

DATA DIALOGUE

**Focused
conversations
put evidence
to work in the
classroom**



BY CINDY HARRISON AND CHRIS BRYAN

As teachers and leaders are well aware, schools and districts across the country have invested enormous amounts of money and energy in creating data management systems so that teachers

can access information about their students' performance. With these systems in place, the focus now needs to move to the structures and allocation of time that will allow teachers to engage in data conversations about student achievement and its implica-

tions for classroom planning and instruction. Such time and structures will ensure that the necessary conditions are in place for data to be used to impact student achievement.

Following and in the table on p. 16, we summarize a framework that

Types of data conversations

| Type of data dialogue | Data used | Who is involved | Conversation topics | Frequency |
|--|--|--|---|--|
| Whole-school conversations | State assessments, district benchmarks | School improvement team, entire staff | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patterns of student achievement. Needs for schoolwide programs (instructional, curricular, professional learning). Needs for additional knowledge and skills for staff. | 2 times a year |
| One-on-one conversations with focus on multi-year growth of students | State assessments, benchmark exams, end-of-course assessments, classroom assessments, common assessments | Teacher and administrator and/or coach | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growth of students. Overall proficiency of students. Instructional strategies to meet student learning needs. | 2 to 3 times a year |
| Department and/or grade-level teams with focus on individual student interventions | Student performance on classroom and common assessments, discipline records, student work | Core teams, grade-level teams | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diagnosis of individual knowledge and skills. Next steps for students. Grouping of students for instruction and intervention. Pyramid of interventions. | Once a month or more often |
| Department and/or grade-level teams with focus on instructional strategies | State assessments, benchmark assessments, common assessments, unit assessments | Grade-level or content-area groups | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growth of students. Patterns in proficiency. Instructional strategies. Assessment strategies. | Once a week to once every 6 to 8 weeks |
| Student goal-setting conversations | Student work, grades, state assessments, common assessments, benchmark assessments | Teacher and individual students | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goal setting. Strategies for success. Celebrations of learning. | Once a week to once a month |

outlines a variety of types of data conversations. For each type of data conversation, we define the purpose, identify possible data sources, recommend frequency, suggest possible topics for the conversation, and identify who should be involved.

Effective data conversations share several common characteristics, whether at the school, grade, department, or team level. Characteristics include:

- Teams need to do an analysis of the current state of student achievement and create SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time-bound) for student learning.

CINDY HARRISON is an independent consultant who works with schools and districts around the world. Her work focuses on instructional coaching, teacher leadership, organizational change, school improvement, and professional learning communities. You can contact her at harrison.cindy@gmail.com.

CHRIS BRYAN is an independent consultant. Her work focuses on standards-based planning and instruction, school improvement, and instructional coaching. You can contact her at lcrsbryan@msn.com.

- Practitioners who can take action and monitor student learning should be the core participants in

team conversations.

- Members of the data conversation should agree that the data they are examining is a good measure of student learning.
- Data used in these conversations can be from national or state tests or common assessments.
- Teams need a facilitator who keeps the conversation focused on teaching and learning, asks the hard questions, and ensures that the group moves to action.
- Teams need a recorder who assists in making sure all members of the group leave with the same understanding of the discussion and next steps.

DATA CONVERSATIONS

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM CONVERSATIONS

Purpose: To create and monitor a schoolwide implementation plan for continuous improvement by analyzing student/school data trends.

Possible data sources: Student achievement (formative and summative) assessments, including disaggregation by subgroups, demographic trends, and perception/survey.

Frequency: Quarterly or trimester data reviews.

Possible topics: The school improvement team analyzes and interprets data so that the whole school understands how the school is functioning. These conversations include setting goals in areas identified for improvement, examining best practices to be used schoolwide, and identifying benchmarks to measure

School improvement team conversations include setting goals in areas identified for improvement, examining best practices to be used schoolwide, and identifying benchmarks to measure growth in student achievement.

growth in student achievement as well as levels of implementation of the identified practice. Moving beyond using the practices to assessment of the impact of the practices assists the team in identifying where they need to make adjustments.

Who should be involved: A representative team of parents, teachers, students and administrators.

School example: Cooper

Elementary School found that they were in the bottom quartile in math for the past three years. Although the school had been implementing the *Investigations* math curriculum during that time, levels of implementation of the curriculum varied in individual classrooms. To assess whether the new curriculum was making a difference in math achievement, the team needed to collect data and assess the level of implementation first. The team asked each staff member to complete an Innovation Configurations map at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. In addition, a set of “look-fors” guided the principal during her walk-throughs and was also used by instructional coaches when they worked with individuals or teams of teachers to co-plan. In order to assess gaps in implementation and teacher knowledge and skills, data were exam-

ined by the school improvement team to decide on necessary allocations of resources to move the school forward.

TEACHER-SUPERVISOR CONVERSATION AND TEACHER-COACH/MENTOR CONVERSATION

There are two types of conversations that might occur here. Conversations between teachers and supervisors tend to be evaluative, while those between teachers and coaches/mentors are usually conducted in a non-evaluative manner.

Purpose: To identify trends in the achievement of students over time in an individual teacher’s classroom.

Possible data

sources: State tests, common assessments, district benchmarks.

Frequency: One or two times a year for administrator-teacher and as often as weekly with teacher-coach/mentor.

Possible topics:

Reflect on the growth in student learning (individual, subgroups, and whole group), identify strategies to implement and growth areas for the teacher.

These conversations often focus on the performances of a teacher’s past and current students and help to identify areas of success and weakness.

Participants may discuss programs and classroom practices to identify and solve problems rather than to assign blame for results. These conversations can focus on data over time and can also include conversation around the teacher’s current students and their needs. The growth of students is the focus rather than current proficiency of students so that teachers consider end points and also look at the growth of individual students.

Who should be involved:

Individual teacher and building-level administrator or coach.

School example: Felicia, a middle school social studies teacher, has been teaching for more than 20 years. In the last two years, the social studies department has been focused on literacy in the content area. In her data conversation with the principal at the beginning of the year, she noted that the English language learners were not making much progress in writing or reading in her classroom. Felicia identified this as an area for growth on her improvement plan. She and her principal then looked at her current students and identified some strategies to implement with the ELL students. They agreed to meet again in three months and look at growth in writing by examining writing samples from the beginning of the year and three months later.

DEPARTMENT/GRADE-LEVEL CONVERSATION FOCUSED ON THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT

Purpose: To identify next steps, interventions, and necessary focus areas for additional student learning.

Possible data sources: Achievement and readiness data such as state, district, or common assessments.

Frequency: Once a week to every six weeks.

Possible topics: Teams agree on and administer assessments to gain information about their students in relation to the school improvement plan. They create class profiles that identify strengths and weaknesses of individual students in a variety of areas which can then be used to differentiate instruction, provide interventions, and focus classroom instruction. Monitoring progress frequently ensures that the makeup of the student groups remains flexible. The team identifies strategies and allows enough time to determine the student’s responsiveness to the strategy.

The grade-level/department team

follows a problem-solving model that includes:

- Analyze data and reach agreement on areas of need;
- Group students by strengths and areas of need, identifying similarities and differences between classrooms;
- Research/examine best practices;
- Develop grade-level/department action plans;
- Implement the plan; and
- Evaluate and revise the plan based on student growth data.

Who should be involved: Grade-level or department teams.

School example: In September, an 8th-grade core team at Villa Nova Middle School administered its pre-assessment and noticed that it had a large group of students who scored low in vocabulary. The team decided to address this need by grouping students for scaffolded instruction across classrooms, preteaching unit vocabulary, assigning students to after-school intervention groups, and monitoring progress through common unit assessments. After each structure was implemented, the 8th-grade team discussed student growth and identified next steps for individuals and groups of students.

DEPARTMENT/GRADE-LEVEL CONVERSATIONS AROUND INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Purpose: To engage in deep conversations around teaching and student learning, identifying student successes and challenges and then moving to teaching strategies and approaches that are successful and those that need to be changed.

Possible data sources: Common assessments, district benchmarks, individual teacher-created assessments, pacing charts, or examples of actual student work.

Frequency: One or more times a month.

Possible topics: Teachers discuss

what happened for students in the learning process and what instructional practices made a difference. Sometimes the conversation may focus on success with certain types of students (special education or advanced students) or with levels of student thinking exemplified in the work. Co-planning units including assessments, teaching the units, and then discussing student learning results is a valuable way to structure these discussions. Develop team goals to support school improvement goals and identify teacher learning needs. Some schools have incorporated the lesson study approach into these data conversations.

Who should be involved: The teachers involved and instructional coaches, when available. Some schools include administrators in these discussions; however, teachers can be brutally honest about their own strengths and weaknesses when there is no threat of information being used in evaluation. In this case, the administrator's role is to allocate time and ensure that these sessions focus on the importance of reflecting on student learning and teacher practices.

School example: Jorge, a high school physics teacher, is meeting with four of his peers who also teach physics. They look at student results for a unit they co-planned and taught. As they compare results, they notice patterns of high achievement and a high level of growth for students from the pretest to the final assessment for the classrooms where Jorge was the primary instructor. He shares strategies he used, and the team agrees to incorporate the strategies into their next unit.

INDIVIDUAL STUDENT GOAL-SETTING CONVERSATIONS

Purpose: To provide students with an understanding of their current level of achievement in order to set goals with action strategies so that students are actively engaged in learning.

Possible data sources: Student work, grades, state assessments, common assessments, district benchmarks.

Frequency: Beginning of year and after individual units.

Possible topics: Students look at their own performance and may compare results to the defined proficiency

level and/or other students' performance. This is usually a conversation between teacher and student but could be small-group or whole-class conversation. Teaching students strategies for success is an integral part of this conversation. Often data walls are used to inform and motivate students to reach higher levels of performance. Celebrating success needs to be a part of this practice.

Who should be involved: Classroom teacher and individual student.

School example: In Aisha's high school algebra class, students set learning goals based on data. Students take an exam or quiz and then analyze their results on an analysis spreadsheet that includes an action plan. The teacher asks students to write a summary of the learning at the end of each unit. Students identify key math concepts, their areas of strength for the unit, a problem they still struggle with, what they have done to monitor their progress towards proficiency, and what they will do to move themselves further towards proficiency. The teacher reads each summary and conducts a brief student conference. ■