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Using Diverse Data to Develop and Sustain School, Family and Community Partnerships

A District Case Study

Mavis G. Sanders

ABSTRACT

This article reports findings from a case study of district leadership for school, family and community partnerships in a suburban district in the mid-Atlantic region of the USA. Analyses suggest that the case district's family and community involvement specialist has been successful in using different kinds of data to achieve a variety of goals that are linked to program growth, improvement, and sustainability. Analyses further suggest that the district specialist has successfully facilitated the collection and use of data among school-based teams for school, family and community partnerships. Her efforts highlight an important district leadership function in an increasingly data-driven educational reform environment.

KEYWORDS *data-based accountability, data-based decision making, district leadership, educational improvement, family and community involvement, reform implementation*

Introduction

Increasingly, educational leaders in many countries are being held accountable for student outcomes on standardized assessments and are being encouraged to use data in the school improvement process (Bainbridge, 2003; Thorton and Perreault, 2002). This global trend has been fueled by international comparisons and rankings of student test scores. In the USA, specifically, 'data-driven decision-making' is the new educational mantra. Educational programs and departments are being asked to legitimate their existence with 'the data'. While all levels of K-12 educational systems are awash with discussions of data, most research on data based decision making has focused on schools (see for example, Guskey, 2003). Fewer research studies have explored the kinds of data that are used by district-level leaders, how these data are used, and factors that support or inhibit data use. This in-depth case study addresses the gap with a detailed description of a district leader's use of multiple types of data in partnership program development and maintenance. In so doing, it is hoped that the

study will contribute to a broader understanding of the types and purposes of data in educational reform in the USA and abroad.

The article is organized in six sections. To create a context for the study's findings, the article begins with a discussion of data, educational improvement and accountability. It, then, links the discussion of data and accountability to issues of educational leadership. Third, the methods and analyses employed in the study are described. Next, the article highlights the featured district's work in the area of family and community engagement. Fifth, the study's findings are presented and discussed. Lastly, the article identifies three implications for educational leaders who desire to more fully incorporate data in their reform efforts.

Data, Educational Improvement and Accountability

The collection, analysis and presentation of data are increasingly seen as vital to educational improvement. Data are seen as a means to create school and district cultures that address issues of educational excellence in ways that are continuous and systematic. This understanding of the role of data in educational reform and improvement is captured in the following quote:

Data are the key to continuous improvement. When you 'plan,' you must use data to provide insight and focus for your goals. Data patterns reveal strengths and weaknesses in the system and provide excellent direction. When you 'do,' you collect data that will tell you the impact of your strategies. Through collaborative reflection, you 'study' the feedback offered by your data and begin to understand when to stay the course and when to make changes. Then you 'act' to refine your strategies. Eventually, the whole cycle begins again. (Learning Points Associates, 2004: 3)

Ruth Johnson (2002) argued that the use of data in educational reform also is important in the quest for educational equity. She wrote, 'When policies and practices are analyzed, there is a very high probability that institutional biases and other uncomfortable issues may surface. Surfacing the issues provides the potential for problem solving and improved practices related to student achievement' (2002: 10).

To develop strategies that achieve the twin goals of educational improvement and equity, educators in K-12 systems require different types of data, both quantitative and qualitative. These data have been categorized into four types: (1) achievement data; (2) demographic data; (3) program data; and (4) perception data (Learning Points Associates, 2004). Achievement data may come in a variety of forms including results from standardized tests and ongoing classroom assessments, as well as school grades. Demographic data may include information on enrollment, attendance, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, mobility and other characteristics that influence student achievement. While these examples focus primarily on students, demographic data on teachers, administrators, families and communities also are important for

educational improvement. Program data are collected to assess the viability and effectiveness of reform strategies, as well as the quality of their implementation. Finally, perception data allow educators to better understand the opinions and ideas of key stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, administrators and community members. By collecting diverse types of data and disaggregating data to uncover trends and patterns for specific groups, educators can better understand current practices and outcomes as they plan for future progress.

Data within the educational context also are linked to accountability, which is increasingly recognized as an important aspect of school improvement and responsiveness in democratic societies (McNamara and O'Hara, 2006). Data-based accountability entails using data to set program and performance goals and to hold schools and districts responsible for goal attainment. This use of data has met with resistance from many educators.

Some have argued that such accountability imposes simplistic market 'thinking' on educational processes; while others have argued that it reduces the professionalism of educators (see Macpherson, 1996). Still others question the motivation of advocates of data-based accountability as noted in the following quote:

The call for data-based accountability, trumpeted first by state education leaders, has been met with skepticism by many of the people in schools who are being asked to collect and use data. Teachers and principals sometimes react initially with fear, distrust, and resistance. Their first questions, if they dare to ask, concern how the data will be used against them. (AASA, 2002: 38)

However, some contend that it is not data-based accountability per se that makes educators fearful. Indeed, as Noguero (in Sirotnik, 2004: 67) questioned:

How could any reasonable person oppose the idea that schools should be required to show some measure of success in carrying out the function for which they were created and produce evidence that children are learning?

Rather, it is the way in which accountability measures are implemented that induces fear.

To allay such fears, Sirotnik (2004) contended that data-based accountability must be approached responsibly. First, such measures must use data to identify appropriate goals that are 'sensitive to the complexity of the social, political, and economic circumstances within which this nation expects its public schools to function' (2004: 11). That is, data should be understood in context and educators should not be held accountable for unrealistic goals that schools, systems, and students cannot attain. Second, effective data-based accountability must use multiple sources of data, as previously described. To limit relevant data to standardized, high-stakes achievement tests diminishes the scope of what educators and educational reforms seek to accomplish. Third, effective data-based accountability must be accompanied by on-going guidance, support,

and professional development to build the capacity of educators to understand and act on data to achieve meaningful goals. According to Sirotnik (2004: 12) 'responsible accountability systems must be as focused on the continued learning of educators as they are on that for students'.

Data and Educational Leadership

Increasingly, research has shown that the effective use of data in improvement and accountability processes will not occur without effective leadership (AASA, 2002). For educational improvement strategies to realize their potential, Fullan et al. (2005) suggested that school, district, and state leaders need to understand the process of change, which they refer to as 'change knowledge,' as well as eight key drivers of successful change. One of these key drivers is a leader's ability to develop within schools and school systems cultures of evaluation that use assessment for learning. According to Fullan et al. (2005: 56):

Assessment for learning incorporates:

- Accessing/gathering data on student learning;
- Disaggregating data for more detailed understanding;
- Developing action plans based on the previous two points in order to make improvements; and
- Being able to articulate and discuss performance with parents and external groups . . .

These authors further contended:

When schools and school systems increase their collective capacity to engage in ongoing assessment for learning, they achieve major improvements . . . They produce data on an ongoing basis that enables groups to use information for action planning as well as for external accounting. (2005: 56)

Thus, educational leaders' capacity to participate in as well as guide the collection, compilation, analysis and dissemination of data is a critical aspect of effective leadership. This capacity may determine how well a reform is implemented, how successful it is in achieving tangible and important results for students' learning and progress, and if and how it is sustained over time. District leaders' facility with data may be especially important for educational improvement and accountability. According to McLaughlin (1992), districts have a facilitative role to play in building schools' individual and organizational capacity for reform. She argues that through the provision of direct support, the facilitation of on-going dialogue and feedback about educational practice, and the celebration of professional commitment, engagement, and progress, district leaders can significantly influence the quality with which school reforms are implemented. To understand more about the use of data in reform implementation and educational improvement, this case study

examines the practices of one district leader for school, family and community partnerships.

Methods

This study is part of an ongoing longitudinal qualitative study of district leadership for school, family and community partnerships.¹ Districts participating in the study are members of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS). NNPS was established in 1996 to build the capacity of school, district and state educational leaders to develop comprehensive and permanent school, family and community partnership programs. When districts and states join NNPS, in addition to coordinating partnership programs at their respective levels, they are required to facilitate and support the development of school-level partnership programs. This may include activities such as leadership training workshops, small incentive grants, and end-of-year partnership celebrations. District leaders also are guided to conduct regular meetings with school-based partnership teams. These teams are responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating school-level partnership programs using Epstein's framework of six types of involvement: (1) parenting; (2) communicating; (3) volunteering; (4) learning at home; (5) decision making; and (6) collaborating with the community (Epstein et al., 2002).²

The study employs a multiple case study design, which includes phenomenological, semi-structured, focus group and informal interviews; observations of workshops, meetings, presentations and other work-related activities of key district-level respondents; document collection and review; and site visits to participating schools within each district. Four districts are included in the study. Data collection in two of the four districts began in August 2004; since that time, one district has been added to the study each year.

Districts were selected for study based on three primary criteria (1) level of district leadership, (2) level of school facilitation and (3) length of membership in NNPS. Only district members that reported high levels of leadership in the 2003 annual NNPS survey and that had been members of NNPS for three or more consecutive years were considered for the study because of their greater likelihood to yield useful insights. Final selection of case districts was conducted to ensure variation along key demographic characteristics such as location (that is, rural, urban, suburban), size and the socio-economic and racial/ethnic make-up of the student population. During their initial year of participation, selected districts receive US\$1500.00 for partnership activities. Districts receive US\$1000.00 for each subsequent year of involvement.

Findings reported in this paper are drawn from 18 months of data collection in a suburban district (District 1) that has been a member of NNPS for nearly ten years (see Table 1 for a brief description of the data sources for this article). District 1 is located in a racially and ethnically diverse county of about 248,000

Table 1 Sources of qualitative data for District 1

Interviews/focus groups	Observations	Document review
Formal and informal interviews with family and community outreach specialist	Monthly parent liaison meetings	District website
Interview with former assist. supt and supervisor of district specialist	Community outreach confs.	School partnership plans
Focus group with parent liaisons	End-of-year celebrations	Department documents
Focus group with four school partnership teams	21st-century community meeting	Workshop materials
	Parent involvement forum	Meeting agendas
		Parent liaison forms and reports
		Parent involvement policy
		NNPS forms

residents. Based on 2000 census data, 74 percent of the population is European American, 14 percent is African American, 8 percent is Asian and 3 percent is Hispanic. Ninety-three percent of the adult population graduated from high school, and 53 percent has bachelor's degrees or higher. Approximately 14 percent of the population speaks English as a second language. Median family income in the district is about US\$74,000.00 and 4 percent of the population lives below poverty level. The district is composed of about 70 elementary, middle and high schools.

To understand how schools' partnership teams and programs are influenced by district leadership activities, site visits to four schools in the district began in January 2006. These schools were recommended by the district specialist as examples of schools demonstrating progress on school, family and community partnerships. Site visits included a review of partnership action plans and related documents as well as semi-structured and focus group interviews with school principals and family and teacher representatives on school partnership teams. As a token of appreciation, participating schools received US\$500.00 for partnership activities.

Data Analysis

All formal interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were then coded for recurring themes and concepts using Ethnograph 5.0. Codes such as 'data use', 'data type' and 'data leadership' emerged through an inductive process of reading and rereading the transcribed manuscripts (Hatch, 2002). Other codes such as 'district leadership', 'district support' and 'principal leadership' were determined based on the study's objectives and a review of the literature on educational reform prior to and during data collection and analysis. Observation and informal interview notes and documents collected for review were similarly coded and filed based on content matter. Once coded, these data were reviewed and summarized in the form of tables, charts, and narrative text to capture and articulate emergent findings. Exploration of the literature on district leadership and reform implementation informed the data analysis

process. Findings that resulted from this process are presented below after a brief description of the district's partnership program.

An Awarding Winning District Program of Partnerships

The case district has been honored for its work on school, family and community partnerships. It has sustained its program for nearly 10 years despite changes in superintendents and district office restructuring. The district specialist for family and community involvement communicates and collaborates with colleagues in several departments as well as works with the district's 12 partnership schools to help them form partnership teams, write annual partnership plans, and implement partnership activities to promote student success. She also manages and provides professional development to the district's parent liaisons who support parent involvement in several partnership schools in the district. In addition, the district specialist helps to coordinate and evaluate community-based learning centers that provide after-school programs for over 100 children and families. These centers provide help with homework, resources for studying, assistance with language, enrichment activities and support for families. The specialist also has developed several tools to strengthen partnerships in the district. These include: a multiple intelligence checklist for parents to share information about their children's talents, and guidelines for teachers to make positive phone calls to students' homes. This district program has been developed, sustained and improved over time with the use of multiple forms of data.

Types and Sources of Data

Findings

The district family and community involvement specialist, who also has served as the district's key contact to NNPS since 1997, used a variety of data that fall within the four previously described categories: achievement data, demographic data, program data and perception data. These different types of data and their sources are described below.

Achievement Data

Within NNPS, school, family and community partnerships are viewed as a reform strategy to improve student achievement and other important outcomes. This perspective was shared by the district family and community involvement specialist and was evident in her work with schools and the district's parent liaisons. The district specialist trained and supervised nine parent liaisons that worked with approximately 12 to 15 'focus' families in the district's lowest performing schools to 'serve as a resource of support for schools and families in the establishment of effective home-school partnerships for

student learning and achievement' (Liaison Operations Manual, 8/2004). Focus families were selected based on the academic performance of their children and perceived need. Low-income families with children who were performing below grade level in reading and mathematics were generally selected. In a focus group, parent liaisons described their support for focus families in the following ways:

As parent liaisons, we give parents the tools that they need to communicate with teachers and administrators. It might begin with our accompanying a parent to a parent-teacher conference and being there with that parent and sitting there with that parent. Eventually they'll be able to go by themselves. (Liaison 1)

We are maybe the very first people that these parents are meeting who say to them, 'You know, we believe in you. We support you, we know that you just need a little help right now. (Liaison 2)

These liaisons also worked with school partnership teams to conduct school-wide activities that were accessible and relevant to the families of all students. In the four schools visited by the researcher, partnership team members including the school principals underscored the important role parent liaisons played in providing family support, implementing family outreach, and garnering greater parent involvement for students' school success. One team chairperson enthusiastically described the impact of the school's parent liaison:

Suzanne has been here about 2-3 years . . . and she is marvelous—fantastic! She is somebody who keeps in close contact with parents. She has a personal relationship with many of the parents. She can call at night and reach them when she can't reach them during the day. She is going to contact every student we have invited to our pizza party for reading. She does so many things that I don't even know about. She is very instrumental in helping us keep in close contact with all our families and she is a member of our partnership team.

The district specialist sought to capture the role and impact of the liaisons through the systematic collection, compilation, review, and dissemination of data. Each liaison was required to complete a weekly activity report that described focus family and school outreach activities using Epstein's framework of six types of involvement (Epstein et al., 2002). Liaisons also were required to collect achievement and attendance data for targeted students in the focus families. Ongoing assessment data also were collected at the beginning of the school year and at the end of each grading period to track student progress over the school year. Under the direction and supervision of the district specialist, one liaison, a retired schoolteacher, worked four additional hours each month to collect and compile the data for analysis and dissemination.

Currently, 12 schools in the district are members of NNPS and have partnership teams to design, implement, and evaluate school-wide partnership programs. All but one of these schools completed action plans that described partnership activities that were linked to school improvement goals. These

plans also included evaluation components that required data collection and analyses. One school, for example, set a goal that '70% of all students will score advanced or proficient on [the state assessment] in reading and math in grades 3–5'. The plan described six parent and community outreach activities that would be implemented and evaluated during the school year to help achieve this goal.

At partnership meetings, these action plans and goals for students' learning were central topics of discussion and anchored partnerships to student achievement. Progress on goals included in the action plans was reported during the end-of-year meeting and celebration organized by the district specialist. The specialist facilitated this process through workshops and site visits where she emphasized the significance of the action plans, provided sample action plans, and underscored the importance of collecting and tracking data on student achievement. Partnership team chairs and principals at each of the four case schools were in agreement that the specialist's assistance was central to their team development and progress on partnerships, as the following excerpts from 2 case schools illustrate:

. . . [The District Specialist] has been great in getting us resources and information, so we have the knowledge and skills shared at in-services to use to build our program. (Action Team Chairperson, School B)

We stay in contact with . . . [the District Specialist]; she attends monthly meetings when she can . . . She brings the partnership teams together and we get a chance to share ideas and things like that and that is helpful—to be aware of what other schools are doing. (Principal, School C)

Demographic Data

In addition to tracking student achievement data, parent liaisons and school-based partnership teams were encouraged to collect and analyze demographic data not only for students but also for their families and communities. Parent liaisons, in particular, were encouraged to have deep understanding and knowledge of their focus families so that they could provide 'wraparound' services that helped these families better support their children's learning. Parent liaisons collected data on families' needs and concerns. These data were documented in monthly activity reports to clarify the need for certain outreach activities as well as discussed in monthly meetings to identify additional resources and actions that could further aid the families. Such qualitative data were important because they 'put a human face on quantitative data,' and added 'depth and detail' to increase understanding (AASA, 2002: 15).

The following focus group excerpts highlight the importance of such data to family outreach:

I think our work also helps the [school] learn more about the child's family. I had a parent who we didn't know at the beginning of the year. We knew that his son was not completing his homework and was falling behind academically. The father

was not available for a parent-teacher conference. By my talking to [the father] regularly, I learned that he went to school full-time, he was at work full-time, and Friday was his day off. So, 'Well, why don't we use Friday!' He's even working on the weekends. So we used Friday for him to meet with the teacher. From that conference, [the teacher] learned that [the father] was working all of this time and that his son really didn't have anyone to spend any time with, so when he comes to school, that's why he's so needy. So it just helped the teacher learn more about what's going on in their family, and now they're looking for a big brother or some type of mentor to spend time with him. But I mean, had we not had that dialogue, we never would have known that. And everybody wins in the end. The teacher is pleased, and . . . [the student] is turning in his homework because his dad knows exactly what he's supposed to be doing. (Liaison 3)

I know the family situation; I know that mama has lost her job, she's having hardship with providing for the family, and she may not have had a complete dinner for the child last night, or he may have come into school and not have had breakfast because, you know, with everything that's going on, he came in late. He's unable to function at school because instead of focusing on schoolwork, his stomach is growling. So, without the liaisons there to fill in those pieces that a teacher would not ordinarily do, I think we would lose out on a lot. And, academically, it would impact the school on a whole because if this child does not come to school with a full stomach ready to learn, we're not going to get anything from him. (Liaison 4)

School-based partnership teams also collected demographic data as part of partnership planning, outreach and evaluation activities. The partnership schools in the district were ethnically and socio-economically diverse. As required by district goals, schools sought to reach all families 'regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, disability or socioeconomic status'. Accordingly, school partnership teams collected demographic data at events and activities to identify whom they were reaching and whom they were not reaching. Based on analyses of such data, one partnership school decided to hold a family-reading activity in the meeting room of an apartment building to reach students and families who were underrepresented at school-based activities. Another school decided to implement activities specifically for Hispanic families after demographic data showed that these families' attendance at school-wide events was low. These activities were led by the parent liaison assigned to the school, who was fluent in Spanish, and significantly increased Hispanic families' attendance at school-based events.

Program Data

NNPS requires state, district and school members to complete annual UPDATE surveys on program activities and implementation. These data are compiled and analyzed by NNPS researchers and staff to guide and inform members' practices and program development. Data are shared in the form of reports, conference and workshop presentations, newsletter items, books, journal articles and book chapters. The district specialist embraced this feature of NNPS and had 'a file with all the research documents' that she distributed to district

and school personnel who needed research-based information on family and community outreach.

Each year, the district specialist also completed the NNPS district UPDATE survey and assisted schools in completing their UPDATE surveys. Beyond ensuring that the required data reached NNPS, she compiled the schools' data into district progress reports. She has shared these data at the district's end-of-year meeting and celebration for two years. She also has shared this important leadership activity with other district leaders during NNPS conferences.

Perception Data

Perception data were collected primarily through surveys administered at both school and district partnership activities and events. NNPS schools included in the study developed short surveys to gauge families' views on the quality and relevance of partnership activities and events. Parent liaisons were regularly surveyed at the end of monthly meetings and given the opportunity to identify topics for future meetings, as well as share concerns, insights and suggestions. Finally, the district specialist surveyed school administrators, district leaders, families and others participating in workshops and professional development activities focused on partnerships.

Purposes for Data Use

The data described above were collected for a variety of purposes. Central among these were:

- (1) to garner additional resources for program growth and sustainability;
- (2) to meet external demands, expectations and standards;
- (3) to measure constituencies' professional development needs;
- (4) to identify strengths and weaknesses in district and school efforts to close achievement gaps among groups of students.

Garnering Additional Resources

Parent liaisons were described as assets to their schools' partnership programs. The district specialist would like to hire more of these liaisons to expand their presence and impact in the district. However, to do so, she needs additional funds. The achievement data gathered by the liaisons and their activity reports provided the specialist with important leverage to acquire these funds. She explained:

In 2001, I had three liaisons at ten dollars per hour for six hours a week. Each year because we showed successful maintenance of effort and a continuous increase in NNPS school members, the amount of funding increased and is now \$95,000.00. We had 9 liaisons for each of our NNPS schools. That worked until last year—one school does not have a liaison but everyone knows it is due to the budget. I'm trying to

garner political support from principals and teachers so that they will stand up and say we need more parent liaison services. I am trying to come up with the data that they want to see to support what I am asking for. The liaisons have data that they don't know they have.

To achieve her aims, the specialist sent each principal a quarterly summary of the data reported by the liaison assigned to his or her school, including the number of parent contacts made by liaisons, the types of contacts made, and achievement data for targeted students. During monthly meetings, she also shared these data with the director of, and colleagues in, her department. These reports helped her to show the program's connection to student achievement, which a recent reorganization of the district requires all offices to do.

Meeting External Demands

The district specialist described the district as 'data-driven'. NNPS also is a research-based, data driven organization that expects members to report and utilize data to enhance partnership program development. Program data, in particular, allowed the specialist and the district's partnership schools to meet NNPS requirements for membership and to reflect on district and school partnership program quality and progress. It also allowed the specialist to 'benchmark' or compare the district's performance against that of other districts within NNPS, which helps districts to learn 'what is possible to achieve' and to adjust and refine goals as needed (AASA, 2002: 52). These data also allowed the specialist to meet her district's expectation of data based planning to improve student outcomes.

One of my biggest accomplishments in this role has been to collect partnership program data, chart it, and present it. . . . I have to be ready with the data when they ask me. I need to produce indicators of effective parent involvement . . . and show 'high-level strategies' that support parent involvement . . . At the end of the day, I've got to show how this office can affect student achievement.

Measuring Constituency Understanding

As part of her leadership activities, the district specialist conducted a variety of targeted workshops for district and state colleagues, family liaisons, school based partnership teams, and administrators. Perception data collected at these events allowed the specialist to identify areas for more focused training such as action plan development; and areas requiring clarification such as how to meet Title I requirements using NNPS guidelines. The specialist also expected school-based teams to collect perception data to help in their program planning. School action plans, partnership meeting minutes and event summaries showed that schools regularly collected such data and fully integrated it into the planning and improvement processes. Through poster and oral presentations,

the specialist provided opportunities for partnership teams to share these data at the end-of-year meeting and celebration. For example, at one such meeting, a school team reported how data inspired it to change its science fair procedures to involve more families, which resulted in increased participation in its school science fair (Observation notes, June 2007). This type of exchange, termed 'pollination' by the district specialist, highlighted for schools the importance of data collection and analysis for partnership program development and school improvement.

Closing Achievement Gaps

While the district as a whole is affluent and high performing, students of color are further from state achievement standards than White and East Asian students. Also, students receiving free and reduced-price meals are further from the standards than more economically affluent students. The district was aware of these gaps prior to No Child Left Behind's³ required disaggregation of achievement data, and has funded several programs designed to close these disparities. Indeed, the partnership program was crafted as one such strategy. Demographic data reported by the liaisons and school partnership teams as well as standardized test data that are widely disseminated across the district help the specialist to monitor how well the district's partnership program is promoting educational excellence and equity for all its students and families.

Summary

The district specialist for family and community involvement used various types of data. These included school- and district-level partnership program data collected annually by NNPS, family outreach data reported by school-based parent liaisons and student achievement data as measured by school and statewide assessments. The study also revealed that the data were used for different purposes. For example, program data helped to chart the growth of the district's partnership program as well as identify areas for improvement at both the school and district levels. Family outreach data allowed the district specialist to document and guide the work of school-based parent liaisons, to hold liaisons accountable for this work, and to link their outreach to the academic achievement of targeted students.

The specialist's use of data highlights an important leadership function that has helped the district develop and sustain an award winning partnership program for nearly a decade, as well as to assess the district's progress on meeting key goals for family and community engagement and student achievement. Her effective use of data has not been without challenges, however. To be useful, data must be collected, compiled, analyzed, and presented in a form that is accessible to broad and diverse audiences. Lafee (2002) identified 'inadequate funding and technical support for data collection' as a major challenge

to district-level data use. Without a support staff, the specialist has had to be creative in finding personnel to assist in these data management activities. A work-study student and a committed family liaison have been critical to the specialist's ability to manage the variety of data that are continuously collected for program planning and improvement.

The specialist, a former biologist, was comfortable with data analysis and interpretation and able to build the capacity of others to work effectively with these data. Thus a challenge that district leaders must address is finding or building the skilled support necessary to manage data so that they are used purposively and responsibly. Furthermore, for data to have its intended impact on student and school outcomes, district leaders must assist in building the capacity of school leaders to understand, and both appropriately and comfortably, use data.

A related challenge is finding individuals and organizations that can enhance the data collection and management activities of the district and its schools. Such organizations can provide critical feedback on data gathering and analyses that can be highly beneficial. In their discussion of district-wide reform, Fullan et al. (2005: 45) emphasized the importance of external partners, like universities, that can provide such 'valuable expertise'.

The specialist's close affiliation with NNPS has helped her to address this second challenge. She has attended several workshops on using data in program development offered at the organization's leadership conferences. These workshops offered the time and space for district leaders to engage in dialogue about data with each other and NNPS researchers. This type of dialogue promotes the deep and continuous learning that is critical for reform implementation and sustainability (Fullan et al., 2004).

In addition to data workshops, NNPS also provided research briefs in its semi-annual newsletter and promising partnership practices on its website. These communications, which the specialist reported using frequently, further exposed her to a variety of types of data that support program implementation and assessment. In addition, NNPS offered targeted research opportunities in which districts and schools could participate as time and interest allowed. The district specialist took advantage of these NNPS supports for data use. In so doing, she has been a leader that has fostered within the district a 'culture of evaluation' around school, family and community partnerships that research suggests is central to meaningful and sustained change (Fullan et al., 2005).

Implications for Educational Leaders

This study shows that data can be important tools for educational reform. What then, are its implications for educational leaders? Here I describe three of what I believe are the study's most significant implications for leaders who seek to enhance the implementation and sustainability of reforms within their local educational agencies.

- (1) Define data broadly. Too often in discussions of data-based accountability and data-based decision making, the emphasis is placed on quantitative data, specifically achievement tests and other standardized assessments. This study highlights the importance of multiple types of data, both quantitative and qualitative to understand not only reform outcomes, but also to understand critical issues of reform implementation, as well as stakeholders' perceptions of the value and effectiveness of the reform.
- (2) Seek assistance in the collection, management, analysis, interpretation and dissemination of data. International studies show that countries differ in the availability of educational data and the technology needed to store, analyze, and disseminate it (Knezek, n.d.; Marsh et al., 2006). Thus while some educators may be faced with the challenge of analyzing overwhelming amounts of data, others might be faced with the challenge of not having the necessary data needed to move their educational reforms forward in a responsive manner. Educational leaders interested in the use of data for school improvement, then, should seek assistance from others in their K-12 system or from those in external organizations, whether university-based organizations like NNPS, or governmental and non-profit agencies that might provide specific professional development and training in data and technology use.
- (3) Make data accessible to a broad audience. The family and community involvement specialist featured in the case study collected diverse data for diverse purposes and audiences. Consequently, she used a variety of formats to make the data meaningful to targeted audiences. The data were compiled into quarterly reports for school principals, but also were used to make posters of pie charts and bar graphs for use in professional development workshops and meetings. By using a variety of formats, the district's family and community involvement specialist was able to integrate data into a variety of activities and settings, and in so doing, standardize its presence and place in her reform efforts.

Notes

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2. For more information, visit <http://www.partnershipschoools.org>.
3. US educational reform legislation signed in 2002 as the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

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Biographical note

MAVIS G. SANDERS is Associate Professor of Education and Research Scientist at the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University. She is the author of numerous articles and books on school, family, and community partnerships, including *Building School-Community Partnerships: Collaboration for Student Success* (Corwin Press, 2005).

Correspondence to:

MAVIS G. SANDERS, Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, 3003 N. Charles Street Suite 200, Baltimore, MD 21218, USA. [email: msanders@CSOS.jhu.edu]