™, our interim assessment, aligns to state standards, Common Core, Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), and AERO. To learn more, read _"Not all assessment data is equal: Why validity and reliability matter."_

2. **Use a balanced assessment system** that informs core instruction as well as intervention needs in your school. See "How to build a balanced assessment system" for insight on pulling together a system that uses formative, interim, and summative assessment effectively.

3. **Understand the purpose of each assessment administered, and if needed, eliminate redundancies.** Creating a simple matrix listing each assessment you use, its purpose, and how often and why you use it can be very revealing. When you gather and organize this data, you'll be gaining the impartial viewpoint you need to actively take charge of your programs. You may have to give up your favorite, but the time you'll regain is priceless.

4. **Create an assessment plan.** This plan should serve as a practical guide to support your programmatic decisions. When creating it, begin by taking your goals into account. Starting with the end goal in mind—what you ultimately want to accomplish—will help you align your practices, protocols, and programs into a sustainable assessment system within your building. In your plan, include a schedule that takes into account when the assessment data rendered is most useful to inform instruction, and make sure the data is available with minimal delay. Consider any additional professional learning, program resources, or family outreach you may need to have in place before, during, or after particular assessment cycles. Then, and most importantly, be clear about how you will communicate assessment results in ways that move teaching and learning forward.

5. **Commit to collaboratively reviewing data and creating time-bound goals for improvement.** As part of your ongoing improvement, it is critical that you not only create the space for collaboration to review and make intentional shifts in your ongoing improvement plans, but also to establish clear next steps. It is of equal or greater importance that you ensure shifts are communicated as actionable and measurable goals that are articulated clearly and with a sense of urgency. Everyone on the team should agree to the work and timelines ahead, and everyone should collaborate to report progress toward goals as often as feasible.

6. **Meet regularly to review data and provide support.** Though this seems like a simple step to follow, I believe it to be one of the more challenging ones. It requires that we hold this collaborative time as sacred. This means all members of the team are present—physically, mentally, and emotionally—as this work drives the rest of our work. We must commit to this if we expect any other work to become a sustainable part of our system.

Read more

Approaching data-driven decisions with more focus and purpose may feel daunting at first, but it will lead to better decision-making and greater school improvement in the long run. Here are some additional articles that can help you as you begin this work:

- "Using data in schools to learn fast," "A four step process for developing data culture in school districts," and "6 common mistakes to avoid for a stronger data culture in schools" by Education Elements

- "Data" by Learning Forward

- "Driven by data: A practical guide to improve instruction" by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo of Uncommon Schools

- "Why success depends on having the right mix of data and how you use it" by Elliot Ransom of UChicago Impact

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Why success depends on having the right mix of data—and how you use it

Elliot Ransom & Carrie Phillips

In education, as in just about every other field these days, organizations are looking to the power of data to help them solve their most intractable problems. For school leaders diligently working to move the needle on academic performance, high-quality data can be an invaluable resource. Student academic and outcome data, like grades, graduation rates, and test scores, offer the promise of gaining deeper insight into where students are and what they need.

While academic and outcome data are necessary indicators for improvement, they aren't sufficient on their own to bring about the significant changes in learning conditions that are often needed to produce better student outcomes. Simply put, outcome data doesn't identify root causes of persistent problems. Low test scores tell educators that students are struggling to retain and demonstrate specific academic content knowledge and skills, but they don't say much about the dynamics in the school—say, the relationships between teachers and students—that may be hindering student learning.

This article focuses on how relying solely on outcome data to guide improvement decisions can cause schools to fall short in driving sustainable and meaningful change. We'll discuss how engaging too narrowly, both in terms of the data we use and the way we engage with it, overlooks the root causes of disappointing outcomes.

When it comes to data, more is more

Conceptually, it makes sense that informed decision-making—like that needed in school improvement planning—requires a robust set of qualitative and quantitative data that reflects both experiences and outcomes. But in education, outcome data continues to be the main driver of improvement planning. Such data points are essential to the improvement process, but in isolation, they don't lend themselves to the comprehensive analysis needed for sustainable improvement. And when school leaders focus narrowly on student performance, they often end up reaching for a technical solution: something they can buy to manifest change.

Outcome data doesn't identify root causes of persistent problems.

For example, a school leader faced with low test scores might say: How about we buy a new curriculum? It's an understandable impulse. However, the reality is that the true causes of academic struggles often lie deeper below the surface, beyond the reach of attractive but shallow remedies. In fact, a growing body of research shows that the conditions of the learning experience—deeper factors, such as trust and safety—are linked to multiple student outcomes.

To better understand these conditions, we can look to UChicago Impact's 5Essentials, a comprehensive, research-based school improvement system centered around five key factors proven to drive better student outcomes: Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, Involved Families, Supportive Environment, and Ambitious Instruction. These 5Essentials are associated with higher outcomes across multiple indicators of student achievement. In fact, research from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) shows that schools with strength in three or more of the 5Essentials are 10 times more likely to show substantial gains in student outcomes.

For example, a study in the Detroit Public Schools system found that schools demonstrating strength in the 5Essentials had lower rates of chronic absenteeism. Another study, in San Francisco, showed that schools with improvement plans modeled around the 5Essentials framework saw fewer absences, improved teacher retention, and smaller student achievement gaps between different demographic groups. For more evidence along these lines, see "Supporting school improvement: Early findings from a reexamination of the 5Essentials survey," a report from the UChicago Consortium.

Get to the root of it

When school leaders expand the data at their fingertips to include insight into the learning conditions of students and the working conditions of teachers, they have a much wider, deeper view of the challenges vexing their school. As a result, they are more likely to implement interventions that target the real causes—and not just the symptoms—of their problems.

In other words, surveys like 5Essentials encourage educators to think more broadly about what may be hindering student growth and achievement. For example, if the goal is to improve academic outcomes, there's only so much that can be gleaned from evaluating and selecting new textbooks or altering the structure of lesson plans. Often, the root cause of the problem can be revealed by asking students about their experience: Do you find your teachers to be trustworthy and responsive to your needs? Do you feel challenged and supported in the classroom?

A growing body of research shows that the conditions of the learning experience— deeper factors, such as trust and safety—are linked to multiple student outcomes.

Similarly, inviting teachers to provide honest feedback can spur discussion and lead to richly informed change efforts. If a survey reveals that teachers feel they don't have enough influence in the direction of the school, for example, leadership can (and should!) use that insight to reflect on how their own decisions and communication styles may have led some teachers to feel disempowered. With a better understanding of teacher sentiment and their own role in shaping it, leaders can initiate new conversations about how best to empower their teachers to collaboratively define the school's direction and pursue even greater success.

Real conversations lead to real solutions

It's important to remember that having high-quality data is great, but it's not enough. It's what you do with that data that really matters. A survey that asks big questions will provide big answers, but a survey doesn't outline solutions. What it *does* do is provide a much deeper read on the experiences and dynamics that may be affecting student performance. It is school leadership and their key supporters who wield the power of the data. It is what they do with that information that ignites change. Remember our example above about leaders who try to repair low test scores with new textbooks? Now imagine a school leader who faces the same challenge but is equipped with more knowledge. Such a leader might say, "Low test scores? Let's ask our students about their experiences in class."

- Do they trust their teachers?

- Do they feel supported?

- Are they being held to high standards and challenged with rigorous instructional practices?

The school leader might also say, "Let's ask our teachers about their working relationships."

- Do they trust each other?

- Do they feel supported by leadership?

- Do they share a sense of collective responsibility for the success of all students and support one another to continuously improve instruction?

Now imagine the innovative solutions that might be born out of such conversations. When combining outcome data with insight into the experiences and perspectives of the school community, school leaders suddenly have a more accurate and nuanced representation of their school's strengths and challenges. That is a powerful place to start when creating an equitable and targeted improvement plan aimed at promoting long-term student success.

Stay focused on your vision of success

Creating this kind of improvement plan and achieving the desired result is rarely easy, but it's hard to imagine a scenario where it's not worth the effort. After all, this is the educational experience and attainment of our students we're talking about. Employing a comprehensive data set that reflects the perspectives of stakeholders requires a commitment to vulnerability. It begins with taking a long, honest look—aided by data and careful coaching and support—at the social components and conditions of the organization, including the analyst's own leadership practices.

A growing body of research shows that the conditions of the learning experience— deeper factors, such as trust and safety—are linked to multiple student outcomes.

For example, consider the concept of relational trust. Trust enhances the life of a school in innumerable ways—for administrators, teachers, students, and families. When schools learn to treat every interaction as an opportunity to build and strengthen trust-based partnerships, students feel the difference. They feel safer to learn, make mistakes, and engage in meaningful goal setting. And when school professionals learn to trust each other, their working relationships can become true collaborations, paving the way for greater collective efficacy. Talking about trust can be daunting, but when schools commit to it, they gain a much clearer sense of where their attention needs to be and a greater commitment to the complex work of improvement.

A final note: As leaders go beyond piecemeal or technical solutions and begin to engage in identifying root causes, it's important to be disciplined in the pursuit of improvement. That's why we like to say, Don't boil the ocean. Don't try to do it all at once. Keep it manageable and focus on the factors you can control. A data-driven and disciplined approach to improvement planning holds the possibility of accelerating the pace of improvement and increasing the rate of success.

About the authors

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Jordan Grant has extensive experience in K–8 education as a teacher, school leader, and network leader. Before joining NWEA, Jordan worked as a MAP partner for eight years and was responsible for everything from setup and test administration to report generation, data analysis, and family communication. Throughout her career, Jordan has sought innovative ways to use data and instructional best practices to help ensure students reach their goals. She holds a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College and a master's degree in elementary education with a bilingual concentration from Pace University. She is currently a doctoral student in the Urban Education Leaders Program at Teachers College, Columbia University.

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