

The Most Important Data

By targeting an area for improvement and gathering information directly from students, this district sets a clear direction for teaching and learning.

Leslye S. Abrutyn

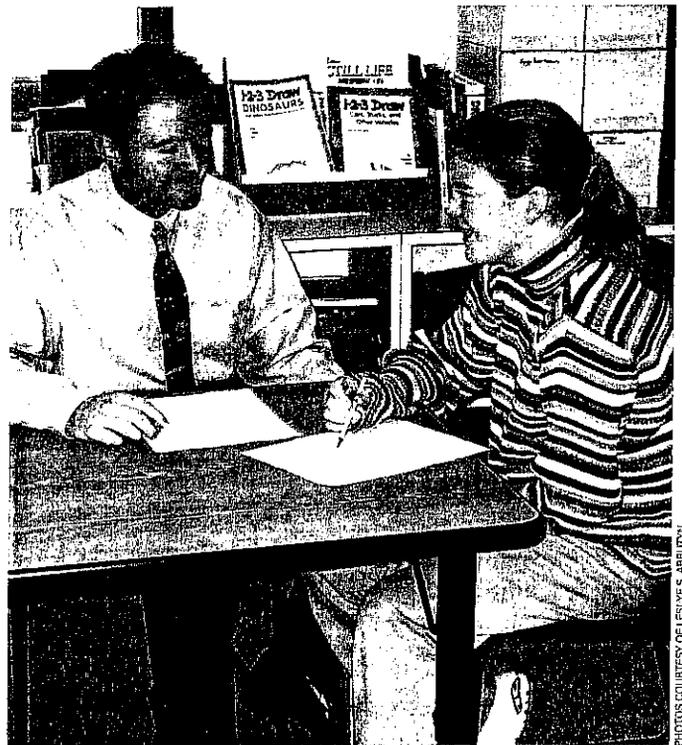
The good news for educators is that more data than ever are available to help us improve student achievement. The bad news is that we are often overwhelmed with so much data that we hardly know where to begin. We're unclear about which data to use, who should use it, and how to use it effectively.

In Penn-Delco School District, we have very good news about data. We use a one-day process to gather authentic, rich data that has not only propelled student achievement to new levels but also transformed our schools into collaborative communities focused on results.

Located in a suburban area outside Philadelphia, Penn-Delco serves approximately 3,400 students in its four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. In the late 1990s, while attending a regional meeting, a small group of our administrators viewed a video demonstrating a walk-through process developed by Lauren Resnick from the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. A *walk-through* is an organized school or classroom tour focused on teaching and learning. The walk-through process developed by Resnick focuses on looking at student work and talking with students to determine what they can express about their learning. We realized that this strategy could hold the key to school improvement.

How We Gather Data

In our district, the walk-through process begins each August when a committee of teachers at each school reviews the data from a variety of assessments—the Pennsylvania System of



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School Assessment (PSSA), the TerraNova standardized achievement test, and district assessments—to identify areas that need improvement. Each school chooses one such area to tackle and develops specific questions to ask students.

In the fall, each school conducts the first walk-through of the year. Administrators, teachers, and invited community members walk through the school, interviewing every student about his or her learning. The process varies from school to school. In most cases, the school sets up desks in the hallway

and pulls students out of their classrooms individually to be interviewed. A typical interview lasts about five minutes. All students can be interviewed within a few hours if the school can sign up and train enough interviewers.

The teacher committee collects the data sheets and meets to analyze student responses and to target priority areas for improvement. Usually the committee meets the same day and tallies the data in an hour or two, either manually or by computer. At the next faculty meeting, the committee provides the teaching staff with the results and its recommendations. The school now has a focus for the year, and teachers begin in earnest to work on the committee's recommendations. The following spring, each school conducts a second walk-through to determine how much growth the school has made in the focus area.

Identifying Questions, Getting Answers

Over the years, our schools have targeted many topics for investigation. Math problem solving, for example, is vital and lends itself well to this process.

The walk-through team might ask students to name and describe as many math problem-solving strategies as possible; to identify the problem-solving strategies they would use for several sample math problems; or to actually solve a problem and explain the strategy they used.

If a teacher committee has analyzed test results and found that students are weak in reading comprehension, the committee might develop a list of walk-through questions centering on the components of this skill. The first question on the interview sheet might simply ask students to list various reading strategies they use. The responses to this question alone can yield powerful data for our teachers: Can students list six or seven strategies and explain them, or do they struggle to list even a few? Another item might ask students to explain when and how they should use particular strategies. If students cannot explain how to predict, for example, then teachers have a clear indication that they need to devote more classroom time to this strategy.

Some schools have targeted the writing process. The interviewer may have each student share a piece of writing from his or her portfolio, asking the student to explain why this is



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his or her best piece and to discuss how the piece is organized. Because our students learn that different kinds of writing are organized in different ways, this question is particularly revealing. At one school that focused on writing, the results of the spring walk-through revealed the following:

- **Strength:** All grades have improved in their understanding of the writing process. Younger grades are especially strong in prewriting and initial drafts.

- **Need:** Some students still lack an understanding of the writing process. The committee recommends having the steps of the writing process posted in all classrooms and continuing to model and discuss these steps.

- **Strength:** Students are able to verbalize the importance of details when writing and are able to look at a piece they have written and add more details.

- **Need:** Some students still associate content with length and are vague about how to use details. The committee recommends using anchor papers to serve as models of proficient performance in this area.

- **Strength:** Younger students understand the concept of beginning, middle, and end.

■ *Strength:* Students mention graphic organizers as a strategy to help with organization.

■ *Strength:* Older students understand the importance of topic sentences and paragraph formation.

■ *Need:* Younger students understand organization but need more practice. The committee recommends that teachers work on paragraph development and point out organization when students are reading passages.

This list of results suggests the level of ownership teachers have in understanding the strengths and needs of their students. The recommendations are teacher-generated, and therefore teachers have a strong investment in following them.

At Coebourn Elementary School, Principal Don Pullano explains that the walk-through process helped faculty members identify areas of needed improvement in math and gave them the tools and the ownership to address their findings. At a fall math walk-through, for example, it became evident that students did not thoroughly understand various math problem-solving strategies (such as *work backwards*, *guess and check*, and *draw a table or chart*). To address this need, the staff decided to give all students a packet of problem-solving strategies. Each page in the packet listed a different strategy with an illustration. Students received instruction on strategies and used the packet at school and at home throughout the school year.

The staff also addressed this finding by creating word problem sheets with a blank line at the top of the page where students were required to write the math problem-solving strategy they planned to use. This practice became so ingrained in the culture of the school that if a worksheet or problem came from a textbook, students got into the habit of drawing their own line at the

top of the page and filling in the strategy they were going to use.

A third way in which the staff worked to improve student problem solving was to begin each math class with a "Problem of the Day," using an overhead projector to model the various strategies.

Another finding of the Coebourn walk-through was that students lacked necessary knowledge of basic math facts. In response to this finding,

number of adults spend an entire day talking with them about their learning, students realize that school improvement revolves around them. In the days following a walk-through, the excitement among students is palpable.

Second, teachers and administrators have gained a new insight: It doesn't matter how well a lesson plan is written or how well the lesson is taught if students cannot clearly articulate the

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teachers provided flash cards for students to take home, as well as training sessions teaching parents the proper way to drill students on math facts using flash cards.

Coebourn's math walk-through also found that students rushed when answering multiple-choice questions and did not use elimination strategies to narrow their choices. The staff's solution: All teachers would provide extra points for students who physically crossed out incorrect answer choices or labeled incorrect answer choices as "far off" or "off."

A Focus on Student Learning

Walk-throughs have, first and foremost, transformed our district's schools by bringing into sharper focus not only what teachers are teaching but also what students are learning. This, in effect, is a shift toward a more results-oriented school district. A school's first walk-through forever changes the lens through which it views learning. All eyes are on students—Do they understand the goals for the classroom? Can they verbalize them? The interviews powerfully increase students' investment in the learning process. When a

lesson's content and purpose. This epiphany has transformed administrators' informal classroom visits. Rather than watch the teacher, the administrator will usually now look first at students to see whether they are engaged and actively participating in the learning. Next, the administrator will walk up to a student and ask, "What are you working on?" followed by, "Why are you doing that?"

Third, walk-throughs provide the most important data of all—the data closest to the students. The process produces authentic, fresh, clear information that gives teachers immediate guidance about where they must direct their efforts. This information does not require advanced technology, data warehousing, or advanced statistical skills. Yet it empowers students, teachers, and administrators, and as a result, the entire school. Schools use walk-through data to direct their plans for improving instruction. Professional staff development for the year is integrally tied to the walk-through process.

Lessons from Experience

School leaders who hear about the walk-through process often comment,

"I'm concerned that my teachers will see walk-throughs as a threat. How can I overcome possible resistance and get started in my district?" Our experience has taught us the value of first sending a team of teachers and administrators to visit a district that is using the process successfully. In our case, the Palisades School District in Kintnersville, Pennsylvania, graciously included us in an actual walk-through. We now do the same for teams of educators from other districts. Every educator, without exception, finds the experience exhilarating and inspiring.

After you take a team to visit another district and experience the process, we recommend that you invite schools in your district to implement walk-throughs on a voluntary basis, perhaps as a pilot program. This strategy will ensure that only the most positive and receptive teachers participate at the beginning. They will then be able to tell colleagues about their experience. You should also explain to teachers that walk-throughs are not used to evaluate them. In fact, the process will help teachers reach the goal they all aspire to—better student achievement. Involving the teacher association leadership is important as well.

We've also learned that no matter how the schedule goes on walk-through day, we should never leave out any students. Our students are so excited to participate and eager to speak with an adult that they are devastated if time runs short. We have now refined our scheduling to make sure that all students participate. We have learned to field-test our questions by trying them out on a few students first. No matter how clear we think the questions are, we sometimes find that they are not clear to the students or do not get at the heart of what we want to find out. We have also developed better processes for analyzing the data. Penn-

Delco's principals now meet annually as a group to share information from the walk-throughs in each school so that they can learn from one another.

Transforming Professional Practice

We have discovered that the walk-through process leads to many positive outcomes that effective schools strive to achieve. These include authentic use of data, a culture of collegiality among staff, reflective discussions about teacher practice, a focus on student achievement, significant and ongoing staff development, a focus on standards, increased student engagement in the learning process, and a strong desire among staff to find out what works in the classroom.

One gauge of the success of walk-throughs in Penn-Delco School District is our standardized test scores. The trend line in every grade has been up. At certain grade levels, the increase in national percentiles during the last seven years has been as much as 20 percentile points, moving us from around the 50th percentile nationally to the 70th and 80th percentiles. Although many initiatives have undoubtedly contributed to that success, we feel confident that walk-throughs have been key. ■

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