

## Book Review: *Leading with Data*

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Goldring, E. & Berends, M. (2009). *Leading with data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

During the past several decades public schools in America have embarked on a series of reform efforts targeted at improving student achievement. As public schools continue to implement the school improvement efforts needed to comply with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates for increased accountability, they recognize the need to ensure that school improvement efforts are both rigorous and relevant to the educational standards set within their state (Daggett, 2000). School improvement efforts must not only focus on meaningful goals, but they must also use the increasingly limited school resources to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the learning environment within them. Schools must provide students with rigorous content, an effective instructional program and curriculum that support state educational standards and expectations, and the ability to demonstrate mastery of these standards through state assessments. The role of school improvement has become more critical as schools move from the traditional environment based on intuition to one that is accountable to its constituents (MCREL, 2003).

The increased visibility of school performance that resulted from NCLB mandates has made the public school administrator the primary focus for public scrutiny. Successful school administrators are expected to lead the charge towards reform within their schools. As a result, the principal's role has become more complex, requiring more involvement in setting goals, monitoring student progress, promoting professional learning communities, providing opportunities for collaboration and professional development, creating partnerships with parents and community members, and influencing classroom instruction and alignment of curriculum with standards (Marzano, 2003). Many public school principals have turned to data-based decision making in an effort to understand where they are and where they need to go. They are now using the wealth of data that has resulted from increased accountability to identify areas for improvement, develop appropriate interventions, better allocate scarce resources, improve the instructional capacity within their school, and evaluate the effectiveness of their decisions (Goldring and Berends, 2009).

*Leading With Data* provides the school administrator with a systematic approach for the use of data-based decision making to guide their school improvement efforts. The authors, Ellen Goldring and Mark Berends, provide readers a model for engaging in data-based decision making within their schools in order to align school improvement efforts with the school's mission and goals, the requirements set forth through district and state standards and curriculum, the instructional capacity within the school and district, available resources, and the overall school learning community.

Both Ellen Goldring and Mark Berends have a wealth of experience with school reform efforts. As a professor of educational policy and leadership at the Peabody College at Vanderbilt University, Dr. Goldring has focused her research efforts on school leadership, particularly the changing the role of the school principal and relationships with schools, families, and communities. Mark Berends is the director of the National Center on School Choice and also the director of the Center of Research on Educational Opportunity at the University of Notre Dame where he serves as a professor of sociology. Dr. Berends' research centers on the relationship between student achievement and the school organization and instruction. The combination of their two areas of expertise has resulted in a practical handbook that provides both applications and theoretical research.

Through *Leading With Data*, the authors guide the reader through the data-based decision making process by breaking chapters in four key sections; improving schools with data, collecting data for school improvement and student learning, analyzing data for school improvement and student learning, and using data for decision making. Each chapter includes an introduction to the topic as well as important research that provides a supporting theoretical framework. Chapters also include vignettes, discussion questions, best practices and recommendations, sample charts, and examples that provide the reader with a realistic picture of how data-based decision making can be used in schools.

The book opens with a discussion of the origins of standards-based reform and the evolution of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002). It provides detailed information about the reform efforts mandated through NCLB, including content and performance standards, curriculum and instructional alignment, and assessment and accountability. The authors create a compelling argument for the use of data-based decision making as a lens through which to view school reform efforts and make informed decisions that support continuous school improvement and organizational learning.

Section one continues with a description of the use of data for school improvement and ways that effective schools use data as indicators of overall school improvement and student learning. The authors' model depicts the key indicators for school improvement. Central to the model is the school's shared mission and goals. It is surrounded by six indicators including content standards, curricular and instructional alignment to standards, professional development, professional community, parent and community relationships, and alignment of resources. Each indicator is supported by a theoretical discussion and examples of their effective use in schools.

The second section in the book focuses on data collection activities that support both student achievement and also school improvement efforts. The first chapter in this section describes the steps involved in data-based decision making. At the center of the discussion are the school's vision and mission and their relationship to the school's improvement efforts. The chapter provides suggestions for evaluating the school mission and its

relationship with the school improvement process, school programs and processes, and resource allocation. The authors suggest that once the vision and mission are in place, school administrators should measure the mission by collecting data, involving the community, and engaging in the problem solving process in order to make evidenced-based decisions and set priorities (p.52).

Once the data collection process has been defined, the school should focus on examining student achievement outcomes. School administrators are provided with a short tutorial for both criterion and norm referenced tests, including a technical description of the types of scores that are reported and examples of each. The authors include several useful charts that depict how this information can be analyzed and more easily understood. Summative data from standardized achievement tests are based on assessments that are given only once a year, and the authors include a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of using this type of data. Best practices for disaggregating summative data are also included, providing examples of relevant information that can be used to drive the school improvement process. Recommendations and examples for investigating trend data and performance of cohort groups are also included.

Section two also provides detailed information about formative assessment, another important measure of student achievement that can be used to support school improvement. Formative assessment results can not only be used to monitor student progress, but also to expand the instructional capacity within the school. School administrators can use the information provided in this section to gain insight into the school climate, student learning, and instructional practices as well as to identify professional development needs. School administrators are also provided with commonly overlooked barriers to the use of data for formative assessment.

A complete analysis of the school requires looking at the entire system (Bernhardt, 2004). Goldring and Berends recommend using a variety of sources of data, all which tie back to the overall shared mission and goals for the school. In chapter six the discussion centers around the six indicators of school improvement presented in the earlier model and potential sources for information that can be used to evaluate school needs. Each indicator is supported by best practices, suggested data collection techniques, and examples of their use in a school setting. School administrators will benefit from the many charts and graphs provided in this chapter.

The third section of *Leading With Data* targets the analysis of data to support the school improvement process. The authors focus on the importance of understanding the strengths and needs of the school family and community and the potential impact that these groups can have on school improvement activities. Goldring and Berends emphasize the importance of involving the family and community in the data-based decision making process and suggest several methods for collection and analysis of data from these constituent groups. The section also provides recommendations for building the sense of community within the school, specifically developing an understanding of group composition, perceptions, benefits, and needs.

Also included in section three is a discussion of the analysis of data for school improvement. The content focuses on identifying which data can be used to identify the causes of school performance problems. The authors use examples to show how school data can be used to uncover areas of weakness.

The final section of the book targets the importance of making the correct decisions for the school. The authors recommend questions to consider when evaluating and prioritizing decisions that address strategies for improvement. The section also provides support for the use of scientific-based research when making decisions about school improvement strategies. School administrators can use this section as a source for detailed information about the NCLB requirements for scientific-based research, evidenced-based strategies, and types of research design.

*Leading With Data* represents a valuable resource for both new and experienced school administrators. The practical approach taken in the book makes it an easy to read tool that can be applied to individual school settings. This book provides much needed guidance for those who truly believe that all students can learn and that it is the responsibility of the principal and teacher to develop effective solutions for student learning problems. The school improvement process represents an important mechanism for uncovering problems within schools and putting in place strategies to address these problems. New and aspiring administrators will find that the book provides a simple model that guides them through the school improvement process and the use of data to make evidenced-based decisions. More experienced administrators can use the book as a reference to assist with analyzing root causes, identifying potential sources of school and student information, allocating resources, and communicating with stakeholders. Moreover the book represents a reminder of the importance of taking a leadership position in the use of data to set the course for school improvement in America's public school systems.

While *Leading With Data* provides a refreshingly simple view of data-based decision making, there are some areas where more detail would be beneficial. Specifically, additional discussion regarding the relationship between the school goals and benchmarking school processes might be useful for new administrators who often become bogged down in day-to-day activities. Coverage of analyzing data for school improvement could be more rigorous as much of the book's discussion centers on a specific example. While readers may follow the process exemplified through the vignette, they may not have enough supporting information to allow them to apply this process in other settings. More support for the link between uncovering problems through data and developing appropriate evidenced-based strategies could be helpful. School administrators may benefit from additional information that supports the steps that need to be taken between clarifying the problem and determining the solution.

Finally administrators may become bogged down with the detail regarding evidenced-based strategies and scientific research in chapter nine. While it is necessary for administrators to understand the importance of using research-based strategies, they may find less detail and additional examples more relevant.

The use of data to make decisions that affect student learning has become increasingly important in recent years as principals have responded to increased accountability with their schools. The true benefit of data-based decision making is that through its use, school leaders have increased visibility into the many issues that face our children. By engaging in data-based decision making, principals are able to make the best possible choices that connect the realities of today with the possibilities of tomorrow and to lead schools towards this goal. *Leading With Data* provides these administrators with a practical guide to developing and maintaining school improvement.

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Vicki White recently received her doctoral degree from the Department of Educational Administration and Policy at the University of Florida.

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