

Putting FACES on the Data – What Great Leaders do!

For

Journal of Staff Development (JSD)

by

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The Problem of Data

Education is overloaded with programs and data. The growth of digital power has aided and abetted the spread of accountability-driven data—adequate yearly progress, test results for every child in every grade, common core standards, formative and summative assessments galore. Each data set shows a full continuum from below standard to exceed standards. Educators need to be able to put FACES on the data at all points on the continuum and, to know what to do to help individual children behind the statistical mask.

We asked over 500 teachers, “Why should we put FACES on data?” What matters to most teachers is their children, their humanity—what we have called their FACES and what lies behind them. One teacher said playfully, “Because they are so damned cute.” True enough for kindergarten, but overall our answer is “because it is so damned important.” You need to care for students, but you also need to help them get better in the one thing that can serve them for life—their day-to-day learning.

As well as the skills required to connect to students emotionally, teachers need to be able to diagnose and act on their students’ learning needs. Teachers need to be knowledgeable experts for each student. This is a tall order because to be effective teachers need to combine emotion and cognition in equal measure.

Weaken one of these links to the learner, and the learning possibilities collapse.

What will be essential is not just to discover a passionate teacher here and there but rather how to generate emotional commitment and effective instruction on a very large scale—for whole systems. Data

are required, but they must be generated and displayed in a way that makes the child come alive in the minds and actions of teachers. We and our colleagues have learned a great deal about how to move beyond a faceless glut of data to specific data that put FACES on the learner. From leaders who have created and sustained district-wide improvement, we learned lessons about:

- the importance of uncommon persistence in the face of competing priorities.
- unfailing attention to the details of implementation.
- hard-nosed decision-making regarding where best to allocate scarce resources.
- ego-free leadership.
- ongoing attention to evidence about what is working and what needs to be modified.

We learned that leading educational reform in your state, district, school, or classroom is not for the faint-of-heart, the impatient, or for those who are easily distracted.

The Desperate Need for a Solution

With so much data available to those who want to improve student achievement – where do they start?

Since about 1990 a growing body of work has examined how student achievement data have been used to inform decisions made by successful states, school districts, school administrators, and teachers.

Politicians and education leaders with the will to raise the common core state standards in their districts and schools can find the right mix of simple-to-read data to overcome the inertia in their jurisdictions; they can they find proven “how to” solutions to drive achievement; and, they find solutions to ensure that every child learns, that every teacher teaches well. The outcome of learning from researched best practice is that their systems and every school within their systems become high performers and therefore are accountable for the funding dollars they receive and for achieving their social-moral imperative? Let’s see what’s “out there” that might answer these questions.

In the book *Realization*, we discussed the 14 parameters, the key areas that we have found to be important for schools, districts, and states to become places where high student achievement is expected and delivered year after year by energized staff teams of true professional educators.

The factors we studied, the 14 parameters, are in effect the nitty-gritty of deep and sustainable collective capacity-building. Think of the 14 parameters as the specific reform strategies that—in combination (and over time, as the organization progresses to greater implementation of the 14 parameters)—“cause” classroom, school, district, and state improvement. The 14 parameters are listed in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 The 14 Parameters

1. Shared Beliefs and Understandings

- a. Each student can achieve high standards given the right time and the right support.
- b. Each teacher can teach to high standards given the right assistance.
- c. High expectations and early and ongoing intervention are essential.
- d. Teachers and administrators need to be able to articulate what they do and why they teach the way they do

Adapted from Hill & Crevola, 1999.

2. Embedded Literacy/Instructional Coaches

3. Daily, Sustained Focus on Literacy Instruction

4. Principal Leadership

5. Early and Ongoing Intervention

6. Case Management Approach: (a) Data Walls (b) Case by Case Meetings

7. Professional Learning at School Staff Meetings

8. In-School Grade/Subject Meetings

9. Centralized Resources
10. Commitment of District and School Budgets for Literacy Learning and Resources
11. Action Research/Collaborative Inquiry
12. Parental and Community Involvement
13. Cross-Curricular Connections
14. Shared Responsibility and Accountability

(Sharratt & Fullan, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2012)

Within the 14 Parameters, several modes of assessment are used to identify and track performance enabling everyone in the system to follow their collective progress in elevating student achievement beginning quickly but sustaining in the long term – to everyone’s positive benefit.

Our work in system-wide reform can be and has been replicated successfully across contexts and continents. We know that learning how to succeed on every Parameter and executing with focused precision is the ongoing work of education leaders. It is not surface beliefs that matter; it is focused commitment, making tough resource allocation decisions, drilling down relentlessly to put FACES on the relevant data, and “staying the course” that matter, no matter what pressures or new concepts the unfocused might launch. Let no one dissuade you. Student achievement is the singular goal here. The positive social spin-off benefits that increasing student achievement generates short term, and the positive social and economic benefits that accrue long-term are both critical by-products of the year-after-year student achievement success.

In the discussion that follows, we speak more to our message of measuring and assessing how individual schools, districts, and states are performing and we speak to how we feel that putting the FACES on the data is a win-win strategy that creates changes in instruction and in achievement levels and that results in a culture of success for students and education professionals—a culture in which all stakeholders can be

proud to participate.

We learned in our initial study, and subsequent work the overarching value of quality leadership at the school level. Successful schools in our research were led by principals, vice principals, and part-time literacy coaches who understood and were committed to the specifics. For example, in the schools we studied, we found the following:

1. School leaders clearly understood the model and, most important, lived the shared beliefs and understandings (parameter 1) in the design.
2. School leaders clearly understood that they needed to attend to the components of the 14 parameters.
3. School teams did constant self-evaluation, striving to align beliefs and understanding among the principal, literacy coach, Reading Recovery teacher, and special education resource teacher as the leadership team who worked with all staff. This involved *accountable talk* and corresponding action, with each other and with teachers, in an ongoing way—during the school day.
4. School leaders did not let the “distracters” divert their energies and focus—they stayed the course toward literacy and student improvement—holding their nerve until improvement results were realized—no matter what! (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009, 2012).

In schools and within education systems, we know that moving toward the goals defined in our shared beliefs and understandings starts with structured plans that are based on shared specificity and consistency of good practice across all classrooms—without imposing it (which we know doesn’t work). We need to offer them rich, easy-to-use inputs, including ways of putting FACES on the data, so that they can do what it takes to reach the goal of every student learning. Doing so is the system’s responsibility to the students and it is necessary to guarantee the teacher’s right to teach well.

The Power of FACES

In late 2010 and early 2011 we approached hundreds of professional educators with whom we were working in the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia for their views on three questions and to gather their stories to share. We asked:

- ◆ Why put FACES on the data?
- ◆ How do you put FACES on the data?
- ◆ What are the top three leadership skills needed to put FACES on the data?

Responses from the 507 respondents indicate that putting FACES on the data helps them to:

- ◆ know the students (personal, human emotional element; encourage colleagues to make the work personal; make our work about the real students; know your students).
- ◆ plan for them (align teaching strategies, specify strategies required for improvement).
- ◆ ensure everyone knows they are responsible or “own” all students (all are our students, promote accountability).
- ◆ assess progress widely and for individuals (understand if the processes and strategies we are using are having an impact).

The research data allowed us to cluster the 14 parameters from our previous work in *Realization* (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009) into four big ideas that we call improvement drivers: Assessment, Instruction, Leadership and Ownership. To zero in on putting FACES on the data, these are the things that great leaders do. But which practices are so effective that they become nonnegotiable, that is, the expected operating norms in every state, school, and classroom? And how do we ensure these practices are in fact implemented? For example, if we believe that every child can learn and has the right to learn, then we need to determine not just if every child has learned, but to optimize classroom teacher effectiveness, we need to know on an ongoing basis that every child is learning by making ongoing assessments and by incorporating that information about each child’s learning into daily instruction—a nonnegotiable practice.

Using the following Case Study from California, we can clearly answer the question, “why do we put FACES on the data”? In it we uncover four improvement drivers to make our point that all FACES are noticed and are brought to life.

Sanger Unified School District exemplifies Assessment, Instruction, Leadership and Ownership of ALL FACES

Sanger Unified, located in the heart of the Central Valley of California, serves a diverse student population of approximately 10,800 students that mirror the demographics and need of the region. They are a high minority, high poverty, and high English Language Learner student population with overall low levels of parent education. The student population is 69% Hispanic, 17% White, 11% Asian, and 2% African American with the remaining 1% being a combination of ethnic backgrounds. While 24% of the students are classified as English Language Learners, 49% of the students come from homes where English is not the primary language. Parent education levels are also of concern, 28% of parents did not graduate from high school and another 24% are high school graduates but never attended college. Additionally, 76% of the students qualify for free or reduced cost lunches.

In the fall of 2004, Sanger Unified received notification from the California Department of Education that they were one of the first 98 Districts in California to fall into Program Improvement (PI) status under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Failure to respond to the learning needs of all students placed them in the bottom 10% of schools in California in overall achievement gains. That notification from the State conflicted with their internal beliefs about their work. But as they dug deeper into the data they realized that their perception did not match what others saw in the results. While more than 50% of their white students were proficient or advanced in English Language Arts according to state testing results, only

20% of the Hispanic students, 19% of their Socially Economically Disadvantaged (SED) students and only 10% of their English Language (EL) Learners were scoring at the proficient or advanced levels. Only 26% percent of the total student population was meeting standards. At individual schools the results were even worse, at several schools where 60% of the students were EL students; fewer than 5% of those EL students were reaching proficiency.

That focused look at the very relevant data began their process of “putting FACES on the data”. They realized that you only get one chance to get today right for a child, and with that thought in mind, they developed an organizational sense of urgency around the need to improve. As Superintendent Marc Johnson announced to the administrative team, they were, effective immediately, a Professional Learning Community (PLC) District and that they would begin the work and learn by doing. They unveiled their “Three Guiding Principles” to focus conversations in the district office and at the school sites: “Hope is not a Strategy”, “Don’t Blame the Kids” and “It’s About Learning”. These served to remind them that they must be deliberate in their efforts to meet the learning needs of every child every day- their students deserved no less. Their work aligns with our 4 improvement drivers: Assessment, Instruction, Leadership and Ownership (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012).

1. Assessment

At each school site, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) had time to begin the process of developing and administering common formative assessments so that they would have access to real time data about student learning. PLC teams worked to build and define the responses and supports necessary to provide the extra opportunities for learning that some students required to be successful in their mastery of the essential standards for their grade level and courses. Data walls were developed at sites and teachers began to meet regularly to have conversations focused on current data and the need to respond to the learning needs of every student as evidenced by the data. Sites then developed robust systems of support for their students who needed extra time for learning as evidenced by the data. Over time this focus has led to the development of support systems that provide extra time and opportunity for learning for

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students who were struggling with mastery of a standard. These systems were fluid and were driven by regular progress monitoring that in turn drove supports to meet student needs. All looking at ALL the FACES, students who do not require additional support were provided with opportunities for enrichment, using rich performance tasks focused on higher order thinking.

2. Instruction

They also realized that no amount of intervention compensates for poor instruction. They began a district-wide focus to develop high quality initial instruction in every classroom. Every teacher and administrator in the district was trained in intentional, differentiated instructional practice and involved in ongoing training to deepen and improve practice. As teachers were trained, the district required administrators to attend all training sessions and to be active participants in the staff development. They believed that if administrators are to lead their teachers they must be expert practitioners in order to serve as learning leaders and instructional coaches at their sites.

An important area of focus for training was in the area of English Language Learners. Every classroom in the district had students who needed extra support in developing fluency in English. Meeting those needs required more than buying a program that supports their language acquisition. They realized that supporting these learners as they develop high levels of fluency and proficiency must be a function of daily instruction. Even now, this priority of assessment that drives instruction continues to deepen their understanding of “putting FACES on the data” for these students and translates that understanding into action through ongoing training and support at all levels.

3. Leadership

District leaders established very clear expectations for what each school was to accomplish while

also providing them resource support to build their programs in response to learning needs of their student populations, including improving the strengths and skill sets of the staff. They also focused on the organizational culture, shifting from a focus on the needs of the adults to an absolute focus on the needs of the kids, knowing that in order to do so they needed to develop a deeper understanding of the learning needs of their kids by going even deeper into the learning data.

One of the first efforts to develop deeper understanding of the data began at the leadership level. They began a process called, “Principal Summits”. A Principal Summit is a one hour presentation made by each principal in the district to senior staff and colleagues, detailing where their school was, where it currently is, and where it is going as it seeks to ensure that ALL students are learning. Presentations include an overview of achievement data for a minimum of five-year period so participants could focus on trends and patterns over time. This process quickly led to a deep understanding of the data by the instructional leaders who in turn led similar conversations with their school teams around data – thus putting the FACES on data for ALL students.

4. **Ownership**

At Sanger, they no longer labor as independent contractors in isolation; they co-labor to meet the needs of all kids. They come together as teams, who work together interdependently (Realization, 2009) to achieve a common goal while holding one another mutually accountable. They have changed as an organization. Now their culture is one of collaboration and the focus is on learning, both that of ALL students and ALL staff members.

In order to accomplish that, leaders throughout the system realized that they needed to embrace the concept of “reciprocal accountability” which to us is Parameter 14: Shared Responsibility and Accountability. Simply stated, if I have an expectation of you, then I have an obligation to provide you with whatever you need to be successful in meeting that

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expectation. They also began three cohorts of leadership training which brought leadership teams from system and school sites together for ongoing conversations around improving student learning. Everyone in the system “owned” all the FACES – student FACES and teacher FACES.

Indicators of Success

The right data sources are indicators of improved student learning. In 2004 they were one of the lowest achieving and poorest performing districts in the state. Within two years of starting this process of improvement they had exceeded the state average for student achievement in all areas. In the spring of 2011, EdTrust West released a study of the achievement gains of the largest 146 unified school districts in California. Their study showed that the achievement gains in Sanger for the last five years ranked in the top three in California for districts of high minority, high poverty student populations. Each year they have seen an increase in the number of students who are demonstrating high levels of proficiency.

The win that matters most is recognizing the value of identifying the FACES of student learning. This has become a daily “win” for them as they continue to focus on the individual student and district-wide outcomes of their efforts. District achievement gains have been consistent and district-wide. The district has:

- been transitioned from one of the lowest achieving districts in the state to a district that has seen some of the most dramatic achievement gains in California.
- been recognized , in the last 5 years, in 13 of their schools as California State Distinguished Schools.
- had named, in the last three years, 17 of their schools to be Title I Academic Achieving Schools.

- had a National Blue Ribbon School in each of the last three years;
- had the Middle School named as a National School to Watch.

While these recognitions have been very gratifying, other indicators of their growth may be even bigger “wins” on this journey. It has been more than three years since they have heard a teacher utter the words “my kids” in a conversation about their work. The reference is now to “our kids” as they have transitioned to a collaborative culture focused on responding to the FACES of every child - every day.

The shift from a collection of “random acts of self improvement” across the district to a shared mission, vision, values, and goals with a laser-like focus on student learning driven by data has been seismic.

Getting it Right

The aligned focus on quality instruction and coaching by school and district leadership together has helped establish a career ladder for teachers to transition into leadership roles as learning leaders. Over the past few years, the district has been successful in hiring five new principals from within the district, while continuing the rate of student growth across the entire district.

Of the eleven comparable districts, Sanger was the third lowest in *funding* but the highest in student *achievement!* Sanger was the only district where the achievement percentile rank exceeded the percentile rank for per pupil spending. Proof that the model can be implemented by any district with the desire and will to make it happen.

Sanger has successfully implemented the strategies and culture shifts necessary for this remarkable turnaround and has not permitted itself to become unfocused from their singular goal of student achievement. The foundation of their reform model is on building collaborative

relationships. Part of the reform is designed to help school leaders nurture collaborative relationships with union leadership, State, and county personnel. Once in place, the reforms outlined are designed for sustainability and can continue indefinitely without additional private or government funding. Their work functions successfully within the parameters set by the California Department of Education and the local teachers' union contract.

Source: Marcus P. Johnson, Superintendent, Sanger Unified School District

Lessons Learned

Our case study research continues to lead us to identify the improvement drivers needed to put the FACES on the data beyond the focused key messages heard throughout the state/ district/ schools:

1. **Assessment** training that supports daily and ongoing assessment practices to improve and differentiate instruction
2. **Instruction** that meets the need of every FACE
3. **Leadership** that embraces the ability to be knowledgeable, to mobilize others, and to sustain improvement
4. **Ownership** of all the FACES – every student – every teacher (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012).

Sanger's successful climb in student achievement began with a soul-searching look at their results and reinterpretation of their data. They took charge of their destiny and now the overall picture is that of a rural district that is changing the image of what can be expected of students living in poverty. In the heart of California's Central Valley, 10,800 students are performing at a level that promises to break the cycle of poverty and poor educational outcomes that have plagued the region for generations. Despite living in a state that spends \$2,400 less per student than the Sharratt, L. & Fullan, M. November 2011Page 13

national average and coming from homes with limited resources, the future is bright for the students of Sanger – all staff have put the FACES on their data and made each student count. Leaders put FACES on all staff making every staff member count. We believe this can happen, this process can be replicated - everywhere!

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