

TERC | Using Data Case Study

Nashua School District, Nashua, NH



New Hampshire Schools Create Environment to Improve Student Achievement, Build Capacity for Teamwork With “Using Data”

Process From TERC Allows Educators to Help All Students Reach Their Potential.

Just six years ago, Janet Valeri faced one of the biggest challenges of her career as an educator. Named principal of Amherst Street School in Nashua, N.H., Valeri had been chosen to lead this elementary school in its third year as a “school in need of improvement.” As a result, the school was forced to offer choice as well as supplemental educational services after school and was teetering on the brink of having to develop a plan for restructuring.

“When I arrived at Amherst Street School, instability was the norm,” said Valeri. “Students weren’t on track to achieve, and there were constant changes in staff and administration.”

However, after two years of involvement with “Using Data,” an innovative program designed to transform teaching and learning through the use of data, Amherst Street School emerged from being a “school in need of improvement” and today is seeing continued improvement in student achievement.

“It is really demoralizing for a school to be labeled a ‘school in need of improvement’ or – as many newspapers like to call them – ‘a failing school,’ said Valeri. “The Using Data Process made our school team feel that through the careful examination and use of data, we had control over what was happening.”

Getting Beyond the “Why” and “What” of Data

Developed by TERC, a leading educational research and development organization, with a grant from the National Science Foundation and evaluated by independent researchers, Using Data has documented gains in student achievement in mathematics, science and other content areas and has been successful in narrowing achievement gaps between economic and racial groups, as well as

Highlights

- Integration of data into the decision-making process and school culture
- Constructive and productive peer discussions
- Data informs ELL and behavior solutions
- Improved staff motivation

increasing collaboration, data use and instructional improvement. The Using Data process takes teachers beyond the “why” and “what” of data-driven decision-making to the important question of “how.” Teachers learn how to use data to inform their day-to-day practice and to put every student on the path to success.

Using Data’s unique systemic approach to changing the way educators look at data and work in collaboration with one another was recently highlighted in an Alliance for Excellent Education Policy Brief as a program that can help educators deliver on the promise of data to improve teaching and learning.

At the time Valeri introduced Using Data at Amherst Street, Nashua School District was involved in a two-year program to train educators throughout the district in the TERC Using Data process. TERC facilitators provided six full-day training sessions designed specifically for the district each year. At least two educators per school were trained in the Using Data collaborative inquiry process. Valeri and a team from her school participated in this professional development and then brought the process back to train the entire school community.

When Valeri became principal at Amherst Street, data were being collected, but she quickly discovered that more needed to be done to integrate data into the decision-making process and school culture.

“We were doing the DIBELS reading assessment three times per year, but it was obvious that for it to change the way we were teaching, we needed to collect the data more

frequently,” she said. “Teachers began administering the assessment bi-weekly and became very good at quickly looking at the data and determining which students needed what kind of help.”

Eliminating the Blame Game

Valeri continued, “The Using Data Process depersonalized the way that teachers talked about the challenges they were facing. It eliminated the ‘blame game’ and produced really productive discussions about what was happening in our school. Our whole district’s culture is starting to shift to focus on conversations about the meaningful use of data.”

Valeri’s success at Amherst Street was rewarded by the opportunity to make similar changes at another Nashua elementary school. Now as the principal at Ledge Street School, Valeri has once again taken the helm of a changing environment.

“There has been a lot of change at Ledge Street, and behavior is a big concern,” she said. “When I arrived at the beginning of the 2008 school year, teachers only collaborated on the fly. Through Using Data, we systematized the process and began to collect, analyze and use data to drive our decisions.”

Student behavior was one of the first issues that the new team at Ledge Street used data to address. “We took a careful look at the data on what was going wrong, which students were being referred and where the bad behavior was happening.”

Janet Valeri, Principal
Amherst Street School, Nashua, NH

Valeri began her principalship at Ledge Street with a challenge to teachers: “My message was, ‘I believe in these students and in you.’ That is the beauty of Using Data. If you believe, you can collaborate, take the data and build a new environment.”

Improving Student Behavior

Student behavior was one of the first issues that the new team at Ledge Street used data to address. “We took a careful look at the data on what was going wrong, which students were being referred and where the bad behavior was happening,” said Valeri.

After discussing the data, the team decided it needed to clearly communicate behavioral expectations and create a motivating environment by introducing a school mascot (luckily, Valeri has an assistant principal who likes to don the costume), as well as allocate funds for two behavior support personnel. As a result, the number of students referred for behavioral issues has winnowed, and the school team can focus on addressing those specific problems.

Where Are the Gaps?

At Ledge Street, Valeri and her team have moved from collecting data on things such as individual student reading abilities to assessing things that affect the entire school community and culture. For example, they collaborated with the Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC) in Concord to deliver the “School Index Survey.”

“All hands were on deck, and everyone in the school community took the survey,” she said. “Once we had the data, we made comparisons and asked ‘where are the gaps?’”

“We have a large ELL population and discovered, for example, that the language barrier makes it difficult for many parents to help with homework,” she continued. “So we looked at ‘how do we support this problem as a community?’ and hosted a series of evening workshops for parents on how to help kids with reading, etc.”

This school year, they will work with the PIRC again to “take another dip of data” and continue to transform the overall school community at Ledge Street.

Another new data source that Valeri introduced at Ledge Street was the My Voice Survey, which looks at the eight conditions that need to be in place if students are to strive for, and fulfill, their academic, personal and social promise.

The school faculty and staff took the survey in 2008 and again in 2009, and Valeri said the results were “very

powerful.” In just one year, the data showed that the culture at Ledge Street School has begun to change from a place where people feel that they aren’t recognized for their accomplishments to an environment where constructive feedback is shared and 100 percent of the staff believes that they put forth their best effort. Best of all, nearly 100 percent of the staff enjoy working at Ledge Street. This year, Valeri plans to administer the My Voice survey to the school’s students and add those data to the school team’s supply of information for making positive changes in teaching and learning.

Looking to the Future

The Using Data Process is making the schools in Nashua places where students are achieving their potential and faculty and staff are motivated and excited to work. At the beginning of the 2009 school year, Valeri said that the Ledge Street guidance counselor told her that it was “so refreshing to come back after the summer and know what to expect.”

“Culture and climate don’t change unless you build capacity as a team,” said Valeri. “The Using Data Process allowed us to do that at Amherst Street and is now helping us to transform Ledge Street as well.”

For more information about Using Data, visit <http://usingdata.terc.edu/>

About TERC

Founded in 1965, TERC’s mission is to improve math, science and technology teaching and learning. Each year, TERC’s programs and products reached more than 3.5 million students in the United States and abroad. For more information, see www.terc.edu.