all students are struggling with a particular concept, even those who are most often proficient, or that some students in notoriously underachieving groups are actually holding their own. The data analysis conversations are always interesting.

At one school, teachers were shocked when not a single student scored "proficient" in fractions on the fourth-grade state standardized test — not just the struggling students they had predicted. The same was revealed when district benchmark tests were analyzed and cross-referenced. However, the teachers were convinced that students understood all the concepts, basing this on what they believed they had taught, informal classroom assessments, quizzes, and homework.

It wasn't until they administered an open-response common assessment drawn from released state test items that they understood the issue. In deconstructing the math problem, they collaboratively ascertained the skills, concepts, vocabulary, and level of cognitive demand required to successfully answer the question. It became clear that the fractions content was not being taught at the same level of rigor that the state and district test questions required and that professional development was needed to unpack the curriculum and adjust classroom practices.

Investigating Causes

Once close data analysis reveals the problem, there is a natural tendency to jump to solutions and skip the third step in the process — investigating and verifying causes. Refrain from purchasing the new reading series, sending teachers to professional development sessions, or completely re-teaching a unit until you know the "why" behind the disappointing data. As one principal noted, "[Our school is under pressure to raise achievement], we can't afford to spend our time doing things that aren't going to get results."

So many factors can figure into a successful formula to ensure higher achievement. Sometimes causes reveal the need for teachers to adjust practice and integrate specific new strategies into their instruction. Other times, causes can relate to curriculum/assessment alignment, scheduling, attendance, or the need for increased teacher content knowledge.

The Using Data program scaffolds the causal analysis process by using a pack of "Cause Cards" which address reasons for low achievement in English language arts, mathematics, and science, and issues related to low socio-economic and special education students. One set of cards in the pack focuses specifically on ELLs. These cards suggest causes that are often overlooked or historically not in the realm of professional conversations in certain settings.

The causal analysis process helped an elementary school in Florida verify a root cause for low student achievement in elementary mathematics needing a relatively simple fix. Special activities such as award ceremonies, assemblies, and even extra pull-out instruction for certain students (often the case for ELLs) were having a profound effect on their most challenged students. Once these activities were scheduled outside of regular classroom instruction time, results improved: 76% of their lowest quartile students made measurable gains in math in the first year of change.

At another school, the causal analysis process revealed that a problem with geometry actually related to academic vocabulary — a question referring to *vertical angles* confused students who were used to the term *opposite angles*. The problem was that the vocabulary being used in the classroom was not aligned with statewide assessments.

At a special needs high school, teachers regularly used simplified texts that were often below grade level to provide students with access to required curriculum content. Even with grading accommodations, they still had few students who passed the English language arts New York State Regents exam. As part of a professional development initiative with the Education Alliance at Brown University, they began by setting a shared vision for success and outlined a new path to attain it. Instead of offering simpler texts, they presented students with the more challenging texts along with many scaffolds to access them. After a year, the results spoke for themselves — seven students in the small group passed the English exam.

In the previous two cases, teachers initially tried to help students by avoiding academic material they deemed too difficult or confusing. Like so many others who work with struggling students, these teachers wanted all their students to experience success, and many believed they were helping students by not introducing academic vocabulary or challenging texts considered beyond a student's ability. "Easing off" of curriculum and content rigor to help students who may be more academically challenged is counter to the tenets of the CCSS, and counter to the "all kids can learn" commitment.

Once teachers have verified the causes of student learning problems that surface across multiple data sources, they are ready to develop a plan for success. The plan outlines what actions will be taken, when, and by whom. The plan is intended as a touchstone for a continuous process that monitors the impact of targeted changes on intended outcomes. The monitoring includes ongoing collaborative inquiry and conversations that always end with a sequence of questions: "What have we learned? What are the next steps? Who needs to know?"

At a time in education reform when some express concerns about where the CCSS will leave our most challenged learners, we like to welcome the standards as an opportunity to close the achievement gap — a pathway to success, rather than a cause for concern. The program Using Data promotes an important core belief: "Significant improvement in student learning and in closing achievement gaps is a moral responsibility and a real possibility in a relatively short amount of time."

As a moral responsibility, it is a call educators must answer. And, in truth, we are already seeing the fruits of new thinking and new approaches under the shared assumption that articulates, "All kids can learn when we establish standards all students are expected to achieve and we continue to work with them until they have done so."

Reference

Used with permission and adapted from DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek, *Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don't Learn*. 2004, pp. 29-33. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.

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