

The Data Wise Improvement Process Distilled

A-306 FINAL PAPER

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12/18/2007

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Rationale

A few short months into my Harvard graduate education, I am a changed woman. As a teacher over the past four years, I stomped stubbornly, issuing mutterings and frustrations every time the seemingly dirty words “No Child Left Behind” entered the school day conversation. Now, I actually find myself embracing the concept behind this act. Perhaps it is a matter of reframing the meaning of this edict. Previously, it was viewed as somewhat technical work; an unfair exam that students must prepare for frequently, painfully endure once a year, and rarely think about again until the following year. Heifetz and Laurie’s reframe this viewpoint with their definition of “adaptive work” which is required “when our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge.” (Heifetz, p.124) As an aspiring principal, I see the value of holding myself and my staff accountable for student learning and firmly pushing pass the common misconception that if it has been taught, it must have been learned.

The Data Wise Improvement Process (DWIP) involves eight comprehensive steps which we have studied at length throughout the semester. As much as I would love to imagine that someday, when I step into the Principal role, I will eagerly open the text and materials from the course and refresh myself enough to begin this process, I know better. It takes only a day of shadowing my principal mentor, Drew Echelson of the Tucker school to realize that I will likely not have the luxury of time. This paper is meant to serve a practical, abbreviated guidebook to implement the DWIP. I have attempted to distill the main ideas I gathered over the course of the semester and synthesize them. It is my hope that this handbook might be helpful to other teachers and administrators, but it is definitely not a replacement to the rich variety of materials we have studied.

As I began the brainstorming process, a strange trend emerged. It seems that the letter R made a frequent appearance. Albeit corny, I have organized this guide around these “R” words, a mnemonic device that will perhaps spark my memory in the future. What follows is a division of the process I envision implementing into these subtitles: Readiness, Realization Steps 1-3, Revisiting, Recalibrating, Recommendations, and Resources.

Readiness

Before embarking on the data journey, it is absolutely necessary to take stock of the **cultural** status of your school. Like any other reform or challenge, using data to improve instruction requires a collaborative school culture or a “culture of inquiry” as the DWIP text calls for (p.12). The principal would do well to take Heifetz and Laurie’s advice of “getting on the balcony” (p.125) to survey the status of the school as a whole. The idyllic setting is one in which grade level teachers already have protected **common planning time** (CPT) to work together and perhaps have previously engaged in peer-coaching or observing each others classrooms. In fact, this element is so fundamental it may not be wise to begin this process without it. An exception to this caveat, although rare, is if the district union contract is reasonably permissive in asking teachers to work together during times other than the required work hours.

In addition to CPT, it is valuable for a Principal to consider Bolman and Deal’s four frames from their text, *Reframing Organizations* before proceeding. Of significant relevance are the political and human resource frames. These frames provide a lens through which to view the staff at your school. Careful negotiations of the networks, coalitions, and power players within the school help set the DWIP



READINESS TOOLBOX

Essential Questions

- How do teachers feel about using data?
- Do teachers currently collaborate and share best practices? How and when?
- Are there staff members who have particular strengths with data?

Protocols & Resources

- Norm-Setting
- Hopes & Fears Continuum
- Chalk Talk
- Compass Points
- Assessment Glossary

Common Pitfalls

- Negative staff culture is not a reason to abandon this process
- Think politically – begin by gathering friends AND enemies before introducing the process school-wide

Estimated Time

- 2-3 months depending on the status of your school

process up for success. However, the principal must go beyond the school's cheerleaders and also seek to enlist support from the doubters and skeptics. In a human resource capacity, a principal must also begin to think about who might be a part of the data team at the school. This process requires a diverse group of people. Steadfastly avoid "repeatedly anointing the chosen few," as Roland Barth cautions, which often "overloads the few while squelching the leadership potential of the unchosen many." (Barth, p.109)

Forming the data team can be a challenge. Though it may seem easy to hand pick and invite individual staff members, it is important to open the opportunity to the whole staff. Still, it is ideal to "include members who [are] trusted and well-respected within the school and who, together, [bring] a range of skills and interests to the work." (DWIA, Ch.1, p.5) After volunteers have signed up, the principal may need to recruit individual teachers who would make good additions to the team. There is no set number for how large a team needs to be, but it should be representative of the size of the school. Simon Ho, principal of the Guild School in East Boston, a school with twenty teachers, realized that more than 6 data team members was too difficult when setting meeting times and making decisions. (personal communication, October, 2007)

With the data team in place, the group is ready to begin building a **common language** surrounding assessment literacy. Initially, this step may seem unnecessary, but taking the time to understand terms will help exponentially in the long run. A glossary of terms is available in the appendix of this handbook. Depending on the time available to meet and the default culture within the data team, there are several other activities and protocols that can be very useful in setting the tone for team work. Rather than describing them in detail here, I have included them in the appendix for your convenience. They include setting norms, sharing hopes and fears, and exploring the uses and misuses of data. Incidentally, if the DWIP process is started early enough, it would also be helpful for the team to read the DWIP book and use text discussion protocols to debrief.

A final task that falls in the “readiness” category is an essential piece to the larger data puzzle and must be non-negotiable. This is the creation of a data inventory for the school. This task is extremely helpful in putting to paper exactly where, when, and how data is collected. By making this a data team task, you are beginning a vital conversation about the possible data analysis that could take place in the future. A template and sample inventory from the McKay school is also included in the appendix.

Realization Step 1: Data Overview

Cohesive data team now in place, it is time to move into realizing the data dream! The first step is satisfyingly concrete and less complicated than you think. The team will plan, create, and present an **overview** of data to the entire staff. Though this may seem harmless, it’s important for the team to take time to consider what data will be used, how it will be displayed, and how it will be presented. Boudett, a member of the DWIP team elaborates, “the content, organization, labeling, and formatting of effective displays reflect the presenter’s overall objectives for displaying the data and are tailored to the audience that will be examining the display.” (Boudett, p.63) Gathering the data team together to share in this decision making process may be necessary. I have included in Appendix C several sample data overviews and a presentation on data displays. Ultimately, regardless of the decision of the “what,” members of the team must do the challenging work of creating the technical overview. For this task I cannot stress enough the value of the **Excel and PowerPoint tutorials** available in Appendix D. As tempting as it may be to complete this work alone or with one assistant, the work **MUST** be shared. By the end of the DWIP process, if implemented well, it is inevitable that the data team



REALIZATION STEP ONE TOOLBOX

Essential Questions

Which subject area should we focus on for the overview? Why?

How might our data overview impact the audience? How can we plan for this?

Who will make the data overview?

Protocols & Resources

Excel & PP Tutorials
Data Display Frameworks
Sample Overviews
Last Word
Why-Why-Why
Peeling the Onion

Common Pitfalls

Avoid too much talk about the overview and not enough action

Ensure overview does not point fingers at any one person or group

Estimated Time

1 month to prepare/plan
40 minute faculty meeting

will be asking staff members to share their data more frequently, possibly using templates in excel. The more this knowledge base and skill set is frontloaded via data team members, the easier it will be to educate the masses if need be in the future. At the Guild school Principal Ho not only had the data team engage in the tutorials, but also enlisted the Math Leadership Team. Over a year later, these members often help new teachers complete data templates or interpret classroom data. These teachers remark that they feel empowered and capable. (Simon Ho, personal communication, December, 2007)

In an effort to be as succinct as possible, three main tips to keep in mind when creating an overview: 1. On every graph, include the total number of students involved, 2. Keep scales, formatting, and punctuation consistent throughout, 3. No graph should take a person more than 90 seconds to understand, and 4. Consider guiding slide comprehension by slowly increasing the level of complexity of a given graph.

Once the overview is complete, review it with the data team and use this time to **practice the presentation**. Make sure data team members know when and how to address the audience. Consider carefully your phrasing, tone, and facial expressions. The cliché “actions speak louder than words” should be a mantra. Rather than presenting with a tone of somber authority, consider carrying the presentation on a wave of “how fascinating!” Stress to the audience that this is an interesting learning opportunity for all.

Realization Step 2: Learner-Centered Challenge

As the team and school moves into the next step, determining how work is done and who is responsible for various tasks can become difficult. In the experience of Mr. Ho and other principals, this stage of the DWIP is the most challenging. After reviewing the data overview, the next step is to distill this information into a specific “**learner-centered problem**” that emerges. This involves a great deal of in-depth data work for all teachers. It is important to keep in mind the words of Barry Jentz and Jerome Murphy, who write about “**embracing the confusion**” in leadership situations. Jentz and Murphy point out that many leaders deny that they are expressly confused for fear of appearing weak. In the case of the

Data Wise Improvement Process, admitting the difficulty of this task is not only a good idea, but pivotal in its power to model the learning process for anxious staff member who may be eager to “throw in the towel” with you. Rather than denying, consider modeling the message, “leadership is not about pretending to have all the answers but about having the courage to search with others to discover solutions.” (Jentz, p.6) This attitude will also demonstrate to staff that you, the principal, are willing to dig into data and do the gritty work necessary.

This step asks teachers to consider the data overview and begin zooming in on a trouble area for students. In my experience, the discussion involved has the tendency to divide the staff, particularly between upper and lower grades. If this is the first time that teachers are attempting to work on one problem for the entire building, then the inclination will be to dismiss ideas by claiming that they are inapplicable to certain grade levels. Although it may be tempting to allow teachers to continue the DWIP in smaller groups, it is crucial to stay committed to the whole group improvement process. Once the building has executed the process successfully, common planning teams may be able to begin their own DWIP, but this should be held off until the distant future. In this sense, this step of the process has much to do with building a “professional learning community,” a current goal of the Boston Public Schools. If the staff is struggling significantly to work through this step, it may be helpful to align the group to the Professional Learning Community Continuum, included in Appendix C. This continuum may help staff members identify where they are and envision where they need to be.



REALIZATION STEP TWO TOOLBOX

Essential Questions

Where are our students stumbling?

What does good instruction look like?

Protocols & Resources

Tuning
Why-Why-Why
Success Analysis
What Comes Up?
Affinity
Questioning Technique

Common Pitfalls

Be sure to focus this task on the student/learner, not on the teacher

Embrace Confusion – this task is not easy and may take more than one try

Stay true to the DWIP – find a learner-centered challenge that the whole school can focus on.

Estimated Time

1 month with data team meetings and large group meeting

Beyond these watchwords, I would also like to share a few suggestions to support this step of the process. This is an excellent time to use “triangulation” of data sources. Incorporating more than one type of data ensure that the eventual learner-centered challenge will be as accurate and relevant as possible.

Additionally, the success of this step requires that the community begin to define what skills and knowledge students need. This conversation may lead to complaints about the curriculum, so it

is important to focus on challenges that are within the community’s immediate control. Using the protocols suggested in this section may provide a helpful tool to persevere through challenging conversations. Finally, once staff members have refined their observations down to a single learner-centered challenge, make sure that this challenge is directly tied to the curriculum and state standards and avoid overbroad statements.

Realization Step 3: Problem of Practice & Plan

This substantive step may seem daunting, but with positive thinking, identifying the problem of practice may not be as challenging as one might imagine. It should follow naturally from the predetermined learner centered challenge. The **Affinity** Protocol is an excellent tool to use when working on attaching the identified problem to a tangible solution. Before beginning, clarify with teachers that this part of the process must challenge the community to think about their own areas of improvement, rather than associating blame with elements of student life that are beyond the control of teachers. Also, this step may be the most personally painful for some teachers. It is difficult to admit that you are doing something wrong, especially publicly. During this step, it may be a good idea to **revisit norms** or engage in a whole-group Hopes and Fears protocol. Even more challenging, developing an action plan usually requires observing teachers practice. If this is not a typical exercise, it can be a highly controversial suggestion, not to mention a



REALIZATION STEP THREE TOOLBOX

Essential Questions

How can we tie the LCP to a problem of practice?

What action can we take and how?

How will we know our plan is working?

Protocols & Resources

Affinity
Consultancy
Why-Why-Why
Mason Action Plan
Praise, Question, Polish
Hopes and Fears
Four Corners
Compass Points

Common Pitfalls

The Problem of Practice must be based on a solid theory

Teachers must be ready to tackle this problem – consensus is a must

Estimated Time

1 month with large group meeting

complicated logistical problem. There are three gestures that may help teachers become more comfortable with being critiqued by their peers. One involves the principal volunteering to model lessons. This is a powerful symbol of the fact that the principal is also willing to admit weaknesses and values the input and advice of his or her teachers. The second act is to have teachers evaluate the instruction of an outsider via video vignettes. Engaging in this activity a few times will help model how peer observation doesn't have to be personally offensive. A third gesture is one that has been by the Josiah Quincy School. In this effort, one teacher volunteers to model a lesson for the entire staff at each monthly staff meeting. Although this practice is not as useful in the sense that it does not involve children, it can be a strong political move and symbolically, it links all teachers together.

Regardless of how the climate is set for doing this challenging work, it is still important to set norms for how feedback and commentary is given after a teacher observation. Aside from using a protocol, which is a good idea, it might also be helpful to have a member of the Instructional Leadership Team always be present at debriefing meetings after modeled lessons. Since peer coaching and model teaching will most likely be accomplished in smaller groups such as grade level or common planning teams, a person serving as a common thread may be able to provide insightful connections between different groups based on his or her observations. This person would also be helpful in maintaining norms and professional decorum.

Developing a workable action plan is an illusive task, especially if it is the first time. The overarching leadership challenge for the principal to acknowledge refers back to the “adaptive leadership” discussed in the beginning of this guide. The Principal must constantly strive to “regulate the distress” of teachers. (Heifetz, p.127) A certain sense of urgency is absolutely necessary, but too much of it will inevitably scare teachers away yet too little will lead to teachers ignoring the action plan as another half-hearted reform effort. A few guidelines may help create this need “pressure-cooker” balance. For example, it must be implicit in the action plan that all changes to improving instruction are **measurable** in some way. The Boston Public Schools displays a version of this standard through their Seven Essentials posters which detail exactly what each of the “essentials” should look like in a classroom. The same is true for an action plan. Each item must not only be measurable, but measurable in different ways. The principal and staff members must acknowledge the fact that all data is not quantitative but can consist of teacher observation, conferencing, homework, etc. Another valuable action planning tool may be the creation of **data templates**. This

may help the data team continue to synthesize and compare school-wide data. A final suggestion is to **keep a purpose and timeline** in mind when creating the action plan. At the Guild school, Principal Ho admitted that their DWIP action plan was so multifaceted that teachers were hard-pressed to find the time to implement it. The

key is that the action plan is working to improve daily instruction in general, and thus action plan items should be viewed as integrations rather than additions to current teaching practices.

It's quite possible that the action plan will not work out according to, well, plan. Thus, it is important to recognize the finished product as a **living document**. It may be modified or changed as necessary. It may also be empowering for all teachers to sign the action plan, acknowledging that it is a representation of the building's goals.

Revisiting & Recalibrating

The action plan is truly only the beginning of the DWIP process. It is now the responsibility of the data team and principal to see it to fruition. Revisiting the plan frequently, checking whether instruction is changing, and looking for visible signs of instructional growth and improvement is a key part of this process. The summer break presents a particular challenge to the data team and school in general. It may be tempting to file the action plan away, but that would be a devastating move after the collaborative efforts made. The continuation of the plan communicates to teacher that the DWIP is no longer the "new" way of doing things, but rather the way it will always be. Getting into the habit of using data in the classroom as a meaningful way to improve instruction begins with the DWIP process.

What if the action plan isn't producing results? This is a very real possibility. It simply indicates that the theory which served as the basis for the plan was not completely accurate, as long as sufficient time has passed to make this judgment



REVISITING & RECALIBRATING TOOLBOX

Essential Questions

Is our plan working? If so, why? If not, how should we change it?

Was our original theory accurate? Are we seeing results? How do we know?

Should we modify or start over?

Where do we go from here?

Protocols & Resources

School Visit
Success Analysis
Peeling the Onion
Questioning Techniques

Common Pitfalls

Don't file the action plan away for safe keeping. It must be referred to frequently. Use the data team to continue evaluating the efficacy of the plan.

Estimated Time

Bimonthly meetings with data team

confidently. If this was the case, it may be determined that a reframing of the plan may be in order. As a principal, this situation must be handled delicately, focusing on the elements of the plan that did work, and acknowledging that the learner-centered challenge is still relevant and worthy. Together with the data team, the principal must determine whether it is necessary to go back to Realization Step 1 or if smaller tweaks and changes may be enough to move forward productively.

In any case, the staff can still feel a **sense of pride and accomplishment** for engaging in a school-wide collaborative process aimed at improving instruction.

Resolute Dedication

Perhaps the most significant challenge to the implementation of the DWIP is the **shift in thinking** it requires for all teachers and faculty members. It asks that teachers not only believe that their instruction needs improvement, but that improvements can be made based on the input, feedback, and advice of their colleagues. More fundamentally, it means sharing a common value and belief that all children are capable of learning. As challenging as it may be to initiate this change, it must be done because it empowers us to move from being victimized by state testing requirements and NCLB to being at least accepting of their purpose – holding schools accountable for student achievement.

Resources

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