

## More Than Numbers

*Data are more than test scores: qualitative data can be a window into your school's culture.*

**By Ronald Williamson and Barbara R. Blackburn**

*Ronald Williamson is a professor of leadership and counseling at Eastern Michigan University.*

*Barbara R. Blackburn is an assistant professor in the Department of Middle, Secondary, and K-12 Education at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte.*

*They are the coauthors of The Principalship From A to Z and the soon-to-be-released Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way, both published by Eye on Education (www.eyoneducation.com). Material for this column is adapted from those books.*

**P**rin cipals are often overwhelmed by the sheer amount of data they have and are unsure how to use the information. When we talk about *data*, we mean all the information you have or might collect that can support your work with teachers to make your school more rigorous. We believe that data can guide decision making, measure success, and monitor accountability. We suggest a four-step approach to using data to support your efforts to improve the rigor of your school.

### Step 1: Determine What You Want to Know

Clarity about what you want to know can help you be clear about the data you might collect and analyze. In other words, the first step is identifying your purpose for collecting and using data.

We suggest that rather than focusing on finding out what will “increase rigor,” you consider organizing the work into smaller, more manageable topics. There are many places to begin. You might want to select a particular area of focus—such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, or school environment (see figure 1)—to begin the work.

### Step 2: Decide How to Collect Data

Once you’ve determined an area of focus, you will want to think about the data you already have. Many schools routinely gather data of all sorts. Think about what is readily available and how it might be used to guide your work. For example, you may have curriculum maps, pacing guides, or a breakdown of test scores in relation to standards. Or you might have data

from doing classroom walkthroughs or from examining lesson plans. You may also have a comparison of grades to standardized test scores or an analysis of students’ work.

Next, collect any other data you may need about the focus area. There are many ways to collect additional data directly from students, teachers, or parents. The data you obtain through the following two techniques can complement the other data you have available.

#### SHADOW STUDY

One technique for gathering information about the curricular and instructional experiences of students is to conduct a shadow study. Shadow studies involve selecting students at random and “shadowing” them throughout the day.

The protocol, originally developed by NASSP (Lounsbury & Johnston, 1985), suggests charting the experience of students at five- to seven-minute intervals. This allows the observer to show the ebb and flow of activities during the day. Spending the entire day with a student and documenting his or her experiences provides interesting insights into the student experience. Of course, students quickly figure out that something is going on. The best approach is to talk with the student whom you’re planning to shadow and explain what you’re doing.

At the end of the day, spend some time with the student you shadowed. Ask him or her about the day and about his or her typical experiences. Give him or her the opportunity to tell you about what school is like from a student’s perspective. Some suggested questions for the conversation follow:

- If a new kid moved in next door to you, what are three good things about this school that you would tell him or her?
- What are some things about the school that you would change if you could?
- How do you feel, in general, about your classes? Do they challenge you?
- How do you feel, in general, about your teachers? Do they provide enough support for you to be successful?
- What did you learn today? How do you think that learning is useful?

#### FOCUS GROUPS

A second technique is to conduct a series of focus group meetings with students, parents, or teachers. A focus group is a set of individuals who have been brought together to be part of a guided discussion about an issue. Focus groups can help you understand how members of the group experience the issue.

One middle school principal in North Carolina invited random groups

of students to meet with her during lunch. She asked students to tell her about the school, about their classes, and about their learning. Her role was to listen, look for patterns among the students' responses, and learn about how they experienced the school's program. The data from those meetings were added to the other data that were used by the school improvement team when it made decisions about strategies for improving the school's program.

#### Step 3: Analyze the Data

As you begin to analyze your data, be sure to involve stakeholders in the process. When analyzing data, it's important to keep an open mind, rather than predetermine the results. Otherwise, you may not see the full picture.

Analyze the information that is provided by each data source. Then look for patterns across multiple sources. This will allow you to prioritize action steps in areas that need the most work. You may find that you don't have enough data to select an area of focus. If that happens, consider how you might gather additional data.



*One technique for gathering information about the curricular and instructional experiences of students is to conduct a shadow study. Shadow studies involve selecting students at random and "shadowing" them throughout the day.*

#### Shadow Study Observation Form

Time (record data at 5–7 min- ute intervals)	Specific behavior	Comments and impressions

*Work with your school improvement team or other collaborative group to determine priorities on the basis of the area of focus and your data analysis.*

**Step 4: Set Priorities and Goals**

Work with your school improvement team or other collaborative group to determine priorities on the basis of the area of focus and your data analysis. Second, identify an area for potential growth, such as incorporating more activities in which each student is required to demonstrate learning. Select strategies that will allow you to address the needs of your school. This is a pivotal point. Too often, principals

gather and analyze data and set goals but then do not use that information to make decisions on an ongoing basis.

Next, design a specific way to track success for each strategy. (How will everyone know whether they are making progress toward the goal? What does success look like?) Finally, detail the specific action steps that are needed to accomplish the goal.

**Final Thoughts**

Gathering and using data to guide

decisions about improving the rigor of your school is important. Be cautious about simply gathering data: the value of data is in using the information to identify improvement strategies and monitor your progress toward meeting your improvement goals. **PL**

**REFERENCE**

■ Lounsbury, J., & Johnston, J. H. (1985). *How fares the ninth grade?* Reston, VA: NASSP.

Figure 1

Sample Characteristics for Expectations of Student Learning	
<b>Curriculum</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Curriculum reflects new learning for students</li> <li>■ Curriculum is aligned with national and international standards</li> <li>■ Curriculum focuses on application of knowledge</li> </ul>
<b>Instruction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Instruction offers opportunities for all students to engage in learning at high levels</li> <li>■ Instruction provides opportunities for all students to respond</li> <li>■ Instruction focuses on higher levels of questioning</li> <li>■ Review of basic information is streamlined; basic information is retaught in a new manner</li> </ul>
<b>Assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Assessment of learning is varied and includes performance-based aspects</li> <li>■ Assessments are structured so that students have multiple opportunities for success</li> <li>■ Grading reflects a belief that demonstrating learning is mandatory</li> </ul>
<b>School Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Everyone in the school environment encourages students to perform at high levels</li> <li>■ Staff members support one another's initiatives to improve teaching and learning</li> <li>■ Shared goals focus on student learning and are used to assess new ideas and practices</li> </ul>