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What Makes a High-Quality Districtwide Data System?

Jeffrey C. Wayman, Ph.D. • October 2009

Topic: Using Student Achievement Data to Support Instructional Decision Making
Practice: Districtwide Data System

Highlights

- It's important for districts to have a high-quality data system for two reasons: there is a lot of student data and schools need data quickly.
- High-quality data systems have to be very easy to use and very easy to understand; they need to be intuitive. The data systems should be very flexible in the ways that educators are able to access their student data.
- To develop a high-quality data system, districts and schools really need to evaluate their needs first. They needs to evaluate where their educators are in terms of using data and where they are as a district or a school and how they conduct education.

About the Interviewee

Jeffrey C. Wayman is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Texas at Austin. His research interests focus on the effective use of data for school improvement. Dr. Wayman's research on data-based decision making includes efficient structures for creating

data-informed school districts, software that delivers student data to educators, effective leadership for data use, and systemic supports that enable widespread teacher use of student data. His current research projects include a three-year study funded by The Spencer Foundation titled "The Data-Informed District: Implementation and Effects of a District-Wide Data Initiative" and a two-year evaluation of the effects of the Acuity data system on student achievement in a large urban district. Prior to joining the University of Texas faculty, Dr. Wayman worked at Johns Hopkins University with the Center for Social Organization of Schools, at Colorado State University in the area of prevention research, and as a junior high math teacher in Kansas City and Salt Lake City.

Full Transcript

I am Jeff Wayman. I am on the faculty in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Texas at Austin, and I served on the expert panel that wrote the Practice Guide Using Student Achievement Data to Support Instructional Decision Making.

It's important for districts to have a high-quality data system for two reasons. One is there is a lot of student data, and in the 21st century we need data quickly and we need it now. It's also important for educators to have a high-quality data system because they need to look at all of their data on their students in one place. This is how educators think of a child as a sum of all of their experiences, and we need to have the data mirror that. In fact, the most common complaint we hear about technology from teachers is, "My data systems don't talk to each other. I have to go to this place to get this form of data and then run over to this place and get this form of data." High-quality data systems integrate these data so they are all in one place.

High-quality data systems have a number of facets that make them high-quality. First, they integrate data. High-quality data systems should be a one-stop shop for any form of student data. High-quality data systems have to be very easy to use and very easy to understand; they need to be intuitive. High-quality data systems should be very flexible in the ways that educators are able to access their student data. For instance, if I am a fifth-grade teacher and I see that a number of students failed this particular math test, I should be able to click into the cell that told me that they failed that math test, get a list of these students. I should be able to click from there on one of those students and go look at that student's history. I should be able to look at the parental information for that student, if something changed in their home life, what their prior math scores were, what their other scores have been in prior grades, and so on. I should be able to go just about anywhere I want from any representation of data within that data system.

To develop a high-quality data system, a district or school really needs to evaluate their needs first. They need to evaluate where their educators are in terms of using data and where they are as a district or a school and how they conduct education. All too often we see a district or a school that bought a data system and then say, "Okay, what will this data system let us do?" Instead, the district or school needs to identify the needs that they have and then say, "Okay, what data systems let us do the things that we need to do to

educate our students?"

A high-quality data system should be what we would call expandable. You don't want to buy or build a data system that won't enable you to do other things as your staff builds capacity and as the data landscape changes. In developing a high-quality data system, schools and districts should make sure that they talk to other users, other schools and districts that also have experience with data systems in general. And if you are thinking about buying one, with the specific commercial product that you are getting ready to buy, there is a lot to be learned from other people who have gone through this process. We recommend that in developing a data system, that you draw from all the roles in the district that might be expected to use this data system.

We have actually advocated a process that we call calibration. We did an evaluation of a district in Wyoming. We recommended they undergo a process called calibration, which answers questions such as what do we mean by education, how are we going to assess education, how are we going to use data, things like that. Within this process you can bring all of these different roles in to answering these questions, and the answers to these questions should help you define what you need for a data system.

As a district looks to implement a data system, they should remember to go slow and go specific. By that I mean that rolling out too many things at once is going to make it hard for people to use. It's going to overwhelm the users, and it often results in large quantities of the system going virtually unused. By going specific, I mean that a district should roll out pieces of the system that are relevant to the work that the educators are doing at a specific time.

We believe that most districts are best served by buying a system than building one. Regardless of whether you choose to build or buy a data system, it's important to issue a clear statement of what you want in that system. If you are buying one, this is done through a thing called an RFP, a request for proposals, where you set out the requirements that you want in the system and the ways that you are going to use it and you ask the commercial vendors to respond for this. You can go through the same process if you are going to build your own system because the real advantage of doing an RFP is to make people in your district have these conversations and reach these understandings about exactly what we want this data system to do for us. So the more articulate a district can be in describing what they want, the happier they will be with their product.