

New Leader

Practical strategies for student achievement

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Use of Data Walls Leads to Improved Teaching, Learning and Achievement

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With the implementation of EQAO and the province-wide push to collect data to foster improved student learning and public accountability, teachers and school administrators have had to become well-versed in using data. Fortunately, we have also learned to use data to drive instruction.

We have become increasingly adept at deciding which set of data will make us information rich, and which will cause us to lose focus on the journey to improved literacy. As a principal of a medium-sized school in a large urban area, I felt that data became a critical component of our monthly conversations during our involvement in a Ministry of Education project. Our school was designated as a Turnaround school and we were required to develop a data wall as a tool to track and, ultimately, improve student achievement. After

reviewing the literature on using data walls, our school team developed a model that captured the essence of the Ministry's mandate, but which also helped us to pinpoint precise strategies for improving the reading of each individual student.

Use of the data wall proved to be one of the most critical elements in our high-yield strategies focus. The goal of the data wall was to provide a summary of the progress individual students were making throughout the month. As a summative assessment tool, it also provided an excellent snapshot of progress over time from the beginning to the end of the term. This method of recording (PM Benchmarks) allowed for consistency in tracking reading results and, as a school principal, it also provided me with the ability to utilize data to make critical decisions – about resource support allocation. Students were provided with additional resource support based upon the conversations with teachers, using the data wall as a springboard.

Intensive monthly analysis of individual student benchmarks provided staff with the moment-to-moment information needed to make personalized and precise programming and instructional decisions. Teachers did not wait for end of the term to adjust programming, as that would cause student learning to be unnecessarily limited. Stiggins (2002) suggests that ongoing, short term analysis of student achievement is much more effective in terms of improving student learning than a year-long analysis.

As the use of our data wall evolved, it led to the implementation - suggested by staff - of common guided reading time for our entire primary division. This allows for resource teachers to support at-risk learners with intensive guided reading intervention during the same time period as their classmates are engaged in guided reading.

Organizing this way ensured that the most vulnerable students did not miss any other part of their curriculum. This method of resource support reinforced the importance of including resource staff in the teaching/learning cycle when working with at-risk learners. Resource teachers then became crucial in the learning partnership, planning and teaching collaboratively with their classroom colleagues.

When staff became comfortable with using and analyzing the data wall we moved to the next critical element - setting individual student targets. This part of the process became integral in the assessment cycle. Once the first round of Benchmark data was collected and recorded, teachers then took time to make a commitment to each student by deciding on a specific level that the teacher believed the student could attain by the end of the term. This target was based on information from their formative assessments and observation notes. This made the target meaningful and achievable. Setting these individual targets was a collaborative process since the classroom teacher and resource staff discussed what would be a realistic growth at the end of seven to eight weeks. Teachers recorded this target by using a small coloured dot and placing it directly on the data wall.

At the end of the term, teachers then reviewed how well they were able to predict student progress. With each opportunity to do this, teachers became better at making predictions on student progress, and got to know their students, and their learning, more deeply. Individual target-setting helped to focus teachers on improving achievement. The entire team was committed to meet-

ing and surpassing the targets that had been set; therefore, planning time, resource meetings and impromptu discussions revolved around what additional strategies could be used with students to help support their reading. Teachers were also able to more clearly identify needed resources to support individual students.

The creation and use of data walls has also proven to be an excellent vehicle to scaffold teacher professional development. The collaborative examination of student achievement data, focused on the data wall, provides opportunities for teachers to work together to respond to student needs. This is especially true when teacher moderation is at the heart of the assessment cycle.

As a staff, we now begin each of our monthly meetings by reinforcing what we know about student learning by marking a common piece of work, discussing criteria and establishing strategies that will support improving student learning in our next teaching/learning pathway. This type of teacher moderation when assessing student work, levels the playing field in understanding the criteria, making the assessment process as objective as possible, and integral to teaching and learning.

Instructional leaders have begun to use data walls in various forms to provide summaries of data that can be used for specific discussions and to support precision teaching. As we become comfortable with sharing this tool with one another we will become more effective in leading teachers and students toward improved achievement and learning.

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A Suggested Approach for Data Walls

- data wall goal: provide summary of progress individual students are making throughout each month
- this method of recording (PM Benchmarks) allows for consistency in tracking and provides ability to use data to make critical decisions about resource supports
- Intensive monthly analysis of individuals' benchmarks provides staff with moment-to-moment information needed to make personalized and precise programming and instructional decisions.
- create common guided reading time for whole primary division -- this allows resource teachers to help at-risk learners at same time as classmates are doing guided reading.
- set individual student targets after first round of data collected
- setting these targets is a collaborative process since the classroom teacher and resource staff discuss what would be realistic growth at end of 7 to 8 weeks. Teachers record this target by using a small coloured dot on the data wall.
- at term's end teachers review how well they were able to predict student progress.
- provides opportunities for collaboration among colleagues.
- begin each monthly staff meeting with opportunity to reinforce knowledge by marking a common piece of work, discussing criteria and establishing strategies that will support student learning in the next teaching/learning pathway.