



A Public Consulting Group, Inc. Company



Data – The Key to Customized Instruction

The BLEgroup is an organization of 200 leading Ed tech decision makers who collaborate to present thought leadership on critical Issues to improve Education with the integration of technology.

Authors:

Eliot Levinson, Ph.D., the BLEgroup, a PCG Company
Bruce Thoren, Superintendent, Shoshoni Schools, Wyoming

Introduction

In the 1950s public education was a monopoly. Students had to attend their neighborhood schools. Education has evolved into a market with options.

Many states and districts now allow students to attend a variety of publicly funded and regulated options:

- Local public schools
- Public charter schools
- Online virtual schools, or
- Open enrollment schools in their own or adjoining communities.

The market forces are growing:

- High-quality schools and districts that were losing enrollment due to aging demographics are marketing the quality of their programs such as language immersion, STEM or technology, higher scores, and improved educational outcomes. A district with 25% empty seats can fill those seats with out-of-district students who are attracted by the nature and quality of the programs. The increased dollars follow student enrollment, so filling seats is critical to a district's financial success. The flip side is that many schools lack resources because their enrollment has dropped
- Charter schools have demonstrated mixed results. Some of the nationally known charter school groups like KIPP, Khan Academy, and Aspire perform well due to their high standards, consistent curriculum, and ongoing professional development, which create positive outcomes. On the other hand, some smaller community-based charter schools with limited enrollment and/or poor management fail to attract students. If they aren't recertified by their chartering authority, they fall out of the market..
- Online virtual schools, despite some poor outcomes, appeal to large numbers of alternative students and homeschoolers and provide online courses for public schools, such as advanced foreign languages or calculus. Smaller public high schools typically don't have enough demand for these kinds of courses to warrant providing their own.

Effective Data Use-The Secret Sauce of Successful Schools In a Market Environment

Data is the cornerstone for the development of educational improvement at the student, teacher, school, and district level. To illustrate the point, I recently visited 4 districts in an open enrollment state. Each of the districts was at a different stage of data usage:

District 1 - Laying Out the Basic Data District 1 is a rural elementary district with a second-year superintendent. Prior to the superintendent's arrival, performance had fallen significantly, teachers had not been evaluated, and there were no strong principals. The superintendent has brought in two new principals and a data analyst who tracks weekly performance in each classroom. In addition, the district has begun a PLC (Professional Learning Community) program, every 3-weeks benchmark tests, and an adaptive assessment every three months. The combined process of the PLCs and publication of the test data enables the superintendent to identify teacher performance and provide teachers needed support by the analyst and the PLC. District 1 is taking the first step of laying out a baseline of data..

School 2 - An Independent Data Model School 2 is a K-12 school with an experienced psychologist who has developed an easy-to-use system for the last decade that enables teachers to identify student entry points in each subject and to repeat the easy-to-use instrument every three weeks. Teachers discuss the results in order to determine remediation and next steps for advancement. The psychologist is very active in determining the cognitive learning style and the type of intervention that is appropriate. This school finds the state department's data demands excessive with "too much information and no actionable data." The school has remained on the highest performing level of all schools in the state.

District 3 - New Superintendent With No Use of Data District 3 is in its second year of low performance determined by the state in two of its three schools. It has a very veteran staff, and the school board, well connected to the staff, micromanages. The new superintendent does not yet feel able to work effectively with the board. The superintendent believes he will need to wait for retirements and hiring of his own staff before taking data-based action for improvement.

District 4 - Advanced Use of Data District 4 has a fourth-year superintendent and has just constructed a new school with capacity for an additional 100 students. Before the new addition, the district was bringing in 28% open enrollment students. There are two teacher coach analysts who collect data on all classroom, benchmark, and administer adaptive tests that are put into a complex spreadsheet. The district has a very intense PLC program and has improved its performance from the low middle to among the highest in the state. Teachers own the data as their own. They do not see it as a requirement from on high. The superintendent is trying to work with the state to develop a dashboard for all teachers so that they can dig deeply into the skills of their students.

Takeaways For Growing the Use of Data

1. Using data effectively is a multi-year process starting with laying out the basic data and gradually growing it with PLCs so teachers own it.
2. The tools for data analytics are still limited. There is a need to move past the spreadsheet and have an effective, easy-to-use dashboard and data analytic tools that can dig into skill development.
3. Effective use of data demands a team-the superintendent, coach analyst, principals, and the PLCs) that collectively owns the data.
4. Testing data must be gathered regularly for it to be useful to teachers. Last year's state test data is not helpful to teachers on an ongoing basis.
5. Adaptive assessments are good but tend to be underutilized, providing only quarterly data and not being used to their fullest capacity to analyze skills.
6. Data must be seen as informative and helpful by a teacher and not as a threat. That is why PLCs and collaboration of the staff are critical.
7. There is a need for a data analyst coach to work with teachers and principals.
8. The curriculum content has to be evaluated as well as teaching and learning. Sometimes the content is inadequate and should be changed.

Data is key for school districts to effectively compete in the education market. Until the school and district effectively use data, there will be no gains in the greatest benefits in the use of digital curriculum and assessment.

The BLEgroup, an organization of leading ed tech decision makers, works with both schools and the industry. The BLEgroup, part of the education practice of Public Consulting Group (PCG), produces a quarterly piece for *EdNET Insight News Alert* on critical ed tech issues. Eliot Levinson, President, may be reached at eliot@blegroup.com.