Using Data Wisely

In this thoughtful *Education Week* article, former Maryland central-office district official Ronald Thomas lists what he's learned about using data to improve teaching and learning:

• *Focus on instructional insights derived from data*. "We don't need 'data driven' schools," says Thomas. "We desperately need 'knowledge driven' schools… Data are useless unless organized into meaningful patterns." Some schools are getting better at creating charts and graphs that can be useful to teacher teams, but others are drowning in data.

• *Don't leave analysis to the wonks*. "Data analysis is not about numbers," says Thomas. "It is all about improving instruction… I am a former middle-school social studies teacher. If I can 'do' data, anybody can 'do' data."

• *Looking at interim assessment results should not be a solo activity*. "Data analyses are most effective when they are performed with other teachers who share the same standards and assessments," says Thomas, "and who can discuss concretely and specifically, based on student results, what is working and what is not working to increase student learning in their context."

• *Data meetings should be frequent*. Thomas says teacher teams should talk about student results at least every two weeks, during the school day, for 45-60 minutes each time.

• *Teacher teams need norms*. "The most productive data-driven teams follow established analysis protocols and enforce clear procedural and relationship norms," says Thomas. Here is the website for the Classroom-Focused Improvement Process developed at the Center for Leadership in Education at Towson University in Maryland:
http://mdk12.org/process/cfip/index.html

• *Teacher teams should focus on next steps*. "The most important questions in data analyses are not, 'What did the students score?' and 'How many passed?'", says Thomas. "The most important questions are, 'What do the students know?' 'What do they not know?' and 'What are we going to do about it?'"

• *Schools should focus on alignment*. Thomas believes that we've maxed out the potential of student interventions as the primary improvement strategy. "There is just no more time left in the school day, and no more energy left in the children," he says. The focus now should be on strengthening the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

• *Professional learning communities need to continuously improve*. Conventional PD isn't very helpful for this, says Thomas. Leaders need to work on beefing up program coherence and help teacher teams get better and better at collaborative inquiry – that is, making "ongoing instructional adjustments based on their analysis of what does and does not work for their students."

• *Keep teachers' eyes on the higher purpose of this work*. "None of these steps is going to have any impact unless, as educational leaders, we clearly articulate compelling reasons why teachers should invest time and effort in data analysis," concludes Thomas. "We did not get into this business to increase state test scores or to implement federal mandates. We are here to help

children learn." So let's focus on moral purpose, he urges – improving all students' futures and eliminating achievement gaps. "After all is said and done, isn't that why we are here?"