

Data-Driven Instruction

| By Elizabeth Rafferty

As soon as I returned for my second year of teaching, I began supporting other teachers. Throughout my career, I have worked to help educators become the best versions of themselves so they can have as great of an impact on students as possible. In all of my work, I see a primary goal in shifting teachers' perspectives about students. I work to shift conversations from being centered on what a student can't do or is doing wrong into conversations around what the student can do or what the student needs. In the past, it often took a lot of time, energy, and relentlessness for me to onboard teachers with this philosophy. One of the most effective ways I've found to help teachers grow in this philosophy is looking at data, particularly when that data is framed around what a student can do and what a student needs.

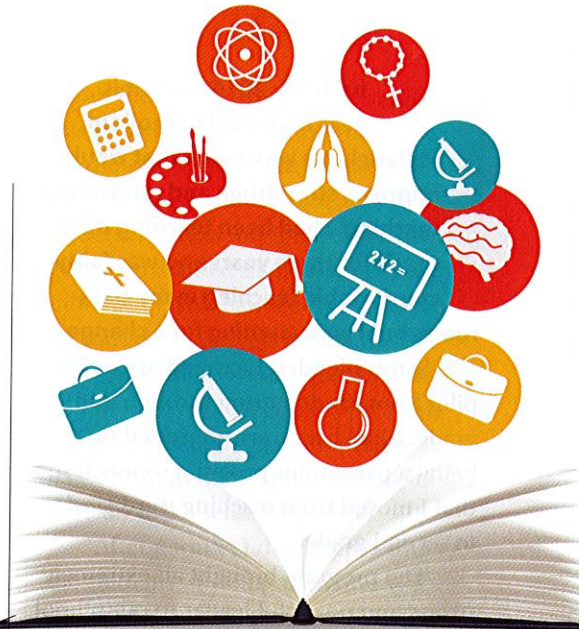
In various roles, I have used various processes to collect and utilize this data – I would use Functional Behavior Assessments, do extensive observations, and inventory student strengths and weaknesses. Although these analyses were powerful in shifting teacher mindsets, the data lived with me. As a result, the shifts moved slowly and the teachers did not “own” the discoveries. Life changed for me when I was able to teach the teachers to use data frequently, meaningfully, and self-sufficiently.

With the introduction of blended

learning, I am able to train teachers to use data to make instructional decisions daily or weekly. Through the lens of data, I am finding this initial mindset shift for teachers to come much more easily, so we can more quickly get into the work of truly serving students. Teachers can track student growth on a daily basis with the data from blended learning, so we have been able to cultivate a growth mindset in a real way. Students and teachers talk about “growing their brain,” and regularly look at data to see this growth. Mindsets shift, gaps are filled in, and momentum builds.

Because teachers get a very quick handle on student strengths and weaknesses, they experience the success of this mindset early. For example, I supported a teacher whose i-Ready data quickly uncovered an important discovery about a student, Alayah. Upon her initial assessment, the teacher had placed Alayah in her top reading group. Quickly, she noticed Alayah acting out during guided reading, which the teacher attributed to a new school year, a new school, and thought maybe Alayah was “showing off.” Perhaps she needed a behavior plan.

A data-dive led us to a different narrative. i-Ready data revealed that Alayah had high vocabulary and verbal comprehension skills – which is why the teacher assumed she was a strong reader off the bat – but was extremely low in phonics, fluency, and reading



comprehension. Said the teacher about the discovery, “I would have figured it out when we got further into the year, but it would have taken me much longer. I usually don’t know my kids this well until November.”

With this early discovery, this teacher was able to magnify her impact, reaching students individually through their on-line instruction and providing the types of specific intervention that this reader in particular, and her students in general, needed. Says a 15-year veteran teacher who made the transition to blended learning and data usage last year, “I have the ability to differentiate, truly differentiate, beyond what I have ever been able to do before. Blended gives me a tool I could never create on my own, and I can target instruction in a more precise way.”

Elizabeth Rafferty works for Seton Education Partners, supporting urban Catholic schools as they launch blended learning.