Increasing Student Achievement

Blair Albrecht, Principal, Nebo View Elementary School, Juab School District
blair.albrecht@juabsd.org

Have you ever felt frustrated or overwhelmed when it comes to data, school grades, high stakes testing, and the demand for school improvement? As an administrator it's easy to get caught up in multiple data points, ranking and comparing, and the continual push to "get those test scores up." If any of you have felt frustrated or discouraged by this, join the club.

State school grades were made public this past October. Not only can these be misleading, but the complex formulas used to determine student growth and the growth comparisons of "like schools" can make it challenging for most of us to understand. In the end, if our data was not what we expected, we are left scratching our heads, wondering what didn't work, or if our scores were good, we're often not 100% sure why. As I've contemplated my school's trajectory and our longitudinal data over the past 5 years, I've identified some small tweaks that may get us the results we are trying to achieve.

First, I would like to give you some background about what we have tried at my school in order to help you better understand where I'm coming from. Three and a half years ago our district designed and began to implement our own Portrait of a Graduate (POG) which outlines the knowledge, skills, and dispositions we expect each student to attain prior to graduation. Simultaneously, we were also working to implement the practices of Personalized Competency Based Learning (PCBL). We had actually begun building our district Portrait of a Graduate prior to the completion of the state's framework and felt that we were ahead of the game in this work.

Throughout each of these implementations, teachers identified evidence that students could use to demonstrate learning and created artifacts to support students in self-assessing their learning. As part of our POG, teacher teams worked together to

identify specific skills and dispositions to be targeted for instruction in each grade level. In conjunction with our district efforts, I had the opportunity to be part of the team that created the state P20 competencies in 2019, and felt that this gave me a very good foundational understanding of what we were trying to accomplish.

In support of these efforts, we've had professionals like Eric Sheninger and Anthony Kim make multiple visits to our schools, providing us with feedback on our efforts to create the conditions for personalized learning in our classrooms.

In addition to the training we have delivered around PCBL and PoG, we have had the opportunity as a K-5 district cohort over the last three years to participate in professional learning focused on the Comprehensive Math Instruction framework (CMI). This work was led by professors from BYU and math specialists from Nebo and Davis School Districts. In literacy we've been able to train our K-2 teachers, principals, special educators, and most of our instructional coaches during the last two years in the LETRS professional learning modules. Our third grade teachers and teachers new to our district this year have recently begun our second LETRS cohort (SB 127) and we have been able to create a third LETRS cohort focusing on our teachers in grades four and five.

At my school, I have led my teachers in creating rubrics broken down into learning targets and indicators for every essential standard. My teachers have worked to build rigorous common assessments aligned to these essential standards. We've also integrated RTI into our master schedule to ensure that teachers have adequate time to reteach and extend learning for all students. We hold weekly PLC's that are scheduled during the regular school day where I meet with teacher teams and our school instructional coach to analyze formative assessment data and determine the implications for instruction. Additionally, we've adopted a grading system that is based on proficiency and mastery. We utilize proficiency scales and give students multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery, providing them with extra time and support as needed.

I share all of these efforts simply to help you understand my perspective.

In the midst of everything we have done to improve student outcomes, we have unfortunately seen that our standardized testing scores have flatlined or even decreased. Ultimately, this was discouraging as a school leader and I reached a moment when I felt like giving up. After all of our efforts to implement evidence-based best practices, we did not see the results we wanted. I've spent a lot of time telling my teachers that if we use best practices, the results will take care of themselves. Well, that has not been the case for us. I was at a loss and so were my teachers. We felt defeated and frustrated due to the lack of results in spite of our best efforts.

I could probably write extensively on any of these worthwhile initiatives. I'm sure I could walk into any elementary school in Utah and see many of these same initiatives taking place on a daily basis. I know that we are not alone in our implementation of these strategies and best practices.

So if we are implementing these initiatives and utilizing best practice, why aren't we getting the results?

As the leader of our school, I decided that we have to slow down in order to go fast. I visited with my teachers at team collaboration meetings, had lengthy discussions with my instructional coach, my district elementary director and my fellow elementary principals. There were a variety of thoughts and ideas about what is happening and why we may not be getting the results we seek. As we collaborated and had honest conversations about what we felt were possible barriers to progress, these are the questions we came up with:

- How do we create urgency without overemphasizing test scores?
- Do kids believe they **can** accomplish learning tasks successfully? Have we built a culture where students have confidence in themselves as learners and how they can demonstrate their learning on rigorous assessments?
- Are our teachers spread too thin? Do they have the time, tools, and training to successfully do their jobs?
- Have we over-focused on personalization?
- Are we scaffolding too much for students?
- Are we re-writing too many assessments and trying to create our own curriculum too often with the hope of getting something to work?

We met as a faculty and decided to implement these adjustments to address possible reasons for underperformance:

- **Urgency and overemphasizing end of year testing:** This is neutralized when we ensure that the common formative and summative assessments we use all year are valid and reliable, and are pushing our students at the same rigorous level, and we are using the data from these assessments weekly to identify effective instruction, and determine implications for further instruction.

- **Student resilience on rigorous assessments:** We determined that we need to do a better job helping to build student's confidence in themselves and their abilities. We recognized that many students are lacking grit and resilience, and would wait for help or wouldn't even try at all. We discussed intentionally building this instruction

into the school day by explicitly teaching these dispositions which will align us with our work on Portrait of A Graduate, and our efforts to develop Assessment Capable Learners (ACL).

Although these "soft skills" could be viewed as one more thing to teach during the school day, we determined that there is enduring merit in identifying student characteristics and dispositions that must be explicitly taught. Ultimately, our team decided that the lack of or the mastery of these skills could be a major factor in determining whether a student is able to experience academic success.

- ○ Teachers suggested ideas such as having students work through a challenging math problem or a comprehension task without initial instruction. Teachers could encourage students but would not scaffold the task or support students in any way as it pertained to the problem. This exercise could take approximately 10 minutes, and after that time expired, the teacher would discuss with students what was challenging and what strategies were used to help them overcome anxiety or frustration during that time. Teachers would praise student effort and metacognition without focusing on the actual answer but instead on the thinking process required to solve the problem.

- **Teachers were spread too thin & were re-creating too many assessments:** Our teachers were honest and said they felt like they were spread too thin with all that they were trying to accomplish. This included all of the previously mentioned professional learning as well as trying to ensure that they were consistently implementing everything they learned and were utilizing all of the best practices that are expected.

Teachers felt that some of our curriculum programs' assessments weren't rigorous enough or were possibly too broad in their scope. They often assess too many standards which makes it difficult to isolate a skill to see if students can demonstrate mastery of a targeted skill. The assessments were also not as rigorous as what we were seeing on the state year-end RISE assessment.

We began adapting the assessments from our curriculum in an attempt to narrow the focus to specific skills and to increase their rigor, thus creating a better assessment. However, when we started adapting the language of the assessment so that students could better understand or so that it would follow the language we used to teach the concept, we realized we were getting a false sense of security, thinking our students had mastered the essential standards only to discover on the RISE assessment that they had not. The problem here is that at end-of-year

testing, teachers can't modify the assessment questions so that students can understand them.

- ○ Some of the tasks we clarified or modified were an attempt to decrease the amount of time that a teacher spent during the day to personalize or differentiate every learning task. I asked teachers to identify specific times during the day when personalization would be appropriate and would benefit students the most. I encouraged them to focus on their whole group lessons, making sure that they were engaging all students during the lesson. I asked them to postpone re-writing rubrics if they weren't getting the results they wanted with the ones they already had. We decided to use assessments that came with our programs or from reliable sources that we felt already had questions written to the rigor level required. Some of the resources we currently use are: iReady Standards Mastery Assessments and the UTIPS database of questions.
- ○ We are going to focus on quality Tier 1 instruction with an emphasis on using the phonics lesson plan template and comprehension checklist from our LETRS training. With these two templates, teachers are now able to determine if their lessons contain all essential components in order for them to be high quality.
- ○ Some teachers were following the program or teaching a standard and then would look at the test to see how it was going to assess the students rather than identify the essential standard first, how they were going to assess it and then plan for instruction. These are the critical pieces to Understanding By Design (UBD) and following the four PLC questions. Additionally, I asked my teachers to thoroughly study their standards and assessments before planning for instruction.
    - ■ To support teachers, I created a drop-in tool form that identified and emphasized the components of a quality Tier 1 lesson. This helps me to provide targeted feedback to teachers about their Tier 1 instruction.

- **Too Much Scaffolding:** We also identified that too often, we were bailing kids out in the name of scaffolding or "I do, We do, You do" but we were dwelling on the "We do" for too long. This specifically speaks to teaching students resilience. I asked my teachers to identify good points in a lesson when they could intentionally facilitate productive struggle. This would allow students to try first before teachers adjusted their instruction.

Conclusion: As we have made these adjustments, I've seen teachers working to perfect their Tier 1 lessons and I feel like they now have the time to focus more on their daily instruction. We are all feeling more confident about our common formative data and feel

that it is more accurate and a better predictor of how students will perform on the end-of-year testing. Students are demonstrating increased confidence. We have created a Nebo View Wall of Champions to highlight student efforts in building confidence; I want to give credit to Sunset Elementary in Washington County for this idea. I am looking forward to studying our mid-year Acadience Reading and Math data and mid-year summative assessments to see if what we are doing is improving student outcomes. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you would like more information on any of the ideas that I've shared in this article. Wishing you much success as you continue to strive for excellence at your school during the remainder of the school year!