

# Using Data to Realign Resources

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When budgets are tight, it is necessary to do more with what is already available.

Three resources are likely under school leaders' control: personnel, programming, and time.

Using data to reallocate teachers, adjust programming, and reconfigure time can create dramatic results at little expense.



Schools and districts across the country are being subjected to some of the fiercest budget cuts in recent history, even as principals are held increasingly accountable for significantly improving student achievement, particularly in schools labeled “persistently low-achieving.” For the 5,000 lowest-performing schools, there is the option of (and tremendous pressure to win) Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs), which can provide millions of dollars over the course of three years to help them turn around. But not every needy school will develop a successful application, and even for those schools that do succeed, the money alone will not change their learning environments. Many other schools have needs that are perceived as insurmountable by the school community, yet they are not eligible for this funding. Principals in those schools hear frequently from their colleagues (and may even think themselves) that if only they had more money—or time or staff members—they could really make a difference.



Every principal has some level of control over the allocation of the three resources that most dramatically affect student achievement: personnel, programs, and time. Although no one has unlimited access to additional staff members, the wherewithal to implement every program that the staff would like, or double the time in a day, every principal does have the power to rethink and reallocate at least one of these assets in ways that can have an amazing impact on the school community.

### Personnel

Although every employee at the school has a job description, that job description typically does not specify exactly where and how individual staff members are deployed within the school—and that assignment flexibility is where principals and school leadership teams have room for creative thinking. To ensure success, three principles must govern all decisions:

- Every decision must be based on a review of the most up-to-date student data: What are the pressing needs that must be addressed?
- Every staffing assignment must be considered in light of the most pressing needs within the school—needs that can change with time; thus, specific assignments must always be viewed as temporary: What staffing assignments will meet the *current* needs?
- Every deployment must be considered in light of the potential impact: How many students will it affect? What are the consequences if this problem is not addressed?

Principals must give themselves permission to think creatively. When leadership teams allow for nontraditional assignments—whether *nontraditional* refers to the students or the office space in which work is conducted—powerful things can happen.



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### READING COMES FIRST

A new principal joined a failing high school at the beginning of the 2007–08 school year. The situation was daunting, to say the least. During the previous four years, the school had had three principals. Student achievement was stagnant, and proficiency rates on the state mathematics and English assessments were consistently between 5% and 15%. The students who managed to graduate were too often ill-prepared to pursue postsecondary education or enter the workforce. The new principal and the administrative team turned their attention to discipline, attendance, and classroom instruction—and they also began to plan for the best approach to reorganizing the math and English staff members to align with their vision for a high-performing school.

The process started with meetings with the math and English teachers that focused on reviewing state and school-level benchmark assessment data. The expectation and tone of those meetings was set up front. Excuses were not allowed, and continued failure was not an option. Blaming the students' previous schools or parents, or the students themselves, was off-limits. The conversation had to remain focused on what the school could do differently to ensure that the students were learning and demonstrating that knowledge because what had been tried in the past obviously wasn't working.

Embracing this mind-set, each group discussed the current state of student achievement on both standardized and classroom assessments and compared the curriculum that was written on paper with the curriculum that was actually taught. After several meetings and open, honest discussions, it became clear that students needed more time in foundational math and English courses, so the teachers chose to focus on Algebra I and English I.

In the assessment data analysis and curriculum review meetings, the teachers found that being unable to get through the entire curriculum during the year was a major hindrance to student achievement. Many students were coming to high school with deficiencies in reading and math and that slowed the pace. The administrators made the decision to reallocate the teaching staff according to a new

master schedule that would better meet their priorities. The new hybrid eight-block, A/B day master schedule featured single-block periods for all courses except Algebra I and English I, which would meet every day. A Title I teacher in each of those content areas provided focused push-in and pull-out services for those two courses.

For that change in programming to be effective, the top teachers had to be assigned to those courses. Although some class sizes in the grades 10–12 courses were slightly increased, it was a trade that provided the best teaching and learning experience possible for the priority courses.

The positive effects of the reallocation were realized early in the year as the teachers and students reported that they were able to cover more material at deeper level than in the past. Teachers were able to identify gaps in student understanding and had the ability to address them without feeling the pressure to keep moving through the curriculum at an unnecessary pace. Finally, the state test scores provided a final stamp of approval as student proficiency levels in both Algebra I and English improved by more than 40% over two years and are now exceeding state averages in both areas.

### Programming

Schools spend thousands and thousands of dollars each year purchasing materials for core content instruction, intervention programs, and teacher professional development. Many of those programs claim to be research based and proven effective. Even if those claims are true, educators still need to know how—or if—the programs are working for students to determine whether they have made a wise investment. Unfortunately, schools typically lack systems to monitor and evaluate program effectiveness; most schools also lack protocols or approaches that allow for systemic course corrections.

### REALITY CHECK

A middle school was midway through its second year of implementing a SIG. The school leadership team had utilized its grant funding to implement numerous new initiatives from multiple providers, including extensive read-

ing and mathematics training for teachers. To ensure that implementation was on track, the school convened a meeting at the close of the second quarter to examine the current level of implementation for each initiative and review school improvement indicators, including student achievement data. Various stakeholders were invited—including administrators, teachers, program vendors, and external service providers who were assisting with implementation. The outcomes of that meeting were a series of midcourse corrections that were necessary for the school to meet the achievement targets that were set earlier in the year.

During the daylong meeting, the participants worked collaboratively to identify both what was working well and which initiatives were faltering. After sifting through data—including benchmark assessment results, teacher and student attendance, discipline referrals, and more—the group members saw that they had launched a wide array of initiatives from a variety of vendors, assuming that each vendor intervention would address a specific need at the school. The relative priority of those initiatives had not been clarified, however, and the initiatives were not necessarily seen as supporting the school's overall SIG goals in a cohesive way.

At the meeting, the team decided to re-focus all activities on three key areas of need: instructional expectations, curriculum articulation, and academic and social interventions. Vendors were asked to align their interventions to those goals to help the school achieve a more integrated approach to implementation. The principal's leadership team then spent another full day developing a 30-day action plan, which narrowed and clarified the focus and allowed the school to collapse and align initiatives and made it easier to conduct ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

Change following the meeting was focused and immediate. The midcourse adjustments were essential to the success of the school and were made possible by way the meeting was conducted:

- Stakeholders with varying roles were

included, allowing for multiple perspectives on the data and rich discourse during the day

- There was protected time for in-depth exploration of the issues and for considered decision making regarding programming and interventions
- Vendors were present to ensure that they completely understood the context in which their programs operated and to make them active participants in helping their resources better fit the needs of the school
- A large group participated in the decision making to help ensure commitment across the school.

### Time

A principal's most essential resource is time. Every instructional minute in a school day counts. Unfortunately, many principals believe that the school schedule has limited flexibility, is adult driven and not designed to meet the needs of students, and is often more of

an obstacle than an asset. Yet research is clear that students need additional learning time, especially in the core area of reading (Allington, 2012). Trying to figure out how to manipulate a complex and multilayered school schedule to get more student learning time can be a daunting task.

### TIME FOR LITERACY

Two Illinois high schools reworked their schedules during the 2011–12 school year to allow for an increased focus on reading instruction. First, selected ninth-grade English language arts teachers and the ninth-grade assistant principal in each school received training on an instructional protocol that helped them use data to focus on specific student needs, allowing them to support students who already had achieved mastery of the content as well as those who were still struggling. This instructional model was accompanied by follow-up assessment approximately every two weeks to measure student progress toward mastering specific reading skills.

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Many principals may not recognize that the resources needed to support school improvement or make dramatic reform take place are already in schools.

The first school allocated 30 minutes a day for an extra intervention period that was based on the identified reading skills. The students received a primary lesson on a focused skill for that week in their English class, with supplementary instruction during the intervention period as many as four times each week. In addition, all teachers in the building were expected to allocate some time each week in the context of their content areas to reinforce the identified reading skill.

Many teachers and even many students in the school quickly saw the effects of having a schoolwide focus on specific reading skills. During a school visit, nearly every student could not only name the literacy focus for the week but also give an example of how that skill was taught in multiple classes. This instructional consistency led to noticeable gains in this school's benchmark assessment scores from the fall to spring.

The second school reorganized its master schedule to allow for common planning time for the three English teachers who were implementing the instructional protocol. Those meetings were held at least once a week and focused on creating and monitoring an instructional calendar, analyzing assessment data, and collaboratively designing lessons and interventions. Teachers received additional support during their common planning meetings from the grade-level assistant principal and the SIG transformation coach and, at least monthly, from the coach who trained them on the protocol.

The real breakthrough was the opportunity for those teachers to work collaboratively with the support of their administrator and SIG transformation coach. After the teachers assessed students' progress on the first two reading skills, it was clear that the students were not showing much improvement or ownership in the process. Fortunately, the teachers were able to meet with the ninth-grade assistant principal during their common planning meetings, and they asked for help analyzing the data and motivating the students. The assistant principal provided some data analysis strate-

gies and called a full grade-level meeting, during which she shared achievement data, along with her commitment to increase the reading skills of each student, and clearly stated her support for the three English teachers.

After a semester of implementing this approach, students' benchmark test scores improved across the board; the second round of assessments following the intervention showed that nearly 100% of ninth graders mastered the reading skills. Although revising the schedule to provide common planning time seemed like a small step, the positive results that occurred from allowing the teachers to work as a collaborative team with their building administrators cannot be overstated.

Creative school scheduling provides opportunities for endless variations. So much can be done with school schedules that Mike Rettig of School Scheduling Associates has built an entire business around creative scheduling for schools. Although he charges a fee for his consulting work, principals can glean lots of free tips from the School Scheduling Associates website ([www.schoolschedulingassociates.com](http://www.schoolschedulingassociates.com)). They also can join the School Scheduling Associates social networking page (<http://schoolscheduling.ning.com>) to connect with other school leaders and share scheduling challenges and successes.

### In Conclusion

Sometimes it's hard to see that the resources needed to support school improvement or make dramatic reform take place are already in schools. To see the possibilities, educators may just need to step back and look through different lenses at how human capital, time, and instructional programming are already being used. **PL**

### REFERENCE

- Allington, R. L. (2012). *What really matters for struggling readers: Designing research-based programs* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.

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