

Embedding Strategic Data Use in Professional Learning Communities

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## Introduction

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) are meant to drive collaborative learning among teachers and principals. Yet, in many instances, they fail to live up to the expectations the district has for them because the PLCs lack clear direction, effective facilitators, or protocols for meaningful engagement with student performance data. As a result of my experience as a Strategic Data Project (SDP) fellow, I learned of the *Data Wise* Project developed at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) which I incorporated into a new *PLC Facilitator's Toolkit* and a new model for school change and leadership professional development I created and am calling *School Wise*.

The *PLC Toolkit* is meant to overcome the weaknesses of the existing PLC initiative at APS to: 1) give PLCs a clear focus on the strategic use of student assessment data to identify learner-centered problems, and 2) provide a structure for collaborative examination of instructional practices. The *School Wise* process is modeled after *Data Wise*, but instead of focusing on student issues and teaching practices, it targets school-wide issues and the leadership practices meant to address them. This model also makes it possible for principals to become familiar with the basic elements of *Data Wise*, which their teachers utilize, in a format which is immediately practical and applicable to their own work and growth as educational leaders.

The *PLC Toolkit* consists of a series of modules targeted to specific months during the school year. The schedule makes it simple for busy teachers and facilitators to quickly engage in substantive review, analysis, and collaboration of data and reflective practice related to their own processes and learning as a PLC.

The *PLC Toolkit* project impact is measured both qualitatively and quantitatively through the administration of a survey of PLC facilitators and administrators and through analysis of student performance data from schools in which the *PLC Toolkit* was incorporated into the work of the PLC groups. The following elements are key elements of interest in assessing the impact of the *PLC Toolkit*: the extent to which the toolkit was utilized; feedback on the *Data Wise* protocol as it relates to solving learner-centered problems and teacher problems of practice; general feedback regarding the overall conceptual design, layout, distribution, and organization of the modules contained in the toolkit.

The *School Wise* model was piloted among elementary school principals in 2012-13 at their monthly forum. Professional development plans developed between the principals and the associate superintendents for elementary education integrated goals and action plans developed during the process. Principals participated in a reflective exercise on the value of the process and ideas for tailoring it to their needs at the end of the school year.

Given the popularity of collaborative work in general and PLCs in particular among school districts, the *PLC Toolkit* may serve as a valuable model for other agencies interested in innovative resources to increase the productivity of collaborative, data-focused teacher groups. Helping busy teacher-leaders by providing easy-to-follow protocols for understanding, examining, and acting on student and teacher data can ultimately help align initiatives and promote continuous improvement in both learning and teaching.

### **Integrating SDP into APS**

As APS's District Accountability Coordinator, I provided data to schools in support of their planning, accountability and other needs. My work at APS is directly related to SDP and its goals. The driving theory-of-action at SDP centers around getting the *right people*, the *right data*, and the *right analysis* together to have an impact on student achievement. Within the Research, Development, and Accountability Department, my team and I are deeply involved in helping key stakeholders at schools carefully examine selected data, make sense of it together, and use it in practical ways to help all students learn. The effectiveness of my support to schools and the district as a whole, I thought, would be enhanced as a member of the SDP team in Albuquerque. I also was aware of the school change models developed at Harvard and wanted to opportunity to learn more about them and integrate them into the support work with APS schools.

Intensive Data Retreats were a major focus of my work when I joined SDP, as was the roll-out of the Schoolnet Instructional Management System, known as AIMS in our district. It seemed that the SDP theory-of-action and diagnostic work could be integrated into the support provided by our team leading to smarter planning and more informed decisions at the school level and more widespread use of current data systems. Knowing how to use more analytic, predictive analysis and integrating it into our data systems would help everyone within the district maximize the benefits they offer.

During my participation in SDP I was promoted to District Accountability Manager, allowing me greater influence over the application of ideas and practices from the project and holding the greatest promise of improving results schools achieve. Learning more from other SDP fellows who use SchoolNet products (Denver and Philadelphia in particular) has also been

helpful as we continue to work with the system in Albuquerque to make it an effective and valued data management tool in our schools. Being a part of the SDP network of districts led to my participation in the Product Advisory Group for SchoolNet which included suggestions about adding predictive analytical tools to the system and new Key Performance Indicator fields directly related to the College-Going Diagnostic and strategies employed in Montgomery County, Maryland, which I was exposed to during the fellowship.

Additionally, my team and I have a number of supporting and influential roles outside my immediate department supporting the development of PLCs, providing professional development for instructional coaches, and most recently, influencing the Principal Training and Leadership Forums managed by the associate superintendent's offices. SDP made it possible for me to participate in the *Systemic Change for Student Success* Learning Lab presented by the Harvard Graduate School of Education Professional Education Program. It was through this experience that the full impact of the *Data Wise* model for using assessment results to improve teaching and learning developed and inspired a new model of school improvement and leadership development I have labeled, *School Wise*. This model provides school leaders with a cogent and effective way to address school-centered problems (rather than learner-centered problems as in *Data Wise*), then work collaboratively with fellow school principals to explore solutions, develop plans, and assess their results.

Each of these activities and projects is shaped in some way by the learning and association with SDP – through the professional development provided, the networking with other fellows, the integration of analytic work by Center for Education Policy Research (CEPR) and the data fellows here in the district and ideas and materials provided via the workshops –

SDP influences and will continue to impact the work of the Data and School Systems Support team for quite some time.

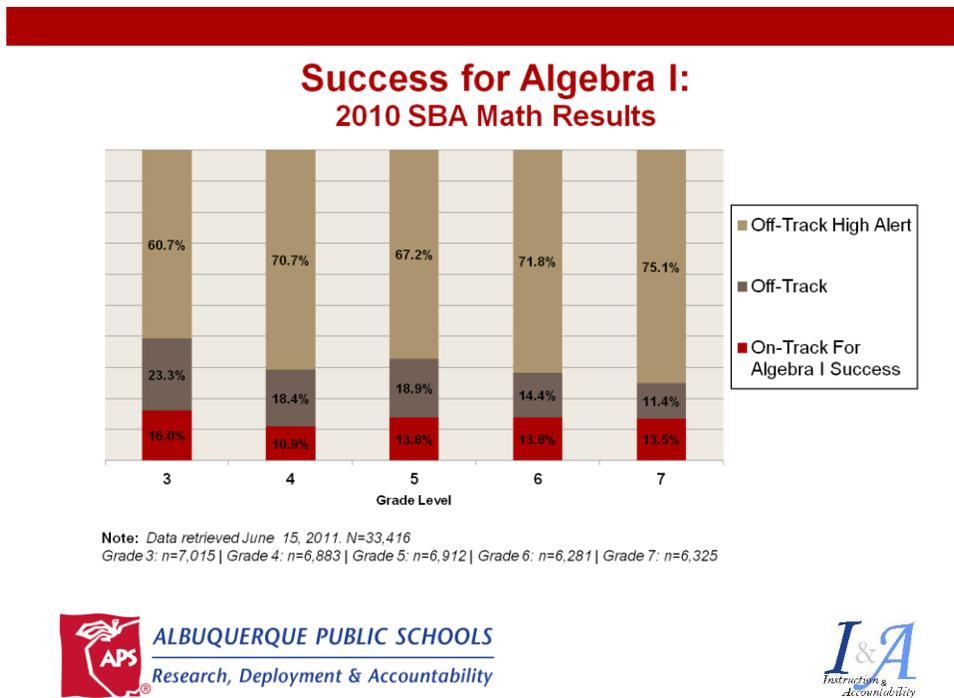
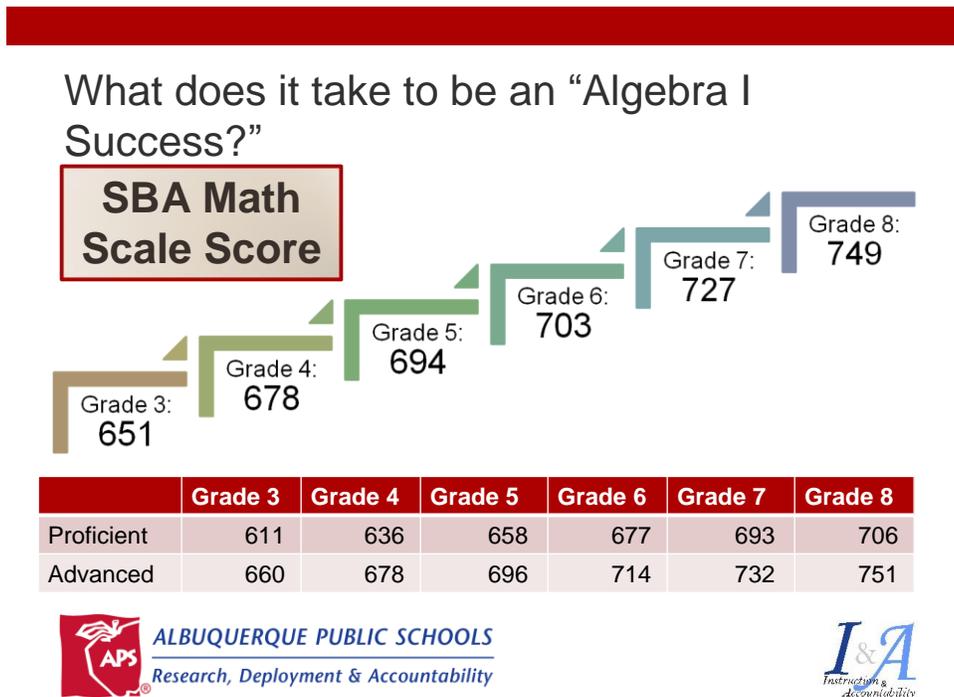
Being involved with the SDP has provided multiple valuable experiences and learnings, including:

- Awareness of the ‘strategic’ nature of data and how much potential there is for school districts to become more sophisticated in their use and analysis of data;
- The value of predictive analytics in addressing persistent problems in schools;
- A sense of school district issues and strategies outside our own narrow perspectives;
- Connections to some incredibly bright and experienced thinkers (fellows, staff and faculty) who are also generous in sharing their brilliance, thoughtfulness, and experiences;
- The *Methods Matter* book club was enlightening and amazing – I loved the session with Dick Murnane who is also a co-author of *Data Wise*, which our team has adopted as a process for helping schools identify learner-centered problems and work together on teaching practices to solve those problems;
- Exposure to Harvard and other top-tier faculty. This would have never happened for a person like me without this opportunity;
- Professional Development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (3-day Learning Lab on Systemic Change) – a tremendously helpful, practical workshop likely to have lasting effects on me and on school performance;
- The opportunity to meet and work with Patty Diaz and Jon Fullerton – whose ideas, facilitation, kindness, humor, intelligence, and wisdom have meant a great deal to me and served as a model of compassionate leadership I’ll never forget.

The opportunity to interact with SDP staff provided multiple learning opportunities. In particular, Patty Diaz never failed to make me step back from and reconsider any idea or problem I took to her. Her measured and thoughtful consideration of issues always led to reflection and consideration of bigger things – systems, influences, politics, and collaboration. I developed an interest in district accountability systems from listening to Frank Barnes at the first convening. Patty generously shared wonderful information from New York City Public Schools which I still keep close by should my district begin to move toward developing its own accountability system.

Involvement with SDP resulted in my closely working with APS Data Fellow Sade Bonilla. When I was asked to prepare an ‘Algebra’ Data Retreat at the district level to address low student performance, I immediately went to Sade Bonilla to enlist her analytical skills in helping the district come to a fresh understanding of the problem. It presented me and APS with the opportunity to see first-hand how predictive analytics could frame issues in ways previously unimagined and move to more creative collaboration and strategy development. Without Sade, the Data Retreat would have relied entirely on descriptive analysis – helpful but not transformative. For example, Figure 1 represents the culmination of analysis performed by Sade which clearly identifies key student performance targets leading to success in Algebra I. Without her, APS would never have identified these key indicators, developed a full appreciation for the scope of the problem, or been able to bring these data to schools as part of our ‘right people, right data, right analysis’ approach cultivated from SDP.

Figure 1: Algebra Success Presentation



Source: APS Algebra Summit, Sade Bonilla, August 2011

### **Lessons Learned**

As a result of my involvement with SDP, I will continue to advocate for the strategic use of sophisticated analytics to address problems, examine effectiveness of programs, and drive innovation in the district. I will also continue to work to help schools and school leaders adopt strategic thinking and appropriate data use as they work to meet their goals at the school level. My team will integrate the *Data Wise* process into their work with schools and as the basis for developing effective school leaders.

SDP has introduced me to the future of data analysis in schools – a future which moves beyond descriptive data and silos of information to the use of sophisticated mathematical tools and policy-oriented thinking to bring smarter solutions to problems, push districts to move beyond the status quo, and unite all facets of a district's operation in the service of better outcomes for children and greater efficiency as organizations. It's an exciting time to be involved in education and the use of data to drive transformation and change.