Data Talks: On-going Goal-Setting and Reflection to Motivate Students

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

My first year as principal, Goshen Middle School was labeled a failing school. GMS did not have best practice instruction happening in a systematic way, and so in my first year we worked on improving instructional strategies, aligning curriculum and using data to inform instruction. After my first year, we earned a “C” rating and then a slightly higher “C’ rating after my third year.

My goal is to help teachers continue their successful work with students by continuing to refine our instructional practices. Next steps at GMS are to create more opportunities for students to own their learning. Consistently monitoring their data is an obvious first step in improving motivation. In the past our culture reflected the saying “data rich, information poor”. I want teachers, parents and students to see that data is a critical part of educating students if used effectively. Research shows that when students monitor their own data, not just principals or teachers, achievement will improve.

Students do not always see how their approach to daily work impacts other data that measures academic success. Through data talks, I want to motivate students to see how doing their best in the classroom will positively impact their grades and other data points that reflect their academic progress.

About five years ago, we moved to standards-based grading system with the use of a 4 point scale. The move away from traditional grading practices to mastery learning has been challenging. One of the greatest challenges is helping parents understand that the intent is to use the scale as an instructional tool to help students monitor their own learning. Teachers are also still searching for ways to motivate all students to complete and turn in work in a timely manner. Most importantly, I want students to understand how the 4-point scale can help them monitor and set goals for improved learning.

In the last three years, our staff has increased its knowledge of analyzing data to inform instruction. One way we would like to improve this process is to help students monitor both their data on a daily basis as well as its connection to other sources of data such as benchmark tests like Acuity, common assessments, lexile growth and l-step growth. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to create a document that would help students connect their 4 point scale grades to their benchmark data. I wanted to then interview students to gauge their response as we reflected on their data and set goals for future classroom performance based on the 4 point scale.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wonder if through data talks, students will connect how doing their best in daily work, and striving for 2.5’s and 3’s, will positively impact other data points that reflect their academic process. Will having students reflect on how their daily work motivate them to want to set goals to improve their daily performance as a way to positively impact other formative and summative assessment data used to monitor their growth?
**Methods/Procedures:**

To gain insights into my wondering, I created a data template that I used with students. I looked at other data collection sheets from other schools then created a template that best captured the data sources at GMS. The template included students’ 4-point scale scores in ELA from their report card, Acuity scores, common assessment data points and their I-step scores. I also included behavior and attendance data. I created a series of interview questions that I would ask each student at the first meeting to gather research on their knowledge behind the purpose of the 4-point scale, to help them understand the data sources, and to help guide them to a goal.

I met with students from multiple tiers of achievement and from various ethnic and economic statuses. After contacting their teachers for permission, I scheduled times to meet with the students during times that would be least disruptive to their learning. At the interview, I recorded the responses of each student and analyzed trends from their responses. I met with students at least one time after the initial interview to see how well they were working towards their goal.

Creating the data form and gathering the data encompassed about two to three weeks. Meeting with students and following up with them spanned about three to four weeks of time. The actual interview process was about 15 minutes and the follow up meeting only about 5 minutes. I informed my 6th and 7th graders that I would continue our data talks into the next school year. Since then, I have shared the very preliminary and mostly qualitative results of my action research with my leadership team to help guide future implementation with teachers and students.

**Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:**

As a result of analyzing my data, several important things I learned include:

- Students didn’t always know why we switched from traditional letter grades to the 4-point scale, but they could explain what the scale meant and how their teachers used it as an instructional tool to help them improve their understanding. This was a relief to me and evidence that my own observations of teacher use of the scale is similar to what students are experiencing.

- As students looked at their data, they could see trends that demonstrated whether they were maintaining or improving academically. I was concerned that the data points might jump around and not show students trends, but for each of my students a clear trend emerged leading to good discussion about a goal that would help them continue the good work they were doing or help them focus more strategically to improve their data if their data points were not showing the progress they desired.

- All students I interviewed said that completing daily work at a “3” level would improve their other data points. I was a little fearful that students who were not pleased with their data trends would be less likely to engage in the goal setting portion or would be reluctant to say that achieving “3” level work each day would help their other data points improve; however, every student I interview responded favorably and connected high quality daily work to improved data overall.

- Students were eager to set a goal for their daily work habits and have me check back with them to see how they were doing with their goal. The 6th and 7th graders wanted me to continue with them next year. My concern that having students see their data points, especially for those struggling students, might be a demoralizing experience. The opposite happened. Students were intrigued by their data points and eager to set a goal that would help improve their daily work and overall academic success.
Providing Concluding Thoughts:

The last couple of years, our work with creating instructional calendars, common assessments, and data teams has been a good process for my school. At the beginning of the process, a couple of teachers were adamant that administrators should hold test talks with students before the l-step window. Although conversations with students before the test could be motivational, I was reluctant to spend a great deal of time giving them. I envisioned a much more meaningful process with talking to students about their data over time.

Whenever a principal can speak from experience as he or she communicates a desired change in instructional practices, the more likely teachers are to consider trying out the idea for themselves. Now I can take my action research to teachers, both the data sheet and the student responses throughout the process, and share the meaningful conversations that took place and how students were motivated by the extra and individualized attention I gave to them. In the future I will have teachers share ideas for how to improve the data sheet and the logistics of how to conduct the data talks throughout the year. Students, teachers and principals will be able to show parents how having students periodically reflect on their data, including their daily work, set goals and monitor their progress will improve student motivation and achievement.

Next year we are moving back to teams of teachers who share the same students. Each teacher will take a number of students for whom they will be responsible for conducting data talks and setting goals. The goal will be to engage and motivate students to take more ownership of their academic performance and to see how strategic goal-setting can make a difference in improved academic performance. I am confident that incorporating data talks into our work with students will be a powerful next step in data analysis at Goshen Middle School.

References:


West Side Middle School. Examples of data tracking sheet