Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D.

Reports from the Precinct Commanders:
Using Results to Drive School Improvement

Historically, the school district, like most school districts, was addicted to formal rules and procedures and subject to an occupational culture that had proven itself to be particularly resistant to change.

Sound familiar? Perhaps, but if one substitutes the words '*police department*' for '*school district*' you have a description of the New York Police Department (NYPD) during the 1990s.

During the mid 90s, New York City was considered one of the most dangerous cities in America. Just 10 years later, New York was considered one of the safest big cities in America. What triggered this amazing turnaround? What helped New York move from one of the deadliest to one of the safest cities? The answer lies in a results orientation that relentlessly focused on the achievement of organizational goals.

The NYPD responded to the rising crime rate by instituting a practice that required precinct commanders to publicly report the most current data on crime and indicate how they were planning to improve the current situation. The reports, using data benchmarked against internal and external sources, were delivered publicly in front of peers who shared the responsibility to ask clarifying questions, make suggestions or add information from their own experience. The goal of the meeting was not to find fault or place blame but to identify policies, practices and procedures that would reduce the crime rate.

The strategy worked. From 2000 to 2001, New York City showed a 12.01 decline in major crime (murder, rape, robbery, felony assault, burglary, grand larceny and GLA). The two-year trend showed an 18.88% decline in major crime and amazingly, the eight-year trend showed a 63.17% decline in major crimes. (O'Connell, 2001)

A similar story can be told regarding student achievement in Kildeer Countryside School District 96. Since 1999, student achievement has steadily improved to the point where more than 96% of all students now meet or exceed state

standards. Such a pattern of sustained improvement over an extended period of time was based in part on a strategy very similar to the one used in the NYPD. Structures were created that made the regular use of data and the sharing of best practices a routine part of the District's results oriented culture.

Applying a Results Orientation in Schools

Like the NYPD, the school district recognized that data needed to be gathered and analyzed in a timely manner if changes in instructional strategies were to be successfully implemented. And like the precinct commanders in the NYPD, principals were invited to participate in meetings where they were required to report and react to building-level achievement data.

During these job-alike meetings, principals met with the superintendent, central office administrators and the other building principals to discuss results of the most recent assessments. The goal of the meetings was to determine if current instructional strategies were working to improve student learning. The foundation for these quarterly meetings was built upon 1) access to timely data, 2) responsiveness to results, 3) use of effective teaching practices, and 4) relentless follow-through.

Within two weeks of quarterly benchmark assessments, principals were expected to analyze the results and prepare a description of the current reality in their school. They also prepared a description of what was being done to improve student learning and a timeline for implementation. The proposed response was scrutinized by colleagues and held against the standard of what was known to be best practice. Transparency was non-negotiable and all appropriate data—good and bad—was openly shared. The

focus of the meetings was on providing feedback and finding solutions. Everyone was expected to work together to improve student achievement.

Tangible Benefits of Data Meetings

There were many benefits of data meetings, but first and foremost the school district found that institutionalizing this practice fostered the development of a more authentic results orientation. The meetings provided a context for the sharing of craft knowledge, promoted the development of new norms around best practice and identified policies, practices or procedures that needed to be changed in order to maximize student learning.

The data meetings emphasized collaboration and the interdependence of relationships. Principals were provided an opportunity to share their experience, the curriculum director was expected to offer suggestions for new methodologies, the business manager understood the rationale behind requests. These results-oriented discussions between central office administrators and building principals developed into regularly scheduled meetings whereby *all* levels of the administration were required to attend and expected to participated in a process to identify achievement trends, allocate resources, and assess the impact of various instructional strategies.

The meetings also resulted in better communication among and between administrators. Not only did the dialogue improve existing lines of communication between and among administrators, it also created new ones. For example, for the first time in his career the business manager sat in on discussions about instruction and thus, had a clearer understanding of the rationale behind request for resources.

Communication improved in several other ways. First, the data meetings generated more frequent and focused communication about teaching and learning. The data meetings served as a reminder that learning —not teaching—was the fundamental purpose of the schools.

Next, the data meetings facilitated more effective communication. While the district had used different reporting mechanisms to manage and monitor learning, the previous structures were the equivalent of "a series of one-way streets running parallel to one another. Today, thanks to [the data] meetings, communication channels have been converted to two-way streets – broad two-way highways with several lanes of traffic running in different directions at the same time." (O'Connell, 2001)

Finally, the data meetings emphasized communication about the right things. The data meetings were focused on *results* and led to changes in instructional practice. Data was shared for the express purpose of collaboratively developing new and more effective strategies. By examining the relative performance of each school on the basis of the quarterly benchmark assessment results—using one school to the other as the basis of comparison—the administrative team could determine efficiently and effectively whether or not an instructional strategy was succeeding.

A Result Oriented Practice Transforms School Culture

Perhaps the most significant feature of the quarterly data meetings was that data on student achievement was used, not just meticulously compiled. Too many departments, grade levels or teams focus on the task of gathering data without a conscious effort to talk about what the data means. Therein lies the primary problem with the use of dashboards and scorecards at the classroom and team level. Besides being time consuming and complicated, these reporting mechanisms can, and often do, shift the focus of teachers' time, energy and attention away from *using* the data to the meaningless task of *compiling* the data.

By utilizing data generated by internal benchmark assessments and promoting open dialogue—even an occasional debate—about best practice, the data meetings transformed the school district into a learning organization that could 'analyze, reflect, learn, and change based on experience.' (O'Connell, 2001) ∎

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*During the course of a career spanning more than 30 years, **Dr. Tom W. Many** has served as a classroom teacher, principal and superintendent—all at the elementary level.*

References

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