

# Walking the Journey **WITH DATA**

## Using Numbers to Build Collegial Relationships, Student Success



**Kim Doepker**  
Principal, Blue Ridge  
Elementary,  
Walla Walla PS

### PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Planning with Data, Creating a Culture,  
Improving Instruction*

**D**ecisions are made with data. Data drives instruction, and the numbers don't lie. These common statements during my tenure at Blue Ridge Elementary lead our work together as a staff, to increase student achievement and close the opportunity gap. We know as leaders that "In a healthy school culture, data is information, not condemnation" (Mohammad, 2013).

This article is the story of my journey over a decade as a school principal, beginning with building a healthy culture, to creating an environment where examining data was at the heart of what teachers discussed, and all the while maintaining my relationships with staff.

### THE FOCAL POINT

A principal colleague of mine challenged me to write about my experience. My journey is one of the hills and many valleys that forced me to reflect, examine, change course, and persist. As a building leader, we all know too well that when the data is good, it is reflected within staff morale, culture, and the motivation to keep digging in when times get tough. And when the numbers are not good, the eroding culture, morale, and relationships can and do happen. Thus, my relationship with data as a building principal over the past 12 years made me stop, reflect, and refine practice.

Creating and sustaining a relationship with teachers with data as the focal point is not always easy. My journey with Blue

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Ridge teachers over the course of 10 years has not been easy. There have been some downright tough times, from being “on the list” in the era of NCLB; grappling with consistently “low achieving” staff turnover; and experiencing the decline of classroom sections and certificated staff. Not to say that colleagues in the area – or even around the state – did not face these same issues. We faced them as a staff to reboot and redefine who we were.

### LOOKING AT DATA DIFFERENTLY

Blue Ridge Elementary has a 92 percent free- and reduced-lunch population, 122 of our 282 students are ELL, and 11.2 percent of students qualified for special education. Six years ago, I brought a team of teacher leaders and volunteer staff members together over the course of several months to examine our dual language program. Through discussions and consulting with dual language and reading experts from the University

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of Oregon, we decided collectively to discontinue our dual language program and focus on a one-way and English-only programming.

This was step one in looking at our school, students, and — yes — the data. A one-way immersion program means students who are native Spanish speakers receive instruction in their first language with the percentage of English instruction increasing each year, so by 5th-grade, students receive 50 percent English instruction and 50 percent Spanish instruction. Teachers felt settled and focused. They knew who would be in front of them and what they needed to do to meet their academic needs.

Consistency and stability were challenging in the first years. We had staff turnover and our data was still not yielding the results we wanted for our students. All we knew was, “Low achieving once again by state standards.” The all too familiar movie kept replaying staff working hard, collaborating on Wednesdays, talking about the curriculum – all of this was happening, but why were we not seeing the results? Needless to say, we didn’t want to look at data anymore. It was too painful and I still wanted to maintain relationships and morale.

Like many building leaders, I questioned my efforts and struggled to keep self-reflection positive. I asked myself, “If the scores weren’t going up yet, and teachers were working really hard, was the problem me; did I not have the skills to lead and close the gap?”

With the support of an education consulting group, we were able to put systems into place that not only helped us look at data in different ways, but caused us to meet regularly and discuss what was happening. Teachers were able to take a deeper dive into the standards, understanding them to point of writing exit tickets and common assessments.

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### THE GOOD AND THE BAD

After the first years struggling to get everyone on the same page, teachers embraced looking at data, whether it is good or bad. It is a part of our conversations. We share the results of exit slips, common assessments, and iReady as a way to grow. Trust among teachers is strong. I know this because teachers are working at sharing students and putting interventions into place based on their common assessments. I am able to ask probing questions about the numbers and students without damaging relationships. Teachers are able to share instructional practices and receive advice from colleagues. The triangular relationship between the principal, teacher, and data is a foundational piece that has grown, continues to grow, and is sustainable regardless if I were to leave or team members change; this process of planning, assessing, and reflecting is embedded practice.

While this may sound utopian, there is still work to be done. I reflect on the past 10 years and cringe and think, “So much time was wasted. Why couldn’t I have gotten here sooner?” The reality is it takes time. Like most administrators, we want to jump in and go 0 to 60; our sense of urgency may not be mirrored in our staff. I learned it can’t be changed overnight. To get to the heart of improvement, you have to create and sustain those relationships with staff and yes, with the data! Data can be pretty or ugly, but you still have to grapple with it.

### THE JOURNEY OF DATA

Finally, we’ve seen results. We met our five-year goal on the growth index set by our Board of Directors in one year, 96.3 percent of our

kindergarten students were in the green on iReady at the end of the school year, 95 percent of our Spanish speaking kindergarten students met the end of year Nonsense Word Fluency on the IDELS, our fourth grade students grew 27 percent on those meeting proficiency on the SBAC, and fifth-grade students grew 31 percent on those meeting proficiency on the SBAC. Those are a few of the highlights of our journey. What is not measured in numbers but goes without saying is the growth, conversations, and reflective discussions teachers engaged in throughout the school year. Their confidence and drive in the work they were doing was cemented and validated when students kept succeeding.

My journey walking with data is far from over. As a “seasoned” principal, I have learned a lot, made a lot of mistakes, but put pride on the shelf, reached out to others, shared the leadership, and kept relationships intact.

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As a building leader, we know our results are measured by the numbers – our data will yield both strengths and stretches. This journey of data is just that; not a destination to condemn, but rather a path to grow, learn and build stronger, collegial relationships that ultimately raise student achievement. ■