

A system depends on a feedback loop / cycle of Plan Do Check Act

Output Systems

Continuous Improvement Systems

Chapter 7

Using Relevant Information to Improve Results

Part One The Case Study: The Reluctance to Use Information

In a professional learning community, educators are hungry for evidence of student learning. Relevant, timely information is the essential fuel of their continuous improvement process.

After attending a Professional Learning Communities Institute, the school improvement committee of Gladys Knight Charter School (nickname: The Pips) unanimously resolved to use the model as the framework for improving their school. Their principal pledged her full support for the initiative. Over the summer, committee members sent supporting materials and articles on PLCs to the entire staff. When the teachers returned in August, the committee convened small-group faculty meetings to respond to any questions and concerns regarding their proposal to implement PLC concepts.

The staff's response was generally very positive. Teachers agreed it made sense to work together in collaborative teams once they were assured that work would occur during their contractual day. They acknowledged the benefits of working together to clarify what students were to learn. They agreed the school should build systematic interventions to ensure students who struggled received additional time and support for learning, and they supported the premise that common curriculum pacing was an important element in an effective intervention system.

The one aspect of the committee's proposal that met with resistance was requiring teams to develop and administer common formative assessments multiple times throughout the year in language arts and math. The committee reasoned that the results of the assessments could be used to identify students in need of additional assistance, to discover problem areas in the curriculum,

and, very importantly, to help individual staff members discover strengths and weaknesses in their teaching.

Teachers raised a number of concerns regarding the use of common assessments. They expressed confidence in the competence of every teacher and argued that differences in student achievement on common assessments could be attributed to a number of factors—including the effort and ability of students—rather than to the effectiveness of the instruction. They felt any attempt to use data from common assessments to make inferences regarding the proficiency of teachers was invalid. They saw the potential for great harm: Results could be used to evaluate teachers or to create winners and losers among the staff. Teachers' self-esteem could suffer. Common assessments could be a first step in a scheme to establish merit pay.

Teachers also argued that common team-developed assessments would not contribute to school improvement. They maintained that if teachers agreed to work together collaboratively to clarify essential learning and to plan effective lessons, student achievement would be certain to improve. If, as the research suggested, collaborative processes among teachers were truly linked to higher levels of student learning, teachers need only focus on the process, confident that improved results would be the inevitable consequence of their efforts. If results became the focus, they argued, teachers would pay less attention to meaningful collaboration and would merely teach to the test.

Finally, they argued that the only results that mattered in the state accountability system were the results from the state test. If teachers were to spend time on data analysis, they should focus on student performance on the state test rather than on creating another entire level of assessment.

low Trust ⇒ CFAs & Teacher Evaluations

Input focus rather than results orientation
Not likely ?

Giving up control to the state
Summative rather than formative analysis

Reflection

Consider the case study and the arguments presented by those who oppose the use of common assessments to monitor results. Should the committee abandon the proposal to ask each grade-level team to develop common formative assessments?



and, very importantly, to help individual staff members discover strengths and weaknesses in their teaching.

Teachers raised a number of concerns regarding the use of common assessments. They expressed confidence in the competence of every teacher and argued that differences in student achievement on common assessments could be attributed to a number of factors—including the effort and ability of students—rather than to the effectiveness of the instruction. They felt any attempt to use data from common assessments to make inferences regarding the proficiency of teachers was invalid. They saw the potential for great harm: Results could be used to evaluate teachers or to create winners and losers among the staff. Teachers' self-esteem could suffer. Common assessments could be a first step in a scheme to establish merit pay.

Teachers also argued that common team-developed assessments would not contribute to school improvement. They maintained that if teachers agreed to work together collaboratively to clarify essential learning and to plan effective lessons, student achievement would be certain to improve. If, as the research suggested, collaborative processes among teachers were truly linked to higher levels of student learning, teachers need only focus on the process, confident that improved results would be the inevitable consequence of their efforts. If results became the focus, they argued, teachers would pay less attention to meaningful collaboration and would merely teach to the test.

Finally, they argued that the only results that mattered in the state accountability system were the results from the state test. If teachers were to spend time on data analysis, they should focus on student performance on the state test rather than on creating another entire level of assessment.

low Trust => CFAS & Teacher Evaluations
Input focus rather than results orientation
Not Likely ?

Giving up control to the state
Summative rather than formative analysis

Reflection

Consider the case study and the arguments presented by those who oppose the use of common assessments to monitor results. Should the committee abandon the proposal to ask each grade-level team to develop common formative assessments?



Part Two Here's How



Schools only become PLCs if they switch their focus from inputs to outcomes and from activities to results.

Inputs vs Outputs

Taking Control
↓

The challenge for schools is to provide each teacher with powerful and authentic information in a timely manner in order to impact his or her professional practice in ways that enhance student learning.

The very reason to engage in the PLC process is to improve results; therefore, it is incongruous to argue that the process should be inattentive to results. For too long schools have focused on process and inputs, operating under the faulty assumption that improved learning is guaranteed if we select the right curriculum, create the right schedule, buy the right textbook, increase graduation requirements, extend the school year, and so on. That assumption has repeatedly, consistently, and invariably proven to be incorrect. Schools only become PLCs if they switch their focus from inputs to outcomes and from activities to results.

Those who think teachers can substitute discussion about how to teach a concept at the outset of a unit for systems that ensure each teacher gets useful information on results ignore an important point: All opinions are not of equal value. Two teachers can be passionately convinced of the superiority of their respective strategies for teaching a concept. How is it possible to determine if one of those teachers has, in fact, discovered a powerful way to teach that concept? It is through the collective examination of results—tangible evidence of student learning—that teachers' dialogue moves from sharing opinions to building shared knowledge, which is an essential step on the journey to developing the capacity to function as a PLC.

In the previous chapter, we argued that one powerful strategy to help create a results orientation in a school is to ask the collaborative teams within it to establish SMART goals that are specifically aligned with the goals of the school and district. Results-oriented goals are *essential* to effective teams. And the capacity of teams to achieve their goals improves dramatically when members have access to feedback that informs their individual practice—feedback that helps them discover what is working and what is not working in their instructional strategies.

The challenge for schools then is to provide each teacher with the most powerful and authentic information in a timely manner so that it can impact his or her professional practice in ways that enhance student learning. As we mentioned in chapter 3, state and provincial assessments fail to provide such feedback. Classroom assessments, on the other hand, can offer the timely feedback teachers need, and when those assessments are developed by a collaborative team of teachers, they also offer a basis of comparison that is essential for informing professional practice.

Schools have been called upon to become more “data driven”; however, this focus is misplaced because schools have never suffered from a lack of data.

“An astonishing number of educational leaders make critical decisions . . . on the basis of information that is inadequate, misunderstood, misrepresented, or simply absent.”
(Reeves, 2002, p. 95)

The old adage, “practice makes perfect,” is patently false. Those who continue to engage in ineffective practices are unable to improve, much less reach perfection.

Every teacher who works in isolation can generate a mountain of data with every test he or she administers: mean, mode, median, percentage passing, percentage failing, and so on. Teachers can give their same individual assessments over a period of years, get similar results year after year, and thus have access to longitudinal data. But unless they have a basis of comparison, they cannot identify strengths and weaknesses in their teaching, and they are unable to determine if an area in which students are struggling is a function of the curriculum, their strategies, or their students.

Lack of data is not the problem. Schools typically suffer from what Robert Waterman (1987) has called the DRIP syndrome: They are Data Rich but Information Poor. Data alone will not inform a teacher’s professional practice and thus cannot become a catalyst for improvement unless those data are put in context to provide a basis for comparison. Even then, the basis of comparison must be valid. For generations, teachers with high rates of failing students have not been persuaded by comparative data. They have quickly dismissed the results as an indication of their colleagues’ lower standards. But when a teacher has access to data that compares the performance of his or her students to similar students taught by colleagues, on an assessment that he or she helped to write, it becomes much more difficult to dismiss unfavorable results.

The old adage, “practice makes perfect,” is patently false. Those who continue to engage in ineffective practices are unable to improve, much less reach perfection. A student who completes 50 math problems with the same multiplication error repeated over and over has not improved his ability to solve math problems. The golfer who hits bucket after bucket of golf balls with a major flaw in her swing does not improve her ability to make par. And a teacher who uses the same ineffective practices over and over again can work harder and harder at those practices, and still not improve learning for students. What each person in these examples requires is feedback—the more timely, frequent, and precise, the better. Then, of course, each will need support as they attempt to implement the strategies recommended for improvement.

It could be argued that teacher supervision and evaluation programs have been established to provide feedback to teachers, but any candid educator would be forced to acknowledge the limits of these programs in impacting teacher practice. Even if the feedback is precise, it is neither timely nor frequent. Furthermore, rarely have we seen veteran teachers respond with enthusiasm to a supervisor’s suggestion that practices they have embraced for years are ineffective.

The best way to provide powerful feedback to teachers and to turn data into information *that can improve teaching and learning* is through team-developed and team-analyzed common formative assessments. If the school in this case



study, or any school, is to develop the capacity of the faculty to function as a PLC, it must create systems to ensure that each teacher:

1. Receives *frequent and timely feedback* on the performance of his or her students,
2. in meeting an *agreed-upon proficiency standard* established by the collaborative team,
3. on a *valid assessment* created by the team,
4. *in comparison to other students* in the school attempting to meet that same standard.

Finally, the school must also ensure that each teacher has the benefit of a collaborative team to turn to and learn from as he or she explores ways to improve learning for students.

Chapter 3 describes the process teams should use in developing common formative assessments and explains in detail the reasons why such assessments are vital to progressing as a PLC. The power of common formative assessments is diminished, however, if individual teachers are not provided with a basis of comparison as they examine the results for their students.

The leading authorities on school improvement are remarkably consistent in their position on this strategy. Their “Here’s How” response to the question of how to improve student achievement invariably calls upon teams to develop common formative assessments, to work together as they analyze results, and to help each other become more effective as individual teachers and as a team. Doug Reeves (2002) calls for “common collaboratively scored assessments” at least every quarter (p. 37). Michael Fullan (2004) contends the process is “one of the most powerful, high leverage strategies for improving student achievement that we know of” (p. 71). Rick Stiggins (2005) concludes the extent to which teams engage in the process will allow them to benefit from their collective wisdom “about how to help our students grow as learners” (p. 82). Mike Schmoker (2005) calls this process a “well-established way to appreciably improve both teaching quality and levels of learning” (p. xi).

It has been said that collecting data is only the first step toward wisdom: sharing data is the first step toward community. If the school in this case study is to become a professional learning *community*, it must create the structures and the culture to ensure data from common formative assessments become easily accessible and openly shared among teachers who are working together interdependently toward the same SMART goal that represents higher levels of learning for their students. Every teacher should be able to ascertain how the performance of his or her students compares to all similar students taking the



The best way to provide powerful feedback to teachers and to turn data into information *that can improve teaching and learning* is through team-developed and team-analyzed common formative assessments.

-Trust Issue

same assessment. Only then will individuals and teams receive the information vital to continuous improvement and a focus on results.

Part Three Here's Why

No school that purports a commitment to help all students learn can be inattentive to results. Learning organizations are, by definition, “organizations where people continually expand their capacities to create the *results* [italics added] they truly desire” (Senge, 1990, p. 3). A focus on results:

- Is essential to organizational effectiveness
- Is essential to the effectiveness of teams
- Serves as a powerful motivator
- Is essential to continuous improvement

A Focus on Results Is Essential to Organizational Effectiveness

Whereas ineffective organizations are “activity centered, a fundamentally flawed logic that confuses ends with means, processes with outcomes” (Schaffer & Thomson, 1998, p. 191), effective organizations “create results driven improvement processes” that focus on achieving specific, measurable improvement goals (p. 193). They continuously improve and renew by gathering and disseminating comparative data to inform the practice of people throughout the organization (Kotter, 1996; Waterman, 1987). Leaders of these organizations are “fanatically driven, infected with an incurable desire to produce *results* (Collins, 2001, p. 30) because results are what leadership is all about (Drucker, 1996). “The outcome of effective leadership is simple: it must turn aspirations into actions. . . . It will not be enough to declare an intent; leaders will have to deliver results” (Ulrich, 1996, p. 211).

Schools and districts that focus on results by creating specific learning goals for students and monitoring learning on a timely, systematic basis are more effective in raising student achievement (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Council of Chief School Officers, 2002; Lezotte, 1997; Marzano, 2003). The major distinction between schools that are able to close the achievement gap among groups of students and those unable to do so is how schools use data (Symonds, 2004). Teachers in gap-closing schools use assessments more often, use data more frequently, and work collaboratively to analyze and act upon the data.



Teachers in gap-closing schools use assessments more often, use data more frequently, and work collaboratively to analyze and act upon the data.



Without attention to results, it is impossible for any group or organization to assess the effectiveness of improvement processes (Schmoker, 1996). As James Champy (1995) advised, “Unless you can subject your decision-making to a ruthless and continuous *judgment by results*, all your zigs and zags will only be random lunges in the dark” (p. 120). No wonder school leaders have been advised to “manage by results rather than by programs and inspire others to manage by results as well” (Schlechy, 1997, p. 71).

A Focus on Results Is Essential to Team Effectiveness

Teams that focus on results are more effective than those that center their work on activities and tasks (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Whereas inattention to results is characteristic of dysfunctional teams, the “ultimate measure of a great team” is the results it achieves (Lencioni, 2005, p. 69). Teams accomplish the most when they are clear and unambiguous about what they want to achieve, when they clarify how they will measure their progress, and when they create a scoreboard that helps keep them focused on results (Lencioni, 2005). When teams work together to establish measurable goals, collect and analyze data regarding their progress, and monitor and adjust their actions, they produce results that “guide, goad, and motivate groups and individuals” (Schmoker, 1996, p. 38).

A Focus on Results Can Serve as a Powerful Motivator

In chapter 2, we described the need for incremental gains or “small wins” to sustain an improvement initiative. Those gains are discernible only if close attention is paid to results. Furthermore, providing evidence of results is one of the most effective ways to win the support of resisters. Some people need to see tangible evidence of results before they will commit. But when skeptics “feel the magic of momentum, when they can begin to see tangible results—that is when they will get on board” (Collins, 2001, p. 178).



A Focus on Results Is Essential to Continuous Improvement

Frederick Winslow Taylor, the father of scientific management, called upon leaders to identify the “one right way” to perform a task and then create systems to ensure that employees adhered to that specific practice. His philosophy, which provided the conceptual framework for the factory assembly line, required management to get it right and then keep it going. Public schools borrowed heavily from scientific management, calling for leaders to select the appropriate inputs and systems (curriculum, schedules, materials) and for workers (that is, teachers) to adhere to the decisions made by others. This legacy has created a tradition in which “schools are structured to reinforce continuity, not continuous improvement” (Consortium on Productivity in Schools, 1995, p. 51).

No organization can continue to improve unless the people within it engage in ongoing learning.



Timely feedback is a critical element in any process to promote continuous learning. Individuals and teams must have access to the data and information that enable them to make adjustments as they are engaged in their work, rather than when it is completed.

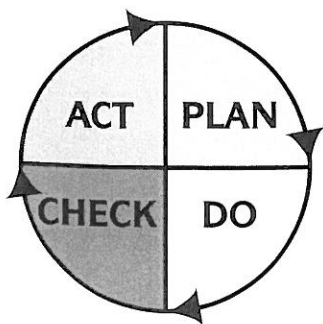
In contrast, PLCs are committed to continuous improvement, an essential element of any learning organization. Members of PLCs recognize their challenge is not to get it right and keep it going, but to “get it right and make it better and better and better” (Champy, 1995, p. 27). No organization can continue to improve unless the people within it engage in ongoing learning. Therefore, leaders of PLCs build continuous learning into the work processes of every individual and every team by working with staff to create clearly defined goals, to align activities around those goals, to clarify measurements of progress, and to focus on results (Deming, 2000; Drucker, 1992). Without this commitment to continuous improvement, schools and districts will be unable to meet the challenges that confront them (American Association of School Administrators, 1999).

Timely feedback is a critical element in any process to promote continuous learning. Individuals and teams must have access to the data and information that enable them to make adjustments as they are engaged in their work, rather than when it is completed (Covey, 1996; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). The information gleaned from an “instructionally useful test will enable teachers to do a better job of instructing their students. And that, after all, should be the reason we test students in the first place” (Popham, 2003, p. 49).

Once again, summative state and provincial assessments fail to provide such feedback. As Rick Stiggins (2004, p. 23) observed, these assessments are “grossly insufficient” as a tool for school improvement and offer “little value at the instructional level” (2001, p. 385). A comprehensive review of research found that formative assessments are far more powerful in promoting improvement than summative assessments. As a summary of that research concluded, “few initiatives in education have had such a strong body of evidence to support a claim to raise standards” as formative assessment (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marsh, & William, 2004, p. 9).

The Central Importance of a Results Orientation

The process of becoming a PLC is designed to achieve a very specific purpose: to continuously improve the collective capacity of a group to achieve intended results. Therefore, it is incongruous to engage in elements of the process and ignore results. When Edward Deming introduced continuous improvement into industry, he presented a four-step feedback loop (see the figure on the left) to allow workers to identify and improve upon problem areas:



1. **Plan:** Design processes to improve results.
2. **Do:** Implement the plan and measure its performance.
3. **Check:** Analyze, assess, and report on the results.
4. **Act:** Decide what changes must be made to improve the process, and adjust accordingly.



Schools and districts that ignore results, or allow only a few members of the organization to concern themselves with results while others ignore them, do not engage in continuous improvement. Their cycle is not Plan, Do, Check, Act (and Adjust), but rather Plan, Do, Do, Do. Soon they are spinning their wheels, stuck in a rut. Improving schools avoid this trap by engaging the people who do the work, teachers and principals, in ongoing processes to identify and monitor results they recognize as valid and relevant (Dolan, 1994). These processes are essential to continual improvement, and a culture of continuous improvement is the “most important change to bring to the school” (Barth, 1991, p. 127).

Throughout this book we have referred to collaborative teams as the engine that drives the PLC process, so consider a sports analogy and assess the likelihood of success of the following football teams:

Tom Petty High School. The Heartbreakers. Team Motto: “Why Bother?” Students sign up for the team, but never take steps to create a team. They never select a captain, assign positions, or schedule a practice. In fact, they never even get in the game.

Harry Houdini High School. The Magicians. Team Motto: “Committed to the Art of Illusion.” Students sign up for the team and are given a playbook. No time is spent studying the playbook or practicing the plays. At game time, each player freelances.

Alfred E. Neuman High School. The Lethargics. Team Motto: “What, Me Worry?” Students sign up for the team, receive a playbook, and attend practices to work on their plays, but absenteeism at practice is a chronic problem. Those who do attend frequently engage in horseplay and spend time talking about their social problems rather than focusing on the task.

George Santayana High School. The Historians. Team Motto: “Those Who Do Not Learn From the Past Are Condemned to Repeat It.” Students sign up for the team, receive a playbook, attend practices faithfully, and devote practice time to becoming proficient at running a few plays on offense and operating a basic defense. At game time they run those same plays and present the same defensive alignment, regardless of the score, the situation, or the team they are playing. Opponents know exactly what to expect from this team.

W. C. Fields High School. The Competitors. Team Motto: “If at First You Don’t Succeed, Try Again. Then Quit. No Sense in Being a Darn Fool About It.” Students sign up for the team, receive a playbook, attend practices faithfully, and use practice time to develop their proficiency on offense, defense, and specialty teams. They use basic statistics to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the teams they are to play: Are they a passing team or a running team? Are they vulnerable to the pass or the run? They prepare their game plan

accordingly and execute it without deviation. If, however, the opponent deviates from the expected, the team is unable to adjust.

Lake Wobegon High School. The Prairie Companions. Team Motto: “Good Is the Enemy of Great.” Students sign up for the team, receive a playbook, and use practice time purposefully. The team uses statistics (that is, data) as part of their routine practice. They carefully review game films of their opponents to discover their strengths, weaknesses, and tendencies. The team builds common knowledge: Our opponent runs off left tackle on short yardage plays over 70% of the time, if the quarterback rolls left he will throw an out pattern, their blitz comes from the linebackers rather than the cornerback almost 100% of the time, and so on. They also examine the statistics and films of their own games to discover areas needing attention. In order to achieve the overarching goal—victory—each group in the team establishes specific goals: The defense will yield no more than 250 total yards and will create at least one turnover. The offense will gain at least 150 yards on the ground and control the ball for 60% of the game. Each member of the team knows the goals and how he or she can contribute to achieving them.

Vince Lombardi High School. The Champions. Team Motto: “The Quality of a Person’s Life Is in Direct Proportion to His or Her Commitment to Excellence.” This team replicates everything done by team Wobegon, but in addition, they are hungry for data and use both data and individual and collective experience to make adjustments throughout the game. Players examine pictures on the sidelines to come to a better understanding of what their opponents are doing and collaborate regarding how they might respond. They openly share concerns and ideas. With the help of their coaches, they reflect on their experience at half time and create new strategies to achieve their goals. They are committed to working interdependently to achieve goals for which they are mutually accountable, and they use data to establish interim goals, to monitor their progress, and to make adjustments in order to increase the likelihood of achieving their shared purpose.

We have seen examples of each of these teams in schools and districts that characterize themselves as professional learning communities. In some, a pronouncement is made, “We are a professional learning community,” but nothing changes: No steps are taken to begin the process. They never get in the game. In others, teachers are given state standards and district curriculum guides to direct their work, but they never come together to clarify the curriculum or how it could best be taught and assessed. In some, teachers are provided with time to collaborate, but the time is wasted as they focus on matters unrelated to teaching and learning. In others, they collaborate on essential learning and create common assessments, but they do nothing with the results other than to assign grades. No



effort is made to identify individual students who need help on specific skills, nor do members of the team use data to inform and improve their practice.

In schools and districts that are progressing as PLCs, teams gather and collaborate about data and use data to monitor student learning and to set SMART goals. Members of the team understand their individual roles and responsibilities and work together to achieve their targets. Finally, in PLCs, teams view data as an essential component of their process of continuous improvement. They use the results of every common assessment to identify individual students who need additional time and support for learning, to discover strengths and weaknesses in their teaching, and to inform and adjust their practice to increase the likelihood they will achieve their shared purpose: higher levels of learning for all students. They are not satisfied with taking a few half-steps on the road to becoming a PLC. They commit fully to stay the course.

Once again, there is no recipe or step-by-step manual for becoming a PLC, but there are some things that must be done as part of the process. Using results to inform and improve practice is one of those things, and schools that are sincere in their desire to create a PLC will act accordingly. Inattention to results is antithetical to becoming a PLC.

Inattention to results is antithetical to becoming a PLC.

Part Four Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey

The PLC Continuum

Working individually and quietly, review the continuum of a school's progress on the PLC journey (page 156). Which point on the continuum gives the most accurate description of the current reality of your school or district? Be prepared to support your assessment with evidence and anecdotes.

After working individually, share your assessment with colleagues. Where do you have agreement? Where do you find discrepancies in the assessments? Listen to the rationales of others in support of their varying assessments. Are you able to reach agreement?

Where Do We Go From Here?

The challenge confronting a school that has engaged in the collective consideration of a topic is answering the questions, "So what?" and, "What, if anything, are we prepared to do differently?" Now consider each indicator of a professional learning community described in the left column of the Where Do We Go From Here? Worksheet on page 157, and then answer the questions listed at the top of the remaining four columns.

Part Five

Tips for Moving Forward: Creating a Results Orientation

1 **Use feedback on results to inform, not punish.** In order to promote continuous improvement, feedback must not only be timely, it must also be effective. Feedback can encourage effort and improvement, but it can and often is used in ways that create a sense of hopelessness. The lessons learned from research on feedback for students can be applied to adults as well. Whenever an activity is viewed as a competition, there will be winners and losers. When feedback to students takes the form of grades, they are likely to see assessment as a competition or a way to compare their achievement with others. Students with a track record as losers see little point in trying; however, when they are clear on intended learning outcomes and are provided with feedback as part of a formative process for improving their work, and are then given support in clarifying how they can close the gap, they are more likely to continue working until they achieve the targets (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marsh, & William, 2004; Chappuis, 2005; Stiggins, 2001).

* Schools that hope to create a culture of continuous improvement should provide every teacher with results from frequent, common formative assessments on a timely basis, but they should not use those results to compare and assess teachers. For more than 20 years, Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, has used frequent, common formative assessments developed by collaborative teams of teachers to drive its continuous improvement process—a process that has made Stevenson one of the most celebrated schools in America. Over the course of those two decades, common assessments have been administered thousands of times, *and on every one of those assessments, one teacher found that his or her students had the lowest scores on the team*. Stevenson administrators and teachers recognize there will always be a teacher with the lowest results on any given common assessment, just as there will always be 50% of the students in the bottom half of the graduating class. Therefore, when teams work collaboratively to analyze the results from common assessments, their focus is not on who had the best or the worst results, but rather on what they can do collectively to improve student learning.

* Conversely, if a collaborative team develops and administers common assessments in the worst, most ineffective schools in the nation, one of those ineffective teachers will have the best results. It makes little sense to focus on comparison of teachers; there will always be a best and a worst. The goal is to provide each team and each teacher with the information and support necessary



to fuel continuous improvement. The underlying assumption of the continuous improvement philosophy demands that we use ourselves as benchmarks and then work to improve upon our previous performance (Gerstner, Semerad, Doyle, & Johnston, 1995). The most effective organizations focus less on using data “to try to assess individual performance and more [on using data] to focus attention on factors critical to organizational success” (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000, p. 173).

Attention to results can serve many purposes: identifying students who need additional time and support in order to become proficient in an essential skill, helping teams mark progress toward their goals, providing individual teachers with timely feedback on the effectiveness of their strategies, and providing a basis of celebration for small wins. But we strongly advise against using results to assess individual teachers. There is no benefit—but rather there is considerable detriment—to the school when they are used for that purpose.



2 Provide the basis of comparison that translates data into information. Remember that data alone will not help individuals or teams improve. They need the context of valid comparison to identify strengths and weaknesses.

3 Use apples-to-apples comparisons. Comparisons are most informative when conditions are similar. Schools with students from high-performing communities often take great satisfaction in “comparing” the performance of their students to state averages, but such comparisons do little to promote improvement. If a school places students into classrooms on the basis of multiple ability groups, it accomplishes little to compare the performance of students in the highest group to those in the lowest. Equivalent situations yield the most meaningful comparisons. Remember Gerstner’s admonition that the comparisons most effective in promoting continuous improvement are comparisons to ourselves: What evidence do we have that we are becoming more effective?

4 Use balanced assessments. No single assessment source yields the comprehensive results necessary to inform and improve practice. The best strategy to gather results is to seek *balanced assessment* (National Education Association, 2003). Part of that balance is between summative assessments *of* learning and formative assessments *for* learning. Summative state and provincial assessments provide an important accountability tool for schools and districts. They demonstrate how local students perform compared to others in the state seeking the same outcomes, and they provide a means to certify the validity of local formative assessments. Common formative assessments created within a school or district can direct teacher practice and identify students



needing assistance on a timely basis. Both are important and should be utilized in a school or district assessment program.

Balanced assessment can also refer to using different types of formative assessments based upon the knowledge or skills students are called upon to demonstrate. Rather than relying exclusively on one kind of assessment—multiple choice tests, performance-based assessments, constructed response tests, and so on—teachers should attempt to determine the best evidence of student learning and the most effective ways to gather that evidence. Schools and teams must develop multiple ways for students to demonstrate proficiency.

Authentic
Academic
Assessment *

5 **Teachers and principals must engage in data analysis rather than outsourcing the task to others.** It is not realistic to expect teachers and principals to become statisticians. The central office can and should take steps to ensure information is provided to schools and teams in an easily interpreted, user-friendly format. It should not, however, exempt the educators in the building from doing their own analysis of the information. “There is no substitute for classroom-by-classroom, school-by-school analysis” by the people who are called upon to develop the improvement strategies: teachers and principals (Reeves, 2002, p. 107).

Teacher
grades

6 **A fixation with results does not mean inattention to people.** There are those who suggest an organization committed to results will be inattentive to the needs of the people within it, willing to sacrifice individuals on the altar of the bottom line. These people fall victim to the “Tyranny of Or.” Professional learning communities are committed to both results and relationships. They recognize that the best way to achieve the collective purpose of the group is through collaborative relationships that foster the ongoing growth and development of the people who produce the results. They recognize that the very key to school improvement is people improvement, and they commit to creating cultures that help individuals become more proficient, effective, and fulfilled by virtue of the fact that they work in that school or district.

Imp

