

## Data, Data, Everywhere But Not a Drop to Drink

By

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How many times have you heard the following from teachers and now parents and State Legislators: “There is too much testing...just let them teach!” Imagining a surgeon saying, “I don’t have time to run tests, just let me cut!” Unfortunately, there is some truth in what teachers are saying because in my observation principals, in some instances, have become what I call “Data Collectors!” They collect data for no other reason than to showcase it for central office staff, which showcases it for superintendents and school boards, which then publicize it to the media. Little or nothing changes in the classrooms but the amount of data, its intensity, and dazzling graphic displays are, confusing and downright overwhelming to the average individual. Presented with such they conclude, “They must be doing something right,” because they do not know which questions to ask.

I recall what it was like to be a principal of a school that was resisting change and/or use of data to drive instruction. In the early 90s before data use was vogue I was responding to the findings of Ron Edmonds, that high performing schools in low-income districts used data to guide instruction. I had what I called quarterly “Days of Dialogue.” My staff secretly called it “Days of Death” because for them it was just another thing to do. Many of them did not use the data because in many instances it was not aligned with instruction. More importantly, they were resistant to changing their practices of teaching how they thought best, which included covering a topic, giving students a grade and moving on. Dr. Steve Edwards, consultant and now Solution-tree Associate, visited my school and was asked, how would we know when there was too much testing. His response has stayed with me many years later, he said, “One test is too much if it does not change your instruction!”

Over the years, I have seen this “data-driven instruction” claims become so much of a driving force in our schools that the Data Collectors I referred to earlier have emerged. They are pretty easy for me to recognize, since I saw a little of this in me at one time. Their offices are filled with expensive tabulated data binders. They may go as far as buying a beautiful veranda to display all of their data notebooks but, *often fail to use the data inside the binders to change practices*. Numerous data related faculty meetings are held and documented for central office purposes. They have leadership team meetings that are sometimes are nothing more than opportunities for teacher to complain and have social discourse. They have mastered what John Kotter refers to as a *False Sense of Urgency*. What make them look urgent are numerous power point presentations with but they lack follow-up. Urgency for some is passing down to their staff what has been passed down to them...pressure, or what Reeves calls “Initiative Fatigue” or “Scut work” (2009, pp. 39-40). During one of my Professional Learning Community’s (PLC) presentations a teacher said, “I’m sure glad you finally told me what this PLC thing is...we do it once a month when we are asked to send data to the office so that it can be sent to the associate superintendent...we never knew what happened to it (the data).”

The above is a result of our obsession with accountability and higher test scores. How often have you heard principals say “We have got to get these scores up!” This ongoing mantra, often fail to result in any sustainable higher level of performance by teachers. According to Karen Schreck (2011, p.1), even students are often unmoved by the improve test score carrot stick. She writes, “The engagement of students aptly applies to efforts to engage the hearts and minds of adults.” She goes on to say, “You can't will or force another person to be engaged, and your motives for engaging your students need to be purer than a *desire for higher scores* on standardized tests, or those young eyes will see through you immediately.” Adults are the same; they will not allow leaders to see them merely as a test score. They want to be a part of something bigger. Otherwise they resist.

The fact of the matter is that it is human nature to continue engaging in practices we know are not in our best “enjoyment” interest. Weight Watchers, Jennie Craig and other diet experts make millions betting on the fact that many of us, including me, will continue to order a burger and fries at a drive-through in spite of knowing it is not in our the best interest. The fact is we are reluctant to give up deeply rooted practices that are both *convenient* and/or *feel good* to us unless it is replaced with something that feels better. “The fear of pain and death is not, for many people, greater than their unwillingness to change” (Reeves, 2009, p.1). He goes on to say that as educators we must realize that the “Most productive and essential changes represent the *death* of past practice” p. 46. This means that there are stages that individuals must go through before reaching a level of acceptance. Outlined below are my views of those stages:

1. *What's in it for me (Jessie, 2005)*: In my anthology, *Testing in the Dark*. I discussed this stage. Teachers have to know that what you are asking them to do will improve learning in their classrooms. The number one pre-requisite is data alignment. Like a surgeon, the test information gleaned must provide diagnostic insight that makes instruction easier and more precise for them and their students. Teacher-designed common assessments combined with other tests that have content validity are the answer.
2. *A change of the verb from “send” to “bring” will make a major difference*. Teachers should “bring and discuss” data with the principal. More importantly solutions should be brought (DuFour, DuFour and Eaker). They have to have “Authorship” (Bolman & Deal, 2001) of the data. When they send data to you, it becomes yours not theirs. The leader should not *respond* to data but *be informed* by it.
3. *Students must own their data* before teachers can be successful. They too should bring data to teachers and principals and discuss plans for improvement.
4. *Deprivitize and celebrate* as a school on a weekly basis. Everyone should know where you are in relationship to your goal on a regular basis, at least quarterly. What worked for me were celebrations of people and their success weekly. In my opinion teachers and students should not leave school on Friday or come in on Monday without feeling good about their

accomplishments.

5. *Repetition and relentlessness about practices that work*: My friend Elaine McEwan, author (McEwan, 2010) surprised an audience in my school by reminding teachers how many times a vocabulary word has to be introduced before it become a part of a student's working repertoire. I find that it is the same with teachers. Great leaders are not only *repetitious*, but also *relentless* in their pursuit of the mission at hand. That mission for all of us is *high levels of student performance for all!*

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