A Recipe for ELL Student Success

Mary Anne Mather explains how careful analysis of test data can facilitate changes to help close the achievement gap

As schools face the reality of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), assumptions about the effect they will have on struggling students is a prominent part of the conversation. The standards are meant to be achievement benchmarks that raise the bar for all students and provide guidance through the grade levels for the development of key learning goals. In particular, the CCSS for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects explicitly address the use of challenging nonfiction texts at all grade levels and across content areas (see Appendix B for exemplar texts and sample performance tasks: *http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf*). This area in particular is concerning to educators, as it is subject to assumptions about what struggling students can realistically achieve.

Explore Assumptions

Although it is often overlooked, taking the time to engage in an in-depth conversation about these concerns and assumptions is an essential first step toward ensuring success for the students who struggle most. While educators and administrators generally believe that all students are capable of learning, what they learn and the way they should learn it has long been debated.

Facilitating conversations about vision and expectations in targeted professional development sessions is a good place to start. One activity called "Variations on a Theme," drawn from the work of the Dufours, Eaker, and Karhanek,* gets people talking... and thinking. Based on the commonly held premise that all kids can learn, participants congregate at one of four posters that they feel best represents the majority opinion at their schools:

1. "We believe all kids can learn... based on their ability."
2. "We believe all kids can learn ... if they take advantage of the opportunity we give them to learn."
3. "We believe all kids can learn... something, and we will help all students experience academic growth in a warm and nurturing environment."
4. "We believe all kids can learn... and we will work to help all students achieve high standards of learning."

Once assembled, they discuss reasons for their initial selections before a more in-depth description is revealed about what each selection really means. They read further about what is typically done at a school when students do not learn, as well as causes for students not learning that relate to each selection. The additional information can change participants' outlooks, which leads them to other posters. Since people visibly move from one station to another, they can ascertain who thinks like they do and who thinks differently. The end result is a much clearer picture of where the school is in its current thinking about student success and where they really want to be.

Predict Results Then Analyze, Analyze, Analyze

After exploring assumptions and negotiating a shared vision for excellence, the next steps focus on systematic analyses of multiple data sources. If we accept the CCSS as achievement benchmarks for all students, understanding how data can reveal practices to scaffold success is essential. Data sources range from standardized state tests and district benchmark tests to common grade-level assessments and examples of student work. Test data is most useful when analyzed at the aggregate, disaggregate, strand, and item levels. Data can also include teacher observations, attendance, student input, and informal assessments to check for understanding. The range of data is important as teachers use a collaborative inquiry process to pinpoint specific student learning problems that surface as trends across data sources, student populations, school years, and grade levels.

We suggest a four-phase data analysis process that starts with making predictions before even looking at the data. Predictions help data analysis teams to:

- Activate their thinking about the data.
- Raise and further explore assumptions embedded in the predictions.
- Deepen understanding about the perspectives and orientations to the data colleagues bring to the table that can help or hinder success.
- Help contextualize the type of data that will be analyzed.

Predictions invite speculation and anticipation about what the data will say based on what and how content has been taught. Do ELL teachers predict differently than regular classroom teachers based on how content has been offered to varied student populations? What accommodations have been enacted for ELLs and other academically challenged students, and how might the accommodations affect outcomes?

The prediction phase is followed by creating a visual of the data set, studying the visual together to make factual observations, and then capturing inferences about why results appear as they do. The process sounds straightforward, but the revelations are often astounding. Facilitating collaborative data inquiry conversations using the four-phase process often gets at understanding rigor and the importance of setting shared high expectations across student populations. When four-phase dialog is used to study disaggregate data, teachers sometimes find that