

Data Walls: A Success Story

Nan Woodson completed a series of very successful meetings with clients of the Center for Performance Assessment to create “Data Walls”—the best way to get data-driven decision making to the next level for effective teaching and learning.

Q. *Tell me about your recent experience in California with Data Walls.*

A. I met with Fresno Unified School District site council planning teams composed of principals, assistant principals, program managers, and representative teaching staff. They were charged with writing their school’s 2004–2006 school site plan.

Q. *What prior training had the participants received?*

A. Last year, the district’s school site-plan writing process was framed to coincide with the knowledge and understanding of the data-driven decision-making process. Participants were introduced to the data process over several months in order to clarify the actual planning of programs, strategies, and goals for their site plan. Many site council members also serve on this year’s writing team and therefore bring with them knowledge of the data process, while some participants are new to the site-planning and data process. The best news is that many buildings now have active Data Teams established and are well on their way to becoming a data culture.

Q. *What exactly did the Data Walls look like?*

A. Each school has a three-panel display board. We used the Center’s guidelines for “Science Fair for Grownups.” The left-hand side includes state test score data and information on Adequate Yearly Progress for that school. Each school also has a graph that shows the school’s math and English language arts scores based on every subgroup, including special education, English-language learners, economically disadvantaged students, and various ethnic groups. You are able to immediately identify each group and the degree they are below, at, or above the AYP “red line” or goal. No one even needs to decode which subgroups need urgent support. In addition, a year from now, it will be evident the extent certain subgroups are making progress and which groups need continuing assistance and immediate focus.

The middle panel also shows activities and strategies at the classroom and building levels. We are working very hard to focus on a few strategies and supporting activities and not let this become a laundry list of everything that teachers and principals want to do.

The right-hand panel demonstrates how the buildings measure progress. They display evidence that testifies they are making progress during the school year—not just waiting until the end of the year for a report from the state. Examples include classroom-based performance assessments, common end-of-quarter assessments, monthly writing assessments, district quarterly assessments, and so on. In short, a representation of formative, not just summative, assessments, and that is a huge area of growth for these educators. Teachers are taking personal and professional responsibility for measuring progress during the year, and this will help them make midcourse corrections during the year.

Q. *What was the planning process like before your work with the schools?*

- A.** Barbara Bengel, Director of State and Federal Programs for Fresno Unified, is responsible for her insight, direction, and advance preparation in order to support the process of writing school site plans. She recognizes that the writing of the site plans must be collaborative with all interested parties involved, but within a logical, sequential thinking process. Without this logic and scaffold, site plans become a document no one refers to, monitors, or is accountable to as the school year progresses.

Once the recommendation for Data Walls was made by superintendent Dr. Santiago Wood, Barbara and her team assembled all materials needed for the creation of the Data Walls: display boards, preprinted titles for each component of the Data Wall, brightly colored paper for accents, scissors, glue, and markers. In addition to the materials, Barbara had prepared a folder for each individual school team containing current AYP data, CST results in the form of bar graphs, and a bottom-line “red-line” graph with a column for each subgroup at that particular site. Teams were to access the AYP report and color the graph to clearly show the relationship of the school total with the subgroup totals. Clearly printed on each school’s graph is the AYP goal—the “red-line.”

The relationship between the bars and the distance above, proximity to, or even below the “red-line” was an immediate point of powerful conversation and focus. Barbara’s advance planning and direction is the secret to a successful phase one of the site-planning process. Simply put, not one minute of the district-wide professional development was wasted looking for materials or scores. Our initial time was clearly focused on the reasoning behind the scores, allowing very relevant and timely conversations to take place about cause data, goals, strategies, and assessment options.

Q. *How did this work relate to the building site plans?*

- A.** The initial site-planning process started in November 2003 and we are continuing our ongoing, highly supportive meetings through February 2004. In the past, site plans were created without a great deal of clear reference to data. This year, the Data Walls are intricately linked to the development of site plans because of the aspects of what is displayed on the Data Walls: data related to current reality, goals, strategies, activities, assessments to monitor progress related to continuous student achievement. This year, the relationship between effective strategies and activities is pronounced with the ever-present question: Is it working? How do you know? Who are students who need immediate intervention? What is the plan to close the gap? How will you monitor whether the intervention has had the desired effect? The best thing is that the participants are looking at the previous year’s site plans and confronting the difference between what they intended to do and what they are actually currently implementing. Next year’s site plans will be much more focused with fewer strategies, all of which are related to the most important needs of students.

Q. *What else did the Data Walls display?*

- A.** Many of the teams are wonderfully creative. Some Data Walls included photographs of teachers engaged in the activities and strategies listed that are aligned to goals, and graphs of student performance, along with a clear relationship between strategies and student achievement results. Educators really understand the Center’s philosophy that “less is more” and they are able to narrow the focus of their activities and align strategies specifically geared toward improving understanding and application of concepts and skills.

Q. What sorts of reactions did you receive from participants?

- A.** The enthusiasm is wonderful. People are astounded at the frank conversations taking place across the district between teachers, grade levels, departments, etc. Some statements made by participants include:
- “I can’t believe we are really talking about this stuff.”
 - “We’ve had student achievement scores in binders and cabinets, but we’ve never had them on display as we are doing now.”
 - “What we’re doing now is preparing to write our reports—actually linking what we do in staff development to real-world requirements.”
 - “It’s great to work on this before the end of the year.”
 - “We’re doing accountability work when it counts—during the year.”
 - “I expected this to be dull and boring, but I feel that I now have a new lease on teaching.”
 - “My wheels are turning—I can’t wait for the next meeting.”

Q. What other observations did you make?

- A.** One of the best accomplishments is that at one school, teachers are willing to put their own names on the Data Wall—the first time it has ever happened. It allows them to highlight their best practices and challenge one another to address the issues that are most important for their students. Best of all, this process has prepared the path for effective collaboration and critical conversations. Teachers and principals are sharing ideas, analyzing data and the effectiveness of strategies, all within the data-driven decision-making format.