

SCHOOLS EXAMINE TEST DATA TO GUIDE PLANS FOR WHAT TO TEACH

Suzanne (Sukey) Blanc and Jolley Bruce Christman

School District moves toward 'data-driven decision-making,' but it's a challenging process.

On September 3, when Philadelphia kids were out shopping for back-to-school clothes or enjoying one of their last days for sleeping in, teachers and principals were closely examining last spring's PSSA and Terra Nova results as they worked on developing instructional goals and plans for the upcoming year.

There is great enthusiasm in Philadelphia and in districts across the country now for "data-driven decision-making" - using the information from assessments of student learning to guide plans for what to teach and how to teach it. The core curriculum has been aligned with state standards in different content areas, and the mandated tests are aligned to measure how well students are mastering those standards.

The notion of using data for instructional improvement has an appealingly logical quality to it: educators get data, educators examine data to see where their students are strong and weak, and educators modify what and how they teach so that students learn more.

But the research on school change suggests that the translation of data into increased student achievement is a challenging process. It shows that teachers and principals need easy and timely access to information that is well-organized and engagingly presented. They need the skills to analyze information and to formulate questions about their students' learning. They need to believe that the information is not only accurate, but is also a good and fair representation of what their students know and are able to do.

Additionally, educators need the time to have conversations about what their students are and are not learning. School cultures need to be trusting and open environments where educators feel safe enough to be honest about what's working and what's not in their classrooms and courageous enough to make needed changes.

Although these conditions for using data to inform instruction often do not exist in schools, the No Child Left Behind Act has pressed educators to pay attention to test results. And the School District of Philadelphia has taken steps it hopes will help principals and teachers understand the value of data for instructional planning and use them well.

Thus far, most of these efforts have focused on the PSSA and TerraNova. District staff aligned objectives tested in the TerraNova and PSSA with the new core curriculum so that when these test results come back, educators can more easily assess what parts of the curriculum they need to emphasize in the future.

Over the summer, many Philadelphia principals prepared for working with their staffs during the opening days of school by participating in professional development sessions where they learned about analyzing student PSSA and TerraNova achievement data and developing action plans based on data. At these sessions, principals learned how to use new online tools to access information about student achievement.

One tool is SchoolNet, a web-based resource that stores individual student data on a variety of indicators, including attendance, report card marks, standardized test scores (including not only TerraNova and PSSA, but also a variety of reading assessments and the benchmark tests for the core curriculum). SchoolNet allows educators to look at how individual students perform over time. It also allows educators to look at how groups of students do on particular test questions. A second web-based tool is GrowNetwork, a resource provided by the state, offering information about the PSSA for school staff and parents.

In addition to learning about these electronic resources, principals worked with Terra Nova and PSSA data in several different ways. These included:

- Analyzing TerraNova and PSSA data through the lens of "Adequate Yearly Progress," the goal for annual improvement in

- student test scores for each school established by the Pennsylvania Department of Education;
- Using TerraNova and PSSA data to identify schools' strengths and weaknesses, especially in relation to the Pennsylvania State Standards in Literacy and Mathematics;
- Writing "action plans" that were based on data, addressed State Standards in Literacy and Mathematics, and specified strategies for improving instruction in literacy and mathematics.

During their summer professional development session, Philadelphia principals were enthusiastic about having greater access to data, but at the same time voiced concerns that are similar to those that have been identified by research. For example, some worried that the data would not be "user-friendly." Many were concerned that their staffs would not have enough time to use data well.

Philadelphia's 2004 PSSA results showed that 160 Philadelphia schools reached the test goals established for them by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. It is probable that increased use of data helped achieve last year's results.

School District officials believe that data use will continue to help students move to new levels of achievement. It will be important to watch whether this happens and to identify the practices and tools that help principals and teachers make use of the data that is quickly becoming available to them.

This article was originally published in the Fall 2004 issue of the Public School Notebook (www.thenotebook.org). Sukey Blanc and Jolley Bruce Christman are senior researchers at Research for Action (RFA). A research brief based on their ongoing study of data use in Philadelphia schools will be released in early 2006 as part of "Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform" - a research and public awareness project led by RFA.

Suzanne (Sukey) Blanc

Suzanne (Sukey) Blanc is a senior research associate at Research for Action. She is the co-author of the major report *From the Ground Up: The Logan Square Neighborhood Association's Approach to Building Community Capacity*. She is the author of numerous reports in the areas of mathematics and science education and is interested in the relationship between urban school reform and equity issues. Sukey is also a Research Director on the project, "Learning from Philadelphia's School Reforms: A Research and Public Awareness Project." She can be reached at sblanc@researchforaction.org.

Jolley Bruce Christman

Jolley Bruce Christman is a founder and Principal at Research for Action. She has published in the areas of urban school reform, students' perspectives on their educational experience, civic engagement and urban school reform, evaluation methodology, and feminist theory and research methods. Dr. Christman recently completed a five-year evaluation of Philadelphia's systemic reform effort, *Children Achieving*, and authored the reports: *Powerful Ideas, Modest Gains: Five Years of Systemic Reform in Philadelphia Middle Schools* and *Civic Engagement in Urban School Reform: Hard to Learn Lessons from Philadelphia* and, with Tom Corcoran, *The Limits and Contradictions of Systemic Reform: The Philadelphia Story*. Currently, Jolley is a research director of the "Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform" project. She can be reached at christman@researchforaction.org.

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