WHERE TO NEXT?

This district had plenty of data related to student outcomes, but school leaders wanted to use it more effectively to shape professional development as well as instruction and learning. Here's what they did to make that happen.

In the decades that data has been in use in K–12, it has gone through a reverse-telescoping process. Initially pressed into service for big-picture federal education planning during the late 1960s, when the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act was approved, the application of data has gradually condensed and become more granular over the years as an area of interest to states, then local education agencies, then schools and now individual teachers.

But at each level, the data takes a different form and serves a different purpose. School leaders, for example, want their teachers to use data to inform instruction and personalize learning. Yet that can pose seemingly insurmountable challenges: figuring out why there's such a wide gap between the data pulled in from external assessments and what's generated from classroom tasks; trying to understand the disparities that exist between data generated in district common assessments and what's revealed by classroom grades;

and even an unwillingness of teachers to trust data they didn't generate themselves.

This SmartFocus looks at how schools can turn data and other evidence into an effective, trusted instructional tool using Visible Learning^plus, the professional-development program based on John Hattie's Visible Learning research and Larry Ainsworth's Common Formative Assessments 2.0. We examine how applying these practices enabled an Illinois school district to better define its goals for professional development, instruction and the learning experiences for staff and students.

STRONG LINKS: VISIBLE LEARNING AND CFA 2.0

The basic idea of Visible Learning, put forth by Hattie in his book by the same name, is to make student learning visible to teachers so they know what effect they're having on learners. This concept also refers to making teaching

visible to the student, so students can learn to become their own teachers—a vital aspect of preparing them for lifelong learning and success.

Common Formative Assessments 2.0 is a 10-step process developed by Ainsworth for developing an effective assessment system.

Visible Learning[plus] and CFA 2.0 provide a framework, based on heavy research, that helps educators develop a common understanding and shared language around what they are doing in their classrooms.

With an effect size of 0.90, the concept of "formative evaluation" ranks fourth among all the positive influences on student learning documented by Hattie. Similarly, one of the steps in CFA 2.0 is to identify the learning intention and student success criteria.

"Every educator is an evaluator," says Dave Nagel, a certified trainer who works for professional-development provider Corwin, to deliver on-site Visible Learning[plus] professional development at schools in the United States and Canada. "It is having the mind frame that I am constantly monitoring the impact my actions are having on the learning of the students I am serving." As teachers understand their influence, they can make adjustments in practice.

Acquiring those skills takes deep implementation and monitored professional development. So does being able to recognize when the teacher and the student understand what they're doing. That's where the data comes in—but it may not be the kind of data schools are accustomed to generating.

To make the concept of Visible Learning understandable, Hattie developed three simple questions that learners of any age—student or teacher—should be able to answer: Where am I going? (What am I trying to achieve?); how am I going? (What strategies are helping me improve my performance?); and where to next? (What are my next learning steps?)

A CASE IN POINT: VALLEY VIEW SCHOOLS

Like all school districts, Valley View School District 365U in Illinois is awash with data, as Karen Flories, executive director for educational services in grades 6–12, will explain. With its 17,300 students, the district had data from the state's new PARCC tests; data from districtwide pre- and post-common assessments in all content areas; Measures of Academic Progress data in elementary and middle schools; program data from Eureka Math and Achieve 3000; and data from professional-development surveys given to all teachers as well as teacher-practice data.

While the data may have been useful for regulatory reporting and various district necessities, at Valley View it didn't really serve fundamental needs—such as how teachers could use the data as feedback to themselves in making instructional decisions or how students could use it to figure out what they needed to do next in their own learning. A major concern, notes Flories, was the discrepancy in how students performed on

external assessments versus how they performed on learning tasks in the teacher's classroom.

"If students receive consecutive 100% on tasks or assessments, that really is educational malpractice," she says. "It prevents teachers from guiding students to their next learning steps. The tasks teachers engineer to elicit evidence of student learning must be designed to align with the standard on which they are focused. Only then can we determine where students are, [so we can gauge] 'where to next?' "

Being able to answer "where to next?" was becoming an increasingly important question as Valley View began to immerse itself deeper into the concepts of Visible Learning.

UNPACKING EVIDENCE

Flories introduced Hattie's precepts to others through a "mini book study group" as a tool for assessing all the different practices we have under the education umbrella to understand which ones were showing the greatest positive effect on students. As she explains, "We had all of this data, but we were looking at it in isolation and not in conjunction with research." Instead of pursuing a "flavor-of-the-month professional development," Flories wanted the school system to look at practices that "could be identified, given focus, developed, evaluated and monitored throughout the school year."

That's when the district called on Corwin to help. Corwin's professional-development team, including Nagel, came in and delivered a two-day Visible Learning foundational workshop to administrators and teacher-leaders from each Valley View building. The conversations focused on two Visible Learning concepts: effect size measurements to monitor students' learning progress—regardless of current achievement level—and mind frames, or ways of thinking that can have a powerful effect on student learning.

As the enthusiasm at the district level grew for Visible Learning[plus] and district leaders began talking up development of Visible Learning plans for each building, principals and other school leaders began to realize the amount of evidence they could gather and to feel a bit overwhelmed with "where do we begin?" They were unsure. "That was a learning opportunity for us. We realized that we had to offer more focus and clarity from our viewpoint at the district level," Flories says.

The district honed the list of practices it considered "crucial" for its educators and for implementing in its classrooms down to three, which overlapped:

- Teacher clarity. Indicated by whether or not students in all classrooms could answer the three questions of a Visible Learner.

- Formative assessment. Coming up with questions or activities that would provide guidance for the teacher on what he or she should do next.

- Feedback. Guidance for the learner that could come from the teacher or from other students, intended to help him or her get out of the "pit," a metaphor for that part of the learning process when understanding is frustratingly elusive.

As a district, recalls Flories, "we said [to building leaders], if you want to get to feedback, you have to make sure you can first meet the indicators under teacher clarity, and then move into the indicators for formative assessment." To help with those efforts, Flories' team customized a Corwin-developed template tied to a rubric detailing where educators needed to go in terms of professional development and how they'd know when they'd arrived.

The team also created a protocol for "impact review meetings," held twice a year at each school to allow district leaders and curriculum directors to hear from principals and teachers about where they are on their Visible Learning journey. Part of the protocol calls for the schools to share the "evidence" they have collected, which, according to Flories, falls into four buckets:

- Student agency. "We wanted them going into those classrooms and asking the kids the three prime questions: 'What are you learning today?'; 'how do you know you'll be successful in what you're learning?'; and 'where to next?' "

- Teacher voice. Buildings used professional-development surveys done after each learning session held at schools to assess the effect of PD.

- Outcome data on the students. This area turned out to be "another real eye-opening formative check for us," says Flories. "We realized we needed to help our buildings become a little more systematic in how they were focusing on the evidence collection process for their objectives."

- Teacher practice. Walk-throughs and evaluation data revealed how teachers fared in discussing learning targets and success criteria with their students throughout the lesson.

As Nagel points out, assessing student growth is a complex undertaking that goes beyond determining whether a student has hit a particular grade mark. "We must look at the growth they're making—that is paramount. If students aren't reaching the standard yet, but they're making huge progress, teachers can stay the course, knowing students will eventually get

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD

Valley View's continuing success with Visible Learning^plus and Common Formative Assessment 2.0 professional development is replicable as long as you remember this:

- **Leaders prove their commitment by their presence.** There has never been a consulting day with Corwin when a district leader wasn't present, says Corwin trainer Dave Nagel. Their participation in the professional development conveys its importance and helps them learn the content. That includes administrators undertaking the same activities as the teachers, such as "unwrapping standards, writing assessment items, and struggles with it."

- **Being present during PD requires presence of mind, too.** That means putting away the personal devices or other distractions. Nagel recalls one afternoon when the executive director for educational services 6-12, Karen Flories, stopped the group midactivity and said, "Guys, you're on your iPads. You're doodling. If you're brain-dead, we'll stop. I'm not mad. But we're not going to do it that way. So you tell me." The group literally took a deep breath and said, 'No. Thank you for acknowledging we are tired, but let's continue.'" That's all it took for them to finish the day strong, he adds.

- **Data conversations require trust.** Even before Valley View began mapping its plans for data use, those coming to the table needed to "feel safe sharing their data and evidence," says Nagel. "We don't want people coming in and saying, 'My results aren't as good yet.'" To get over that mental hurdle, he led discussions to highlight the importance of "monitoring relational trust." It's an area where school leaders will "want to tread lightly on" in early days, he adds, until participants have established that data won't be used to "point fingers or get anybody into trouble." There must be a culture of honesty and safety. It's meant to help everybody learn and grow.

there." But the other evidence is just as important, he adds: "Do students know what they're learning? Why they're completing specific tasks? You've got to ask them. Do teachers feel supported in their professional learning journey… so they don't feel that professional development is being done to them? Teachers need time and support to practice and try new strategies. We have to ask them just like we ask students, 'How is your learning going?'"

As Nagel explains, those are the kinds of data that help teachers, schools and the district guide their next actions. "It has to be a combination of student achievement and student growth results, certainly, but also the voice evidence related to learning. If those things are happening, usually, the achievement results take care of themselves."

THE ULTIMATE GOAL: HELPING TO DEVELOP VISIBLE LEARNERS

The gains seen at Valley View support Nagel's premise: With those other elements in place, the achievement results are taking care of themselves. Says Flories, the district is seeing "strong correlations between student voice and student outcome data. In grade levels and content areas where student voice indicates high levels of teacher clarity, student outcomes are higher." As one example, PARCC scores for middle and high school English/language arts and math surpassed state averages in the 2014-2015 school year and "look very promising" for the latest school year.

But the work continues. Flories notes, "We are working harder than ever to ensure a clear understanding of the focus and direction of Valley View. Similar to Hattie's mind frame of everyone having a shared language of learning, district leaders want to ensure the vision and mission are understood by all and drive actions to impact student learning. The farther away you get from the district office, the farther away the vision and mission are."

In response, with the help of Corwin professional development, Flories' team has been spending a lot of time working with building leaders "on ensuring that they not only have a solid understanding of where we're going as a district but that they can also walk the walk and help us be a catalyst for what this message is and what it entails, so their teachers can see why we're doing this."

The use of Visible Learning^plus and CFA 2.0 is intended for kids to "become their own teachers," Flories emphasizes. "And that doesn't mean to remove the

- **Achieving depth of understanding also requires a depth of commitment to PD.** People don't learn the same way. Therefore, professional-development plans cannot be completely scripted. Know that success will unfold in different patterns. "You would never take a seventh-grader into a room and say, 'Four times a year we're going to give you a math lesson and expect you to get it,' " says Nagel. "But we do it to adults all the time. You have to scratch deeper."

- **The right partnership can help you gain clarity on direction and accelerate your journey.** "We've had four cohorts of teachers go through some type of Visible Learning foundational development," says Valley View's Flories. Nagel, the same instructor delivering that PD, is also the district's CFA 2.0 developer. "Which has been absolutely fantastic," she adds, "because he knows us so well and is deeply invested in our success. He knows where we've been, so he can speak very authentically to Valley View, which means a lot to our teachers. He's not some stranger coming in off the street. This will be our third year of partnering with the Corwin team, and there are only positive, good things to say. The support we have received is unwavering."

teacher from the classroom; but it means that you give them that advocacy, that grit, that curiosity, that determination that they need. There are going to be so many times when kids are knocked down with whatever harsh realities life entails. If we can create visible learners who are resilient and who say, 'OK, I might not get it today, but I can figure out how I'm going to get there tomorrow,' that's what our dream is." ■

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