

# Data, Data Everywhere and Not a Drop to Use

by Diane Kline



Just as the weary seamen in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* were surrounded by a vast ocean of water but did not have a drop to drink, educators are drowning in seas of data they cannot use.

The 2008 Federal education budget included over \$48 million dollars for statewide longitudinal data systems. Over the past four years 27 states have received \$122 million for statewide data systems. Foundations have contributed millions of philanthropic dollars to ensure the development of state longitudinal data systems. And in response to NCLB, districts have created entire departments whose sole purpose is to respond to request for compliance data.

**Are we there yet? Do we really need more educational data?** Apparently so according to the new administration. Through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (AARA) another \$250 million dollars has been allocated in educational stimulus funds for the development of state longitudinal data systems.

The U.S Department of Education itself apparently questions the value of state longitudinal data systems. A study on classroom data utilization recently released by The Department found that "...the vast majority of the activity around data systems and data use in schools involves district, not state data systems...the hoped for efficiencies to be gained from integrating data systems at the state, district and school levels are not apparent from the vantage point of schools or districts."

The American Productivity and Quality Center's (APQC) recently released findings from *Best Practices in Data Driven Decision Making*, a benchmarking study sponsored by the Data Quality Campaign, revealed the factors that support and serve as barriers to data driven decision making. Study participants included 69 districts ranging in size from 300 to over one million and five of the nation's largest districts, overwhelmingly agreed that it is **not the lack of data** that hinders data-driven decision making.

To the contrary, districts described "being overwhelmed by the sheer number of data collects from the state for compliance reporting". One participating superintendent reported that his district "has 83 state data collects a year and that only 2% of the data can be used for the purpose of analyzing and improving student achievement.

It is hard to argue with the value of longitudinal data systems. Especially since one of the objectives of the ARRA is to provide much needed data for linking K-12 and higher education information to work force skills and training . However, in an economic environment where newspapers are filled with stories of impending teacher layoffs and proposals for four day school weeks and districts that are selling commercial ad space to be placed on the sides of school buses in order to raise cash, why would the new administration rank state longitudinal data systems as one of its top priorities?

Because the view from 50,000 feet is always much prettier than the view at ground zero. Insulated academics, policy makers, foundations and non-profits have great ideas for developing sophisticated data systems that will “help” educators. But the reality of attempting to use data for decision making is much messier and more complex than it appears to be. Challenges such as slow state cycle time for turning around summative test data, lack of software interoperability and insufficient time for teachers to discuss data hijack the best of intentions for data driven decision making.

During APQC’s benchmarking study, national focus groups were conducted with teachers and district administrators to explore barriers to data utilization. In one session as district administrators began to discuss a proposed bond issue to purchase “newer, more sophisticated software systems” the teachers in the room began to show signs of growing frustration. After patiently listening to the conversation, one teacher blurted out “we are just beginning to learn to use what we have now, please don’t buy a new one!”

**Does all of this evidence indicate that state longitudinal data systems would not have a positive impact on student success?** Absolutely not. The studies cited above and APQC’s 30 years of experience in helping thousands of organizations improve performance clearly shows that data systems that are designed with utilization in mind can create breakthrough improvement. This means that data systems must be part of larger improvement systems to be effective.

**What do I mean by an “improvement system?”** An improvement system is a framework for managing an organization that ensures the organization gets the results it wants. And developing improvement systems is hard work. Improvement systems require clarity of organizational purpose, definition and focus on customers, identifying and mapping key organizational processes, developing and tracking key performance measures and metrics, benchmarking internal and external best practices, using tools for process improvement and knowledge management. It is the improvement system that provides the mechanisms for utilizing the data.

A handful of successful districts across the nation have implemented data-centric improvement systems. Many of these districts were best practice partners in ***APQC’s Data-Driven Decision Making Benchmarking Study***.

**Iredell Statesville School District**, an APQC best practice partner and the **2008 winner of the Education Malcom Baldrige Award**, attributes much of its success to a deeply ingrained culture of data injury. All staff members know that you don’t walk into the Superintendent’s office or go to any meeting unless you have data to support whatever you came to discuss. **Gwinnett County Public Schools**, another best practice partner, has identified data owners that participate in cross functional action teams to constantly review data validity. And at Western Heights School District in Oklahoma, at the start of each school

day the superintendent reviews multiple data dashboards. By using these data dashboards, the superintendent can give staff, community and board members real time, accurate data on just about any metric that impacts student achievement.

I propose that we not add a promising initiative like state longitudinal data systems to the ever growing pile of stagnant, random acts of educational reform. As a part of the new administration's plans to help educator's I propose that we create something that will actually effect the daily challenges of teaching students and running a school district.

I propose that as a part of or in addition to the monies that have been allocated for state longitudinal data systems that the administration also allocates dollars for building improvement systems. Data systems that are designed with usage in mind can help to build the internal capacity that schools and districts need to survive the tsunamis of economic crisis, the ever changing political education platform and the rapidly revolving door of superintendents.

There are no silver bullets for improving the mess we have made of our nation's educational system. But, as Dr. Clayton Wilcox, former Superintendent of **Pinellas School District** says, there are many promising silver BBs for education reform. The development and implementation of data driven improvement systems is one shining BB that has great hope for not just improving, but transforming the U.S education system.

—Diane Kline

## About APQC

Founded in 1977, the nonprofit American Productivity & Quality Center (APQC) has worked with organizations across all industries with the mission for improving performance by connecting organizations to best-practice research, metrics, tools, and experts.

Since 1996, APQC Education has been committed to the same goal but with a vision enhancing the U.S. education system by identifying improvement opportunities within districts' routine processes. We aspire to be a source of knowledge and a landmark on the path of continuous improvement.



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