

CHANGING SCHOOLS IN LOUISVILLE

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School Reform by the Numbers



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Puzzling Over Data



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Leader of the "Band"



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About This Issue

Through a series of stories in this final issue of *Changing Schools in Louisville*, education writer Holly Holland reviews the wealth of student and school achievement data available in the Jefferson County Public School system and describes how some schools are attempting to use that data to help students meet state and local academic standards.

Holland, a former education reporter for the *Courier-Journal*, edits the magazine *Middle Ground* for the National Middle School Association and writes frequently about school reform. "I was struck by the vast amount of information available to schools, and the potential for schools to use this information to improve teaching and learning," Holland says. "But I also found that most schools are just beginning to recognize the value of all this data, and very few have the skills and understanding and the commitment to use it well."

"There's a real need for the district to develop a comprehensive training program that not only helps schools understand the messages hidden in the data, but shows principals and teachers how to translate those messages into action."

Goodbye, Yellow Brick Road

In *The Wizard of Oz*, the yellow brick road led to Emerald City, a powerfully imagined place where everyone achieved their heart's desire. For the past four years, we've tagged along as a small but growing band of school reformers have traveled JCPS's version of the "yellow brick road," searching for their own Emerald City — a place where every teacher believes every student can succeed in school, and is well-prepared to make that success possible.

As the district's relationship with the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation draws to a close, it's "goodbye, yellow brick road" for us. Since 1996, our team of education writers, supported by the foundation, has chronicled the progress of the district's journey — with all its fits and starts — toward standards-based teaching and learning. [These stories are archived on the Web at <<http://www.middleweb.com/Lvillereform.html>>]

Our special focus has been the middle grades, that critical, make-it-or-break-it time in every student's school career when one of two things usually happens — they gain the skills, knowledge and maturity they need to survive and prosper in high school and beyond, or they falter; too weighted down by poor skills and low expectations to complete the journey.

During our travels, we've enjoyed the companionship of some smart, dedicated Louisvillians who understand what it might mean if schools could only break the cycle of failure so many JCPS adolescents find themselves trapped in. We've met accomplished teachers who were restless to improve, teachers who have come to see that standards-based reform is about much more than "high-stakes" testing and accountability. Because they've done the hard work asked of them in professional development programs and applied what they've learned through trial-and-error in the classroom, these teachers have reached students whom many believed could never achieve.

What have these teachers learned to do? They can design a curriculum that covers the most important content students need to know. They can teach the curriculum in many different ways, tailored to the learning styles and needs of each student. They can help students understand what "good work" is and why the content they are learning is important. They can look at student work and the results of their own lessons and use what they learn to improve their teaching. And the best of them can also help other teachers grow — fueling a new spirit of accomplishment in their schools, and the understanding that schools aren't helpless in the face of poverty and social dis-ease; that educators really are called to make a difference.

These teachers have been able to make these changes, in part, because of other talented and inspired educators within the school — a core group of administrators within the central office who "get it" and have the power or influence to do something about it; creative thinkers within the Gheens Academy, who have helped reshape and sharpen the focus of professional development in the district; principals who know

how to lead, not just "manage"; talented teacher-coaches whose persistence and willingness to go the extra mile convinced many more teachers in the system that professionalism is about getting better, not just getting to the end of the day.

We've also met many community members and reform advocates on our trip down the yellow brick road — "outsiders" who care enough about the future of all of Louisville's adolescents that they put up with suspicious, indifferent school managers who don't yet understand that school reform is community work, not "school district work." They ask hard questions about school and student failure and refuse to accept the doctrine of "acceptable losses" when it comes to kids.

With all these folks in place, you might well ask, why hasn't JCPS found the Emerald City? The district has made progress, to be sure — as some of the assessment data in these pages indicates. But the JCPS middle schools still lag behind their counterparts in many regions of the state, and the performance gap between poor and middle class students hasn't narrowed much.

The simple answer? Not enough accomplished teachers. Not enough principal leaders. Not enough inspired support people and central office administrators who "get it" — who not only believe that greater gains are possible, but know how to achieve them. Other folks like ourselves who have observed the district's journey toward reform speak of a lack of clear direction. A muddled vision at the top.

Knowing vs. doing

District leaders believe — and rightly so — that the success of the system's reform efforts depends on good professional development. Teachers need to know what to teach, how to teach it, how to determine whether kids are learning it, and what to do if they are not. JCPS teachers, like teachers everywhere, are all over the map when it comes to these skills and this knowledge. They have much to learn, and professional development is the way they learn it.

JCPS has poured many hundreds of thousand of dollars into professional development over the last decade. Those investments have yielded some returns, without a doubt. But they have not produced dramatic changes in the achievement of the district's students. Why not?

Current research on effective professional development is unambiguous: If you want to improve teaching, you must make each classroom a laboratory, where teachers take what they are learning and — with the support of coaches and mentors — try it, refine it, and absorb it into their professional practice. The professional development experts at the Gheens Academy (and others in the JCPS leadership structure) are well aware of this research. The summary of a good professional development "design" on page 6 was prepared by Gheens staff. And it's right on the money.

So why, earlier this school year, did one long-time

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ON THE COVER: Barret Traditional Middle School's Annette Doyle, a parent-volunteer-turned-school-clerk, analyzes test scores, grade reports, census data, and any other figures that will help educators explain the patterns of academic performance among the school's students. Photo by Jonathan Roberts.

WHAT'S WORKING AND WHAT'S NOT

Data-Driven School Reform: It's Easier Said Than Done

Middle schools are under increasing pressure to raise student achievement. District and state leaders say the answers are in the data. But like any tool, data must be put to good use to be effective.

BY HOLLY HOLLAND

Fighting off eyestrain and mental fatigue, dozens of teachers, parents, and administrators from Conway Middle School stared at the pages of statistics before them, trying to discern the disorderly patterns of student achievement.

Did the school's low math scores on the state tests mean teachers should emphasize basic computation strategies or give students more ways to use those skills?

Did the higher reading scores result from their schoolwide focus on literacy, the special reading training that teachers in every subject received, the push to get families to read together at home, or a combination of all those efforts?

Which groups of students were not succeeding on multiple sections of the tests? Was it because of weak instruction from their teachers, poor motivation from the students, the low expectations of their parents? How could they address

the problems? And how would they know whether the interventions had succeeded?

After examining the data for nearly two hours one afternoon in late February, the diviners were no more certain about their conclusions than a fortune teller peering into a crystal ball.

"I find the data frustrating," acknowledged Pam Boykin, a Jefferson County resource teacher who works with Conway and Newburg middle schools. "Some of the questions I have I can't answer with the data.... When you have to work this hard to figure out what the data is saying, there's something wrong."

Her confusion is not unique. Throughout Jefferson County, middle school faculties are struggling to understand why student achievement lags behind state and national averages and, more precisely, what they should do about it.

Finding answers to these questions has become more important in recent years for several reasons, including increased pressure from Kentucky's

high-stakes accountability system, which rewards and penalizes schools based on their performance; national foundations, which demand progress in return for their investments; and choosy parents who no longer hesitate to shop around for schools with higher test scores.

Since 1990, Jefferson County has spent millions of dollars — most of it from outside donors like the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation — on middle grades reform. Statistics suggest that the district has made some achievement gains, and a few schools have done better than expected. But some schools still lag far behind, and everyone is under increasing pressure to accelerate student gains. Leaders at every level are telling schools that the wise use of student data is a critical step in the process.

No shortage of achievement information

Jefferson County "accumulates substantial school-by-school information showing the progress of its students," wrote Policy Studies Associates Inc., a national research firm, in a recent report to the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation on the progress of JCPS's middle grades reforms. "Now that these indicators are developed and circulated annually on a school-by-school basis, school leaders and their professional teams are in an excellent position to assess trends and make continual program adjustments in response."

In their comprehensive review of the district's middle school scores on state and national tests, the researchers found "a mixed picture of achievement against national, state, and district

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A team from Conway Middle School learns to analyze student achievement data at the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership. Left to right: Debbie Inman, Jeannie Linker, PTA president Marsha Kennison and principal Steve St. Clair.

“Data-Driven School Reform”

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standards.” The study focused on scores from tests based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which measures students’ progress over time in reaching national achievement goals (set by a board appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Education); the CTBS Survey, a commercial multiple-choice exam that compares the county’s students to a national sample of their peers; and the Kentucky Core Content Tests (KCCT — part of the CATS accountability system), the recently revised state exams that use multiple-choice questions, short-answer questions, and writing portfolios to show whether students have met certain academic standards.

Among the highlights of the Policy Studies Associates report:

From 1998 to 1999, Jefferson County’s eighth-graders demonstrated “significant achievement gains” in reading on the NAEP-based exam, particularly on extended-response items.

Scores on the NAEP exam remained steady or advanced slightly even though the number of students from poor and disadvantaged families has grown — by 20 percent in the past eight years, according to Superintendent Stephen Daeschner. More than 50 percent of Jefferson County’s students are receiving free or reduced-price lunches — a key indication of poverty — compared with 33 percent of students nationwide.

1999 CTBS (6th grade)

Some high-poverty schools made substantial progress

Some schools with high concentrations of low-income students made substantial progress in the 1997 to 1999 period, while most others showed persistent needs. Farnsley-Williams, a school with more than 65 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced-priced meals, showed 10 or more percentile point gains in all three subjects tested. Thomas Jefferson Middle School, with over 50 percent of students qualifying for the lunch program, improved consistently in each subject. Lassiter, Noe, and Southern, also high-poverty schools, improved over the three-year period in both reading and language tests, but their scores declined in mathematics.... Conway achieved a notable 10 percentile point increase in mathematics and 5 point increases in reading and language arts....

The evidence of progress is less positive among other high-poverty schools, where scores remained low. Western, Frost, Iroquois, Stuart and Knight recorded persistently poor and unchanging scores during this period. The CTBS scores at Western in all three content areas were below the 25th percentile.

SOURCE: “1999 Report on the Jefferson County Public Schools,” Policy Studies Associates, Inc.

Sixth-graders’ scores on the CTBS Survey of reading, math, and writing were generally in the low average range compared to sixth-graders nationally. Scores were relatively unchanged from 1997 to 1999.

Two-thirds of the middle schools were below state averages in reading, math, and writing on the state CATS exams.

Although there are “pockets of school-level success” on the state tests, the researchers concluded, scores for the county’s seventh- and eighth-graders are “low in all content areas. Stronger performance occurred at some individual schools, especially in math, while performance in writing was especially weak.”

Of the 10 middle schools with the highest concentrations of students from poor families, only Noe Middle School performed slightly above the state average, and it did so only in reading. However, the report noted that Noe and two other schools with high-poverty populations — Farnsley and Thomas Jefferson — demonstrated fairly consistent improvements and generally higher achievement than their demographic characteristics would predict. Farnsley, a school with more than 65 percent of its students from poor families, “showed 10 or more percentile point gains in all three subjects tested.”

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of these test trends is that — despite major investments in teacher professional development and the introduction of many new teaching/learning strategies in the past five years — educators do not have a clear idea of what’s working and what’s not. “Schools have so many initiatives going on,” explained Conway Principal Steve St. Clair. “We’re not a sterile environment. We’re not scientists. We can’t control all the variables.”

The inconsistency of quality instruction

All the initiatives do make it difficult to isolate cause and effect when it comes to student performance. But the inconsistency of quality instruction within and among Jefferson County’s middle schools seems to be one key reason why achievement gains have been smaller than reformers had hoped.

Barbara Neufeld, a principal researcher for Boston-based Education Matters, Inc., has been

1999 NAEP-based Test (8th grade)

Significant increases in reading achievement

From 1998 to 1999, Jefferson County middle school students demonstrated significant achievement increases on the NAEP-based test of reading. The proportion of Jefferson County students scoring at or above Basic increased by 10 percentage points (while the percentage of students scoring Below Basic decreased by 10 percentage points), a change of considerable magnitude. In addition, the percentage of students scoring at or above Proficient in reading increased by 7 points. In mathematics the number of students scoring at Basic or above rose by 7 percentage points (with a corresponding drop in the percentage of students scoring Below Basic).

The percentage of student scoring at Proficient or above in math remained essentially unchanged. On average, JCPS students’ performance improved on items assessing statistics and probability, algebra and functions, and measurement.

SOURCE: “1999 Report on the Jefferson County Public Schools,” Policy Studies Associates, Inc. (Random sample of 8th graders tested in reading and math using tests based on those used by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.)

evaluating JCPS’s middle grades reform initiatives since the early 1990s. In a 1999 report to the Clark Foundation, Neufeld and her colleague Jennifer Boothbay wrote: “Our findings suggest considerable variation by school in what teachers and principals are doing to create a learning community for teachers and students even when schools have the same external support resources available to them.”

Neufeld and Boothbay found greater attention to reading in all subjects — a trend that seems to have produced higher test scores — and better alignment between teachers’ lessons and the topics covered on the state’s tests. They also detected more use of lessons that help students see the connections among subjects, instead of the traditional practice of cutting off math discussions as soon as the bell rings for science class. Even so, they said, many teachers continue to lecture and ask students for little effort beyond memorizing and summarizing facts.

“We know that the (school) district has done a great deal to provide teachers and principals with professional development designed to enable them to implement (higher academic) standards and that this has been an improvement over what the district offered in the past,” Neufeld and Boothbay wrote. “What is clear, however, is that implementing standards-based reform requires more and more highly skilled support at the school level than the district had anticipated.”

Deborah Walker, executive director of the JCPS Gheens Academy, said the district has been sharpening its professional development offerings to give schools more help in analyzing their achievement data and choosing effective responses.

Kentucky Core Content Test Performance — Jcps Middle Grades — 1999

Middle School	Reading	Math	Writing	Predicted score	Academic score	Final score	Jcps need index
Barrett Traditional	75.5	92.2	49.3	64.8	62.6	66.2	0.265
Brown Middle	71.4	80.1	46.7	65.0	56.9	64.4	0.467
Jefferson Co. Trad.	77.0	88.1	50.9	61.6	60.3	64.2	0.219
Johnson Traditional	68.8	82.6	45.2	57.7	54.1	58.5	0.465
Meyzeek Middle	67.7	74.5	45.4	56.2	53.0	57.3	0.720
Kammerer Middle	68.6	80.7	35.3	58.2	52.9	57.2	0.413
Crosby Middle	66.5	69.0	36.9	52.4	48.9	53.7	0.540
Highland Middle	68.9	61.6	39.4	54.1	48.2	52.9	0.724
Noe Middle	68.6	65.8	31.4	52.0	47.0	51.9	0.698
Westport Middle	64.0	62.6	34.4	50.0	47.1	51.9	0.655
Myers Middle	60.8	61.8	39.4	50.6	45.6	50.7	0.600
Newburg Middle	66.2	58.1	38.8	49.6	45.6	50.6	0.672
Thomas Jefferson MS	60.8	55.5	29.9	N/A	43.2	48.6	0.763
Carrithers Middle	60.6	53.7	37.8	47.3	42.9	48.2	0.761
Lassiter Middle	59.3	55.8	24.7	48.4	40.3	46.0	0.925
Stuart Middle	57.0	51.5	29.7	44.8	39.5	45.0	0.755
Conway Middle	61.8	43.8	27.5	42.1	37.2	42.8	0.678
Moore Traditional	57.2	39.4	22.2	N/A	34.9	41.0	0.802
Knight Middle	58.9	44.7	21.8	43.2	35.0	40.7	0.914
Iroquois Middle	57.6	42.1	22.1	43.9	33.9	40.0	0.991
Farnsley Middle	57.1	39.5	16.4	N/A	32.8	39.2	0.928
Frost Middle	51.9	36.5	19.8	41.1	31.6	37.9	1.029
Southern Middle	49.5	33.3	18.7	37.3	28.5	34.3	1.266
Western Middle	46.9	28.3	23.8	37.3	26.4	33.3	1.339

EXPLANATION OF RANKING: Schools were ranked from top to bottom using the "Final Score" column. **WHO'S TESTED:** Sixth graders were not tested on KCCT in 1999. Seventh graders were tested in reading, science, on-demand writing, and writing portfolios. Eighth graders were tested in math, social studies, arts & humanities, and practical living/vocational studies. **PREDICTED PERFORMANCE:** Using past test score data, the state predicted how well each school was expected to do in 1999. This number compares to the "Final score." **ACADEMIC SCORE:** Academic performance of school based on scores in different subjects. **FINAL SCORE:** Combines the academic scores with non-academic data, like dropout and attendance rates. This score (combined with the school's final score in the Spring 2000 testing) will determine whether schools earn rewards or state assistance. Schools must reach a final score of 100 by 2014 to meet the state goal. **NEED INDEX:** Jcps Supt. Steve Daeschner and his staff developed this indicator as one way to compare performance among schools in the district. The higher the number, the greater the challenge a school is perceived to have. See the story and chart on page 13 for a more detailed explanation. **N/A:** More than 20 percent of the school's population changed from the year before and no prediction was made.

Instead of just waiting for the distribution of annual test results, for example, she encourages schools to review students' work throughout the year to see whether they're learning what the faculty is teaching.

"We really want them to look at results," Walker said. "If they're working in math and putting in some changes but they see the same work from the kids, then it's not having an impact.

"...These aren't easy things to do — to teach in different ways, to teach to standards, to have kids demonstrate their understanding in different ways. These are huge shifts in the ways teachers think about their practice. Sometimes they think they've made huge changes but they really haven't. The consistency and depth is what we're aiming at."

Walker said the Gheens staff has begun providing more samples of standards-based lessons and more guidelines for conducting training sessions focused on instructional weaknesses. Gheens specialists also encourage faculties to have regular and ongoing conversations about the effectiveness of their chosen strategies.

"They need to pinpoint what is not paying off,"

Walker said. "We have a lot of work to do in relation to helping teachers reach agreement about what is good work on the part of students and what is their role in helping them get there. It's not just, 'I taught it once' or 'I've taught it twice, and they didn't get it.' But if they didn't get it, I need to teach it again and in different ways."

Data can be a crutch, or part of the cure

The regular analysis of student achievement data is a critical step in understanding how to break through the barriers of low achievement and low expectations. But like any tool, data must be put to good use to be effective. Data can be a crutch or part of the cure. It can be used to justify poor results, or to challenge status-quo teaching and spur innovation.

Some schools may look at data to console themselves and confirm what they already know — that children from poor families tend to score lower on standardized tests or that the district's magnet schools tend to attract the most motivated and high-performing students. Other schools use

the test results to help them improve instruction for all the students who show up in their classrooms.

"You can produce tons of statistics, but the important thing is what you do with them," said Ken Draut, the school district's assessment coordinator.

Draut pointed to one local elementary school principal who routinely requests test scores for each class to determine which teachers had the best results with similar groups of students. That information helps the principal identify the most effective instructional strategies and encourage other teachers to adopt them.

By contrast, he said, another local elementary school asks for data comparing its scores to the test scores of students who live in the school's attendance zone but chose to attend magnet schools. That information might confirm that the neighborhood school has lost some high-achieving students, Draut said, but it won't show educators how well they've helped the students who stayed behind.

(Other Jcps observers say the practice of looking at the performance of kids "who should

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have gone to our school” is fairly common among low-achieving schools. “If only we had those good kids’ is something you hear a lot,” says one central office administrator.)

Draut said the county’s middle and high schools have been much less aggressive than elementary schools in using test data to find clues about instruction. One exception he mentioned is Barret Traditional Middle School, which relentlessly examines data for clues about what teachers are doing well and what they need to improve (see story beginning on page 7).

Although school staffs might not find all the information they need from test results, Draut said, they can use the data to ask important questions: Is our curriculum lined up with what’s being tested? When do we teach certain topics and how? What kind of instruction do low-performing students receive? What can we do differently? Do all of our students know how to answer open-response (essay-style) questions and do they get regular practice doing so?

1999 Kentucky Core Content Test (7th and 8th grade) Few middle school students reached the “proficient” level

Two-thirds of JCPS middle schools’ academic indices in reading, mathematics, and language were below the state average. The percent of students scoring at or above proficient in all content areas was low in all areas — in reading 9 percent; in mathematics 27 percent; and in writing 3 percent. No students achieved at the distinguished level in reading, on-demand writing, or portfolios, but 12 percent scored a distinguished in mathematics. Slightly more than 60 percent of students report that they use various active learning strategies in reading and mathematics on a daily or weekly basis.

SOURCE: “1999 Report on the Jefferson County Public Schools,” Policy Studies Associates, Inc.

On the last question, the answer typically is, “No,” despite the emphasis on such questions on CATS and other tests that assess for students’ understanding of the information they’re given in class. In surveys they complete when they take the state tests, middle school students in Jefferson County say they spend far more time reading textbooks and filling in worksheets than writing and reflecting about topics.

“Only 60 percent of students report that they are engaged in applied reading and mathematics tasks on a daily or weekly basis,” the Policy Studies Associates report concluded. “Fewer than

50 percent of students said they learned new reading strategies daily or weekly.” The students’ relatively stronger performance on the CTBS exam, which includes all multiple-choice questions, “suggests that during the middle grades, JCPS students may not be preparing students as well as they might to analyze and write about what they know,” the researchers concluded.

“The answers are in the building”

In the case of Conway Middle School, the Policy Studies Associates study found that the school “achieved a notable 10-percentile point increase in mathematics and 5-point increases in reading and language arts” on the 1999 CTBS exam over the 1997 results. Over the three-year period, the researchers concluded that only Farnsley Middle School improved as rapidly in mathematics as did Conway.

Ellen Pechman, one of the authors of the PSA report, said Conway’s achievement gains are substantial, particularly considering the high percentage of students who come from poor families. The school is close to the national average on the CTBS in most subjects.

She suggested that Conway’s staff might want to focus on the students who scored below the 25th percentile on the CTBS to see if they need different kinds of instruction or additional learning supports. For students who scored near the average, she said, teachers can compare test results with grades to identify any discrepancies.

“Really, for each cluster you can do that and ask, ‘Is that an accurate score for that kid or is he under-performing?’” Pechman said. “That’s an example of what you can do with data.”

Conway’s faculty has made a good-faith effort to gauge the school’s strengths and weaknesses, principal Steve St. Clair said. The February data analysis session, conducted during a professional development day, marked the third time the staff has met to review the statistics this school year.

Conway teachers and administrators also are trying to gain community support for higher achievement, including training parents to understand academic standards and making sure all students explain the work they are doing and their progress during semi-annual conferences with parents and teachers. In addition, teachers have posted exemplary student work throughout the building and indicated how each sample stacks up to state and district expectations.

Yet St. Clair acknowledged that Conway still has far to go.

“I think the answers are in the building,” he said. “But you have to have a lot of conversations.”

Design Qualities for Professional Development

These design qualities reflect the research on effective professional development for schools:

Data-Driven: Student achievement data point out professional development needs for individual schools and across schools. At the district level, we use feedback from schools to refine the design and focus of our professional development efforts.

Long term and sustained: It takes time for teachers, principals and support staff to learn new skills and behaviors. One-shot workshops will not do the job, no matter how good the workshops are. People need to focus their efforts over time until new behaviors become internalized.

Results oriented: The focus of our professional development should be increasing student learning. While it is interesting to learn new information, if it is not directed toward improving student performance, we don’t have the time or resources for unfocused professional development.

Job-embedded: Studies repeatedly show that people learn best on the job, where they work is supported with increased training and coaching. The task, then — whether it’s in the classroom or central office — becomes the source of the professional development, so that people are applying what they learn directly to their responsibilities. For teachers, this also means using the classroom as a learning lab for building professional knowledge.

Collegial: Team work is very important. Our efforts are doubled when we work together to bring about improvements in student learning. Individual teacher growth can improve student learning, but whole school professional development holds promise for raising the achievement levels of all students.

SOURCE: Deborah Walker, executive director of the JCPS Gheens Academy.

DIGGING FOR DATA

Educators at Barret Middle Are Asking the Hard Questions

With the help of former parent volunteer Annette Doyle, educators at Barret Traditional Middle School are using student data to look beyond the school's high averages and determine what's working and what's not for all kids.



Barret data-cruncher Annette Doyle.

BY HOLLY HOLLAND

Some people examine a school's student achievement data and ask, "Why?"

Annette Doyle looks at the same statistics and asks, "Why not?"

For the past six years, the former parent volunteer and now paid office clerk at Barret Traditional Middle School has been analyzing test scores, grade reports, census data, and any other figures that will help explain the patterns of academic performance among the school's students. Through colorful bar graphs, spreadsheets, and comparison charts, she turns ordinary numbers into interesting and revealing presentations.

"No matter what kind of data you want, she can get it for you and put it in a form that makes sense to people," said Cathy Mattingly, the media specialist at Barret and a former math teacher who shares some of the number-crunching duties with Doyle. "It's very hard for non-math persons to look at data and make sense of it. But when you see a picture and can visualize it all, it just helps the whole faculty."

Because students must be on grade level to enroll in one of the district's traditional programs, Barret routinely posts among the highest average test scores in Jefferson County. Leaders in the school know that they could "cruise" on the results of their best students, without much heat from the community or the district. But teachers and administrators realize that high averages can mask the weak performance of struggling students and the mediocre work of others who aren't reaching their potential.

By searching for trends, studying the clues, and asking good questions about the statistics,

Doyle shows Barret's teachers where they might have missed the mark and how they can improve their aim in the future.

For example, Doyle compares the grades that every student earns in a particular subject with their scores on state and national tests in those subjects. If there's a mismatch, teachers can look at the sample test questions to see if they adequately reviewed the required topics in class, gave students enough practice answering different types of questions, or held students to lower standards than the testmakers.

In response, the school can make some thoughtful adjustments. To help students who scored in the novice category on the state's reading and writing tests, Barret placed them in a smaller than average class so they could get more attention from a teacher who has experience using varied instructional methods. The teacher also coordinates assignments with her colleagues so these students get additional practice reading and writing in subjects other than English.

Weekly reviews and regular adjustments

Barret's staff meets weekly to review the school's consolidated plan, checking to see if the strategies they've put in place are having the desired results. One problem they discovered was a lack of attention to "practical living," an area covered on the state CATS tests. To fit more relevant lessons into the curriculum, the staff created a family life class, organized targeted field trips, and built into the core curriculum some assignments on topics like drug abuse,

relationships, and preparing a resume.

Another time teachers realized they had inadvertently left the study of electricity out of science classes and gave short shrift to the Westward expansion during U.S. history discussions. By analyzing the test results, teachers found the omissions and worked quickly to plug the gaps.

Principal Stuart Watts said Doyle's creative data analysis has "been extremely valuable" in helping the staff identify achievement patterns that they might not see by simply scanning a sheet of figures.

"It takes a while for teachers and everybody else to sort of grasp things from the information that you have," Watts said. "The first time you look at a set of statistics it may not mean as much as when you continue to look at it."

"We're really into equity now"

Doyle doesn't wait until researchers from the school district or the Kentucky Department of Education distribute all the reports and information she needs. She finds the data on her own.

To gauge the impact of poverty on student achievement, for example, she obtained block-by-block census data and correlated it with children's home addresses and test scores. After discovering that poverty — much more than race or gender — accounted for the school's lowest test scores, Barret's PTA acted to reduce some of the barriers to learning. Specifically, the PTA leaders set up a supply closet at school stocked with paper, markers, glue, and other materials that children might need, but can't afford, for their

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“Asking the Hard Questions”

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homework assignments.

“We’re really into equity now,” Doyle said. “We realize that there are different learning levels of kids out here. You can’t just go to class and say, ‘This is what I’m going to teach today,’ and expect everyone to get an A.”

Recently, Doyle began analyzing students’ academic progress over time by reviewing their scores on multiple tests over a number of years — going all the way back to fourth grade. Although she’s comparing the results of different tests, Doyle expects to identify trends that will give teachers a better idea of the impact they’re having in the classroom.

“We call ourselves a family here. We all work together — or we try to,” she said. “We don’t point a finger at a particular person. We show them the data and say, ‘This is what we need to do.’ It’s remarkable. It really does help our teachers see what’s going on in our school.”

Reading scores have soared

Doyle has developed two targeted projects to boost achievement at Barret. Both grew out of her involvement with the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, an initiative of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, which trains Kentuckians to become advocates for better public schools and includes a training unit on using achievement data and other statistics to diagnose teaching and learning problems.

Doyle designed her first Commonwealth Institute project to raise Barret’s scores in the arts and humanities section of the state tests. Working with the staff, she helped change the schedule so every sixth-grader would have a full complement of arts and humanities courses during the year. Older students would get extension courses instead of repeating material from previous years.

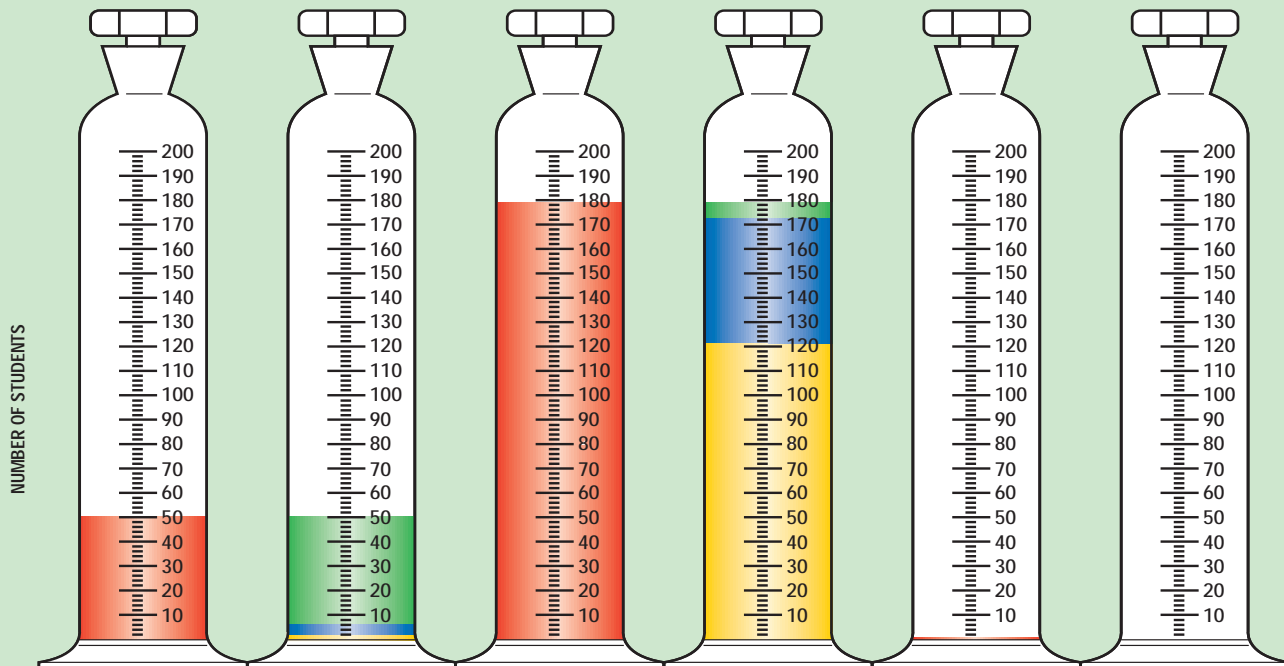
Her second project involves the Accelerated Reading program, which awards points to students based on their scores on computerized

reading comprehension tests. Because students read books appropriate to their identified literacy levels, they can improve and earn recognition without being compared to students with greater or lesser skills. Teachers regularly post updated lists of the points each student has earned, and Mattingly encourages participation by keeping a chart in the library of each class’s performance. Motivated students with limited literacy skills can and do make it to the top of the lists by reading a significant number of books and comprehending them, so the competition rewards effort and growth as well as high achievement.

Doyle’s latest series of bar graphs shows that reading has soared throughout the school since she began tracking the progress last fall. It’s just one more example of how schools can use statistics to help students learn, she said.

“I love crunching numbers and looking at data,” Doyle said. “We’re really excited about (getting) next year’s scores to see the progress we’ve made.”

Breakout of Student Performance in Science Barret Traditional Middle School — Kentucky Core Content Test—1999



	NOVICE		APPRENTICE		PROFICIENT	DISTINGUISHED
1999	50		179		1	0
LOW		2		121		
MED		4		51		
HIGH		44		7		

SOURCE: Annette Doyle, Barret Middle School

NOTE: Column 2 shows the number of students at each level of the KCCT “Novice” category (Total in Column 1), Column 4 shows the number of students in each level of the “Apprentice” category (Total in Column 3).



Acid Rain

Here's an example of a question 7th graders were expected to answer on the 1999 science section of the Kentucky Core Content Test. Here's what the students saw:

Acid rain is a major problem in many parts of the United States. It can harm both plant and animal life and can cause changes to physical structures (natural or manmade). Rainwater is normally slightly acidic, but sometimes enough pollutants mix with the water in the sky to make the rainwater more acidic than normal.

A. Describe two tests you could perform to determine if the rainwater in your town is acidic.

B. Choose a plant, an animal, or a physical structure and explain what damage acid rain could do to it.

Science Content

What is the relationship of the assessment to the curriculum? The content addresses the following Science Academic Expectation: "Students identify, analyze, and use patterns such as cycles and trends to understand past and present events and predict possible future events." In addition to the basic concept of scientific inquiry, students are asked to show their understanding of water as a solvent, of how substances react chemically with other substances, of how substances are often placed in categories or groups if they react in similar ways, and of the effect of a chemical substance on living organisms or non-living structures.

Performance Expectations Applications

How good is good enough? An appropriate student response should provide evidence of the student's understanding of alternative ways to test for acidity (pH) of rain water and of the possible reactions of biological or physical materials with acids. For example, it should show that the student can (a) clearly and accurately describe two tests that could be performed to determine if rainwater is acidic; and (b) clearly and accurately explain how acid rain can cause damage to a biological structure or a physical structure. Successful student work should provide convincing evidence that the student can use scientific content and inquiry skills to address the relevant issue(s), although the response may not address all details and may contain some minor flaws.

How is this relevant? Students demonstrate the ability to describe tools and techniques that could be used to gather data and to use scientific information to predict the effect that one material would have on another material. Students also demonstrate an understanding of scientific concepts relating to acidity and of physical factors in the environment that may affect everyday life.

SOURCE: Excerpted from "Spring 1999 Release Item: Grade 7 Science," Kentucky Department of Education.

"The Leader of the 'Band'"

Continued from page 14

important, but we realized that if they can't read, write, and compute, they need to stop doing needlework."

In addition, this year Meyzeek identified 80 sixth-graders whose elementary test scores were low and placed them in a literacy immersion program led by a team of three teachers who spend all day focusing on reading, writing, and math. Lessons in science and social studies are

blended into the language arts and math classes.

Working within departments, teachers at all grade levels have been trying to identify gaps in the curriculum where they might not have paid enough attention to certain academic standards or where they might not have reinforced students' skills sufficiently. For example, eighth-grade math teachers developed more units on measurement and geometry, and science teachers incorporated some practical living/health topics into their classes.

Baker believes another reason for Meyzeek's

higher test scores is the staff's increasingly consistent expectations for students. Because almost all of the educators in the building now teach "all kinds of kids" — not just those in the Advance Program or just those eligible for federal Title 1 services — they no longer set different standards for different groups of students.

"If all you teach is low-achievement kids all day, pretty soon you lose sight of what good sixth-grade work looks like," Baker said. "We've tried to be more methodical or intentional or focused in what we're doing."

RACIAL BREAKDOWNS ‘PAINFUL’

“Are the Things We’re Doing Working for Our Students?”

The Kentucky Association of School Councils provides in-depth training that can help schools delve more deeply into the results of the Kentucky Core Content Tests. During a session at Iroquois Middle School, teachers and parents uncover some difficult questions about student performance.



Iroquois Middle School teacher Janet Coffey takes a closer look at data from the Kentucky Core Content Tests.

BY HOLLY HOLLAND

Marty Vowels is a seasoned school administrator who spent several years crisscrossing the country as a consultant helping other educators adopt better professional practices.

But as she wraps up her first year as principal of Iroquois Middle School, she’s still wrestling with some of the problems she once coached her colleagues to solve. Specifically, she’s trying to figure out how to motivate teachers to make significant changes in their instruction — and to use student achievement data to guide their way.

“How do you not kill people’s morale while at the same time creating an inspiration that you need to do much better than you are?” Vowels asks. “I’ve been struggling with that all year. Because you don’t want people to think they’re not doing anything right. But you also don’t want them to get to the point where they say, ‘Oh, it’s because the (state) test is bad. Oh, it’s because our kids are poor. Oh, it’s because the elementary schools aren’t preparing them well.’”

“You have to take all that stuff away and get a group of staff members, the larger the better, who say, ‘We know that we can do better, and what are the things that we need to work on to make that happen?’”

Statistics suggest that Iroquois still has

much work to do. Students’ test scores are among the lowest in Jefferson County, and Iroquois also fares poorly when compared with schools serving similar populations (see the “Band” story and chart on page 13).

During this past school year, Vowels has been encouraging her staff to ask hard questions about why they choose certain instructional strategies and whether those methods have produced the results they expected. Several times teachers have met to analyze the school’s performance on Kentucky’s achievement tests, including a March session conducted by Susan Weston, executive director of the Kentucky Association of School Councils (KASC).

Colorful data for visual learners

About a dozen Iroquois teachers and parents gathered after school on a day where unseasonably warm weather made it even more difficult than usual to muster enthusiasm for number crunching. For two hours, the group reviewed the test results as presented through a series of visually appealing bar graphs and pie charts created by the KASC. The color-coded, computerized graphs and charts don’t make the

statistics any less startling, but they can help people notice patterns and ask good follow-up questions.

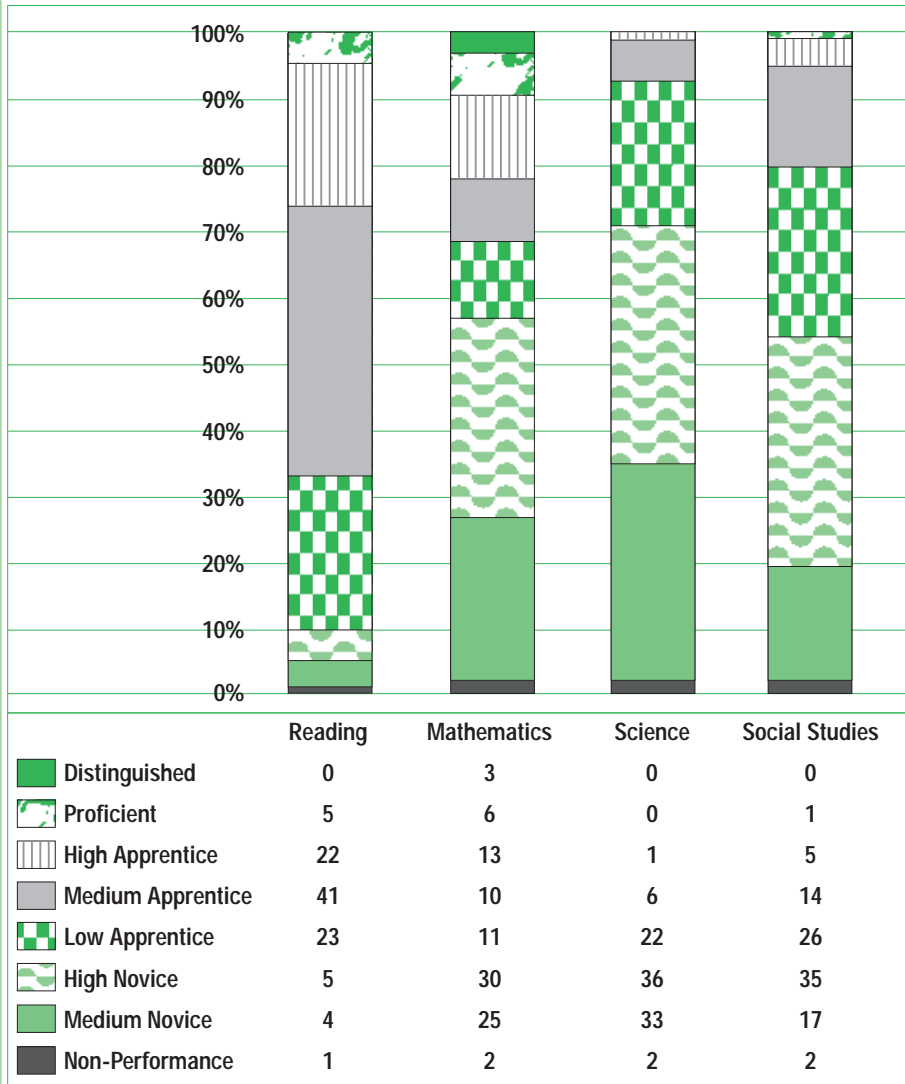
“I’m a visual learner. Show me a pie chart, show me a bar graph, I understand it,” said Ruth Fister, an eighth-grade science teacher at Iroquois who said the data analysis session gave her new insights into the school’s academic performance.

The KASC developed the assessment profiles specifically to help school councils do a better job of interpreting and responding to their test results. The KASC also has used the profiles to train hundreds of Kentuckians who are participating in the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, a multi-year project of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, which helps parents become better advocates for public education.

The KASC’s school profiles show the percentage of students who scored in the novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished categories in each subject, and the types of skills students mastered or failed to learn. The graphs break down test scores by race, gender, family income, and program placement, such as gifted and talented classes; reveal year-to-year trends in achievement. They also summarize surveys students complete about the kind of instruction they receive and the range of topics they cover in class.

Iroquois Middle School - Kentucky Core Content Test 1999 Overall Assessment Results

Performance Levels for Reading, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies
(Percent Scoring at Each Level)



KASC Assessment Graphing Service • Graphs Prepared on 2/14/00

“I would never jump to the conclusion that something is absolutely not happening in a school based on a survey alone, but it’s a really good clue for going up and asking questions and getting it checked out,” Weston said. “What you do is get more parents who are comfortable with the data who are prepared to go to schools and ask the questions. The schools have to get a little bit better at either answering the questions or finding out enough information for themselves so they can start looking at the data.”

Asking pertinent questions about performance gaps

Using study sheets prepared by the KASC, people learn to ask pertinent questions. For example, if girls outperform boys in most subjects, what is the school doing to close the gap? If a school has low scores in

the economics section of the social studies test, how do teachers plan to blend more economics lessons into the curriculum or get additional training in the subject? If low-performing students say that they use worksheets every day in science class, will the school ensure that they have more opportunities to apply basic skills through experiments, projects, and field trips?

During the Iroquois session, a group of teachers reviewing the math results wondered if greater attention to reading would help the two percent of students who didn’t answer any of the math questions. A group studying the social studies results suggested that with a little extra effort the 35 percent of students who scored in the “high novice” category might reach the apprentice category. One teacher noticed that the school’s African-American students fared so poorly that their scores were lower than most of the students with learning disabilities.

“I would say it’s scary, but you also could say, ‘Hooray, we’ve done well with our disabled students,’” Weston said. “The racial breakdowns are painful. We need to be uncomfortable about it.”

Others wondered why so few of the school’s top students failed to reach the proficient and distinguished categories in any subjects.

“We have some very smart children here,” one teacher said. “I see no reason why we don’t have more children at the top.”

Helping the students that you do have

Several teachers groused about the unfairness of the state test and the way neighborhood schools such as Iroquois lose many motivated and high-performing students to the district’s magnet schools. But as the afternoon wore on, the teachers began talking less about the students they don’t have in their classrooms and more about how to help the ones they do have.

“Go back and look at your consolidated planning,” Weston suggested, “Ask, ‘Are the things we thought were going to work delivering or not? And are the things we

“Are the Things We’re Doing Working?”

Continued from page 11

started last spring the right things?’ It’s important to look at this and try to find some connections.”

Weston also suggested that the staff consult and visit schools around the state that have had more success with similar student populations. Vowels agreed that targeted professional development is key to the turnaround at Iroquois.

“I see some really good teaching, and I see some mediocre teaching, and I see some really poor teaching,” Vowels said. “And it’s the same with the kids and their test scores — How do you get the poor ones closer to the top?”



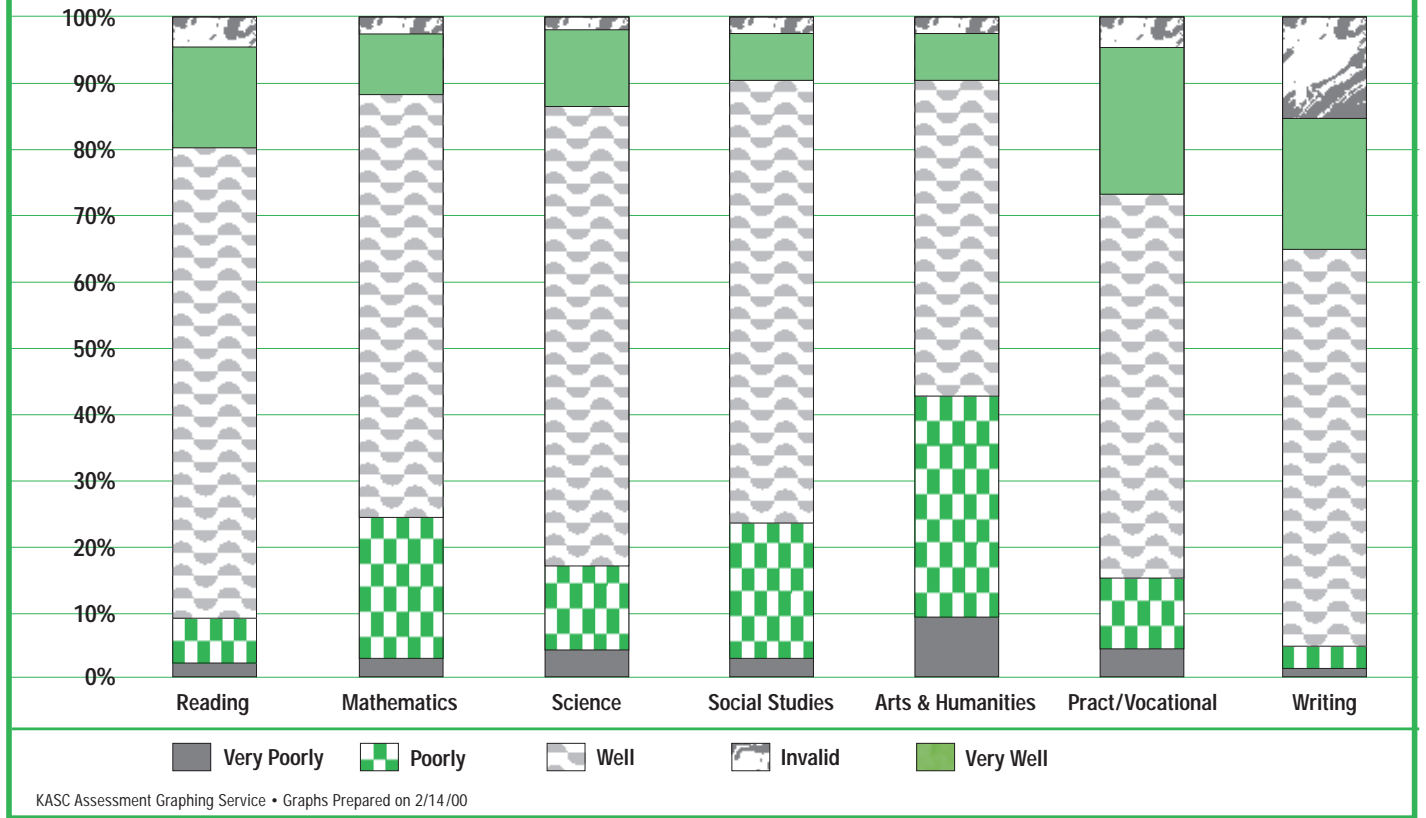
Susan Weston, executive director of the Kentucky Association of School Councils (second from left), pores over Iroquois Middle School’s student achievement data with (left to right) guidance counselor Jan Preher, parent Jackie Fullner and parent Sheila Badger.

[To find out more about the KASC data analysis process, including how to arrange for a study session in your school, contact the Council at (606) 238-2188 or send e-mail to kascouncil@aol.com]

Iroquois Middle School - KCCT Student Questionnaire

“How well do you think you did on each part of the test?”

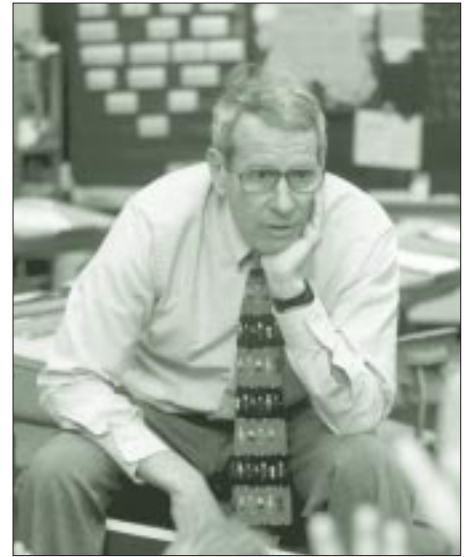
(Student Questionnaire, Q7-Q13)



UP AND DOWN THE CHART

Taking Direction from the Leader of the “Band”

Superintendent Steve Daeschner uses test scores and socioeconomic information to single out high- and low-performing middle schools for praise and criticism. “This year,” Daeschner says, “I said, ‘It’s time for me to tell you what the expectations are, and you’re below them.’”



JCPS superintendent Steve Daeschner.

BY HOLLY HOLLAND

Since 1993, when he became superintendent of the Jefferson County Public Schools, Steve Daeschner says he has been encouraging educators and members of the community to “look at the data” to see if their concerns about various programs and policies are on target. He believes statistics can help people focus on rational, instead of emotional, arguments.

So, it’s not surprising that Daeschner turns to the numbers when he wants to determine which middle schools are making strong performance gains and which are falling behind. He puts schools with similar profiles together in clusters and studies their achievement scores. This “band” chart, Daeschner says, reveals both schools that have moved beyond the performance levels typical of their group and schools that have failed to perform even at the level of their peers.

Daeschner’s calculations don’t just focus on a school’s average test scores, or what he calls “output variables.” He also considers outside factors that he believes create different kinds of challenge for different schools. Three factors or “input variables” are used to create a “need index” for each school: the percentage of students receiving free- and reduced-price lunches (a key indication of family poverty); the percentage of students receiving special-education services; and the percentage of students transferring in and out of school during the year (the mobility rate). The index is then used to sort “similar” middle schools into groups for the band analysis (see the chart on page 14).

In deciding which schools to single out for praise or criticism, Daeschner said he also considers several other factors, including a comparison of each school’s achievement gain from its final score on the KIRIS test (discontinued after 1998) to its first KCCT score. Daeschner also considers whether the school has programs with selective admissions requirements, and looks at the percentage of students in a school who are from high-poverty neighborhoods.

“This is the first year I’ve formalized (the process), but I’ve been doing it since I got here,” he said. “Last year I sent letters to the schools that were high performers, but I didn’t talk to the low performers.... This year I said, ‘It’s time for me to tell you what the expectations are, and you’re below them.’”

Daeschner said he asked the principals of three below-the-line middle schools, which he declined to name, to come in for a conference. He wanted to know what they were doing to “turn things around.” He also sent letters of commendation to the principals of Barret, Meyzeek, and Western middle schools for posting gains beyond what their “band” profiles suggested they would do. (For some commentary on the “band analysis” approach, see the editorial on page 2.)

Although Western’s average test scores are the lowest of Jefferson County’s middle schools — and among the lowest in Kentucky — Daeschner said the school deserves praise for doubling its academic index score (the average score of seven subjects tested) on the state tests from 1998 to 1999. (The Kentucky Department of Education does not compare these scores for accountability

purposes, since the tests are different, but Daeschner believes large gains are worth noting.)

Doing a few important things better

“It was unexpected, but it was nice to get that type of commendation from the superintendent,” said Western Principal Dean Hite. “It kind of reinforced that this is a tough job, but he was watching and looking at us, and he knew that a small gain is a real big gain in some schools. I really appreciated the letter.”

Hite attributes Western’s higher test scores to focusing on a few problems instead of trying to tackle everything at once. Last school year, she said, the staff started emphasizing two main instructional strategies: teaching reading skills in every subject and making sure all lessons were aligned with the state’s core content.

“I felt there were too many initiatives going on” before, Hite said. “They were good, but the math teachers were working on one thing and the science teachers on another, and all of them were great, but they were never coming together.”

Using grant money, Western hired William Bintz, a literacy specialist from the University of Kentucky, to train teachers in every subject area how to help students become more fluent readers. Hite said Bintz told the teachers that they couldn’t rely on textbooks to get their lessons across because so many of Western’s students have poor

Continued on page 14

“The Leader of the ‘Band’”

Continued from page 13

reading skills. While the school works to strengthen its reading programs, teachers can use picture books to discuss literature themes or experiments to demonstrate scientific terms.

Daeschner believes all of the district’s middle schools should make similar adjustments in their instruction to boost student achievement. He said three key factors will lead to improvements: a well-developed consolidated plan (required by JCPS and KERA) that targets achievement gaps identified by test scores, professional development that shows the staff how to make necessary changes in the classroom, and a faculty that is committed to meeting its goals.

“Make sure you’ve got a curriculum that’s basic in reading, writing, and language, that’s closely tied (together),” he said. “You know what your sixth-graders are doing and what your eighth-graders are doing all the way up and down the line. Your curriculum is narrow and focused. All of your (professional development) goal days are specifically focused, and you’re spending incredible amounts of time disaggregating data. You’re focusing on kids who are not achieving.... Those are the things that are making a difference. We know that.”

At Meyzeek, data confirmed a wide performance gap

Asked whether her staff was making the changes Daeschner recommended, Meyzeek Principal Debbie Baker said she thought all of the district’s middle schools were trying to. When pressed for details about Meyzeek’s specific responses, Baker described instructional changes that indicated very targeted and intentional actions.

For example, after reviewing the school’s math scores in depth, the staff confirmed a wide performance gap that many suspected was there but that was nonetheless a stark reminder of the challenge schools face when they have a diverse student body. The staff confirmed that students in the math/science magnet program tended to score at the proficient and distinguished levels and students from the low-income neighborhoods surrounding the school usually scored in the novice, or bottom, category.

JCPS Band Chart of Middle School Performance

	1999 CATS Final Score	JCPS Need Index #
Western	33.3	1.339
Southern	34.3	1.266
Frost	37.9	1.029
Iroquois*	40.0	0.991
Farnsley*	49.3	0.928
Lassiter	46.0	0.925
Knight	40.7	0.914
Moore Traditional*	49.3	0.802
Thomas Jefferson*	49.3	0.763
Carrithers	48.2	0.761
Stuart*	45.0	0.755
Highland*	52.9	0.724
Meyzeek*	57.3	0.720
Noe*	51.9	0.698
Conway	42.8	0.678
Newburg*	50.6	0.672
Westport*	51.9	0.655
Myers*	50.7	0.600
Crosby*	53.7	0.540
Brown	64.4	0.467
Johnson Traditional*	58.5	0.465
Kammerer*	57.2	0.413
Barret Traditional*	66.2	0.265
Jefferson County Traditional*	64.2	0.219
State middle school average	54.3	

JCPS Superintendent Steve Daeschner and his staff developed the “need index” as one way to compare performance among schools in the district. The higher the index number, the greater the challenge a school is perceived to have. Schools are divided into “bands” or groups based on their index number. Schools with a high index and a high CATS score within their group receive commendations. (See story for complete explanation.)

* Indicates site of an Advance Program or a magnet program with selective admissions criteria.

Source: Superintendent Stephen Daeschner

Perhaps the most disturbing finding was that few Meyzeek students landed in the middle on math performance — raising questions about the amount of “value added” by the school’s non-magnet mathematics programs.

The sobering facts revealed by the staff’s data analysis prompted Baker and her staff to take action, and Meyzeek began offering a daily enrichment class that many teams use to reinforce math skills, particularly for students who do not qualify for the Advance Program.

“We’ve been looking at where the kids are when they come to us,” Baker said. “If we think they’re likely to do poorly, we look at what they might need in the form of intervention. What they might need is more time. So, we’ve tried to build more math instruction time into the day.

“Before we had this academic enrichment time, one group of kids might be getting reading, then the next six weeks they were juggling or doing needlework. All of those things are fine and

Continued on page 9

“Goodbye, Yellow Brick Road”

Continued from page 2

researcher in the JCPS middle schools observe that, in its planning, the district seems to lack “a clear recognition of the depth of support required at the schools to ensure strong school-based professional development that will lead to improved curriculum and instruction and student achievement”? Why is it so difficult for the school system to act on what it knows to be true?

We don’t pretend to have all the answers to that question. But part of the answer has to do with “leadership” and “expectations.”

Powerful forces

The Clark Foundation began its relationship with the Jefferson County Public Schools in 1989. Over the next six years, the foundation made a series of grants to spark reform at three of the district’s lowest performing middle schools — Iroquois, Southern and Western. In 1995, when the district adopted standards-based reform, Clark made larger grants and JCPS pledged to give these schools extra attention.

A decade (and several million dollars) later, these three schools remain at or near the bottom in achievement among JCPS’s 24 middle schools. In 1998, the Clark Foundation commissioned a study of the reform efforts at these schools. The results, which have not been widely circulated or reported on in Louisville, raised serious questions at the Foundation about the likely payoff of future investments in JCPS middle grades reform. Ultimately, the concerns raised by the report and disagreements about the future course of reform led to a mutual agreement to end the Clark-JCPS relationship this year.

We won’t attempt to summarize the report by consultant George Perry, based on 80 interviews and a thorough review of data and historical records. (To obtain a copy, contact norton@middleweb.com.) We will quote from the August 23 cover letter to Supt. Steve Daeschner written by Foundation program director M. Hayes Mizell:

“What is particularly troubling is that for ten years the Foundation has supported a wide variety of intervention efforts. Some of these were instigated by the school system, some by the Foundation, and some by the schools. Yet, we have failed to achieve the results we have all sought. This tells me that our efforts have either been misdirected, or they were too weak not to be swamped by powerful systemic forces.”

Based upon our own observations, we suspect the latter explanation is closer to the truth. We believe that after years of trial and experimentation, a core group of educators has emerged in the school system who know what it will take to make all schools successful. But they have frequently been stymied by “powerful systemic forces” who resist the dramatic changes required.

That’s a leadership problem. And underlying the leadership problem is a problem of expectations. Too many JCPS leaders buy into the myth that kids who are socially and economically disadvantaged cannot excel. “Do a little better,” perhaps, but not excel.

In the story “Leader of the ‘Band’” on page 13, Supt. Steve Daeschner describes a process he calls “band analysis.” Using various achievement and socioeconomic data, Daeschner groups middle schools into “performance bands” and looks for schools that

What Schools Should Be Asking About Student Achievement Data



School leaders in Jefferson County have a high regard for JCPS assessment coordinator Ken Draut and his willingness to pull school and student information from the school system’s massive database and shape it in ways that can help schools analyze their progress and plan improvements.

On request, Draut and his staff will sit down with principals and middle school leadership teams to help them make some sense of the reams of data available from the district’s research office. Schools have access to scores from the CATS testing program, the nationally-normed CTBS, assessments of students’ basic skills, and much more. The office can also provide feedback from teacher, student and parent surveys; it can supply details about student demographics, describe district enrollment patterns and share data from the U.S. Census.





The research staff can also “disaggregate” data, allowing interested schools to examine student performance by race, gender, socio-economic background, subject, and grade level. This kind of analysis, Draut says, is an essential first step for schools that are serious about improving their programs. The second step — and the most important, Draut says — is for schools to use the information wisely in making decisions about instructional programs, professional development for teachers, and other actions that address problems raised by the analysis.

“You can produce tons of statistics, but the important thing is what you do with them,” Draut says.

Here are some of the questions Draut and his staff believe school teams should be asking about their data:

-  In what content areas is student performance significantly lower or higher than in others?
-  In looking at student performance in various subjects over time, what trends are indicated?

What trends do teams see in the number of students who are in the CATS novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished categories? What content areas appear to have little change? “Steady upward or downward trends are significant and may indicate that intervention strategies are either working or not working.”

-  What specific strategies appear to be working? For example, has an emphasis on reading instruction produced steady increases in reading scores?
-  What is the relationship of skills that cross over content areas; for example, writing, problem solving, reading comprehension and critical thinking?
-  Are there significant performance discrepancies (by content and by grade level) between or among groups according to gender? Race or ethnicity? Socio-economic status?
-  Are there significant performance discrepancies (by content and by grade level) among the general population of students and students who are in Title I? Migrant programs? Special education? ESS? Gifted and talented?

Once school teams determine the answers to these questions, they face a difficult and often ambiguous task: deciding on strategies that might address any noted discrepancies.

Schools that want to delve even deeper into data analysis can arrange study sessions with staff of the Kentucky Association of School Councils. For a modest fee, KASC can produce a detailed breakdown of data from a school’s Kentucky Performance Report. A parent-friendly study packet walks school councils and leadership teams through a thought-provoking process that relates the analysis to the school’s Consolidated Plan for improvement. (Call 606-238-2188.)

have moved beyond the performance levels typical of their group or that have failed to perform even at the level of schools with similar student populations. The “overachievers” are praised and the “laggards” are called on the carpet.

Daeschner’s approach is not all bad — it does turn the heat up on the very worst performers. But it also sends a not-so-subtle message to schools with mediocre performance that “so long as you can do about as well as other schools with the same kinds of kids, you’re doing okay.”

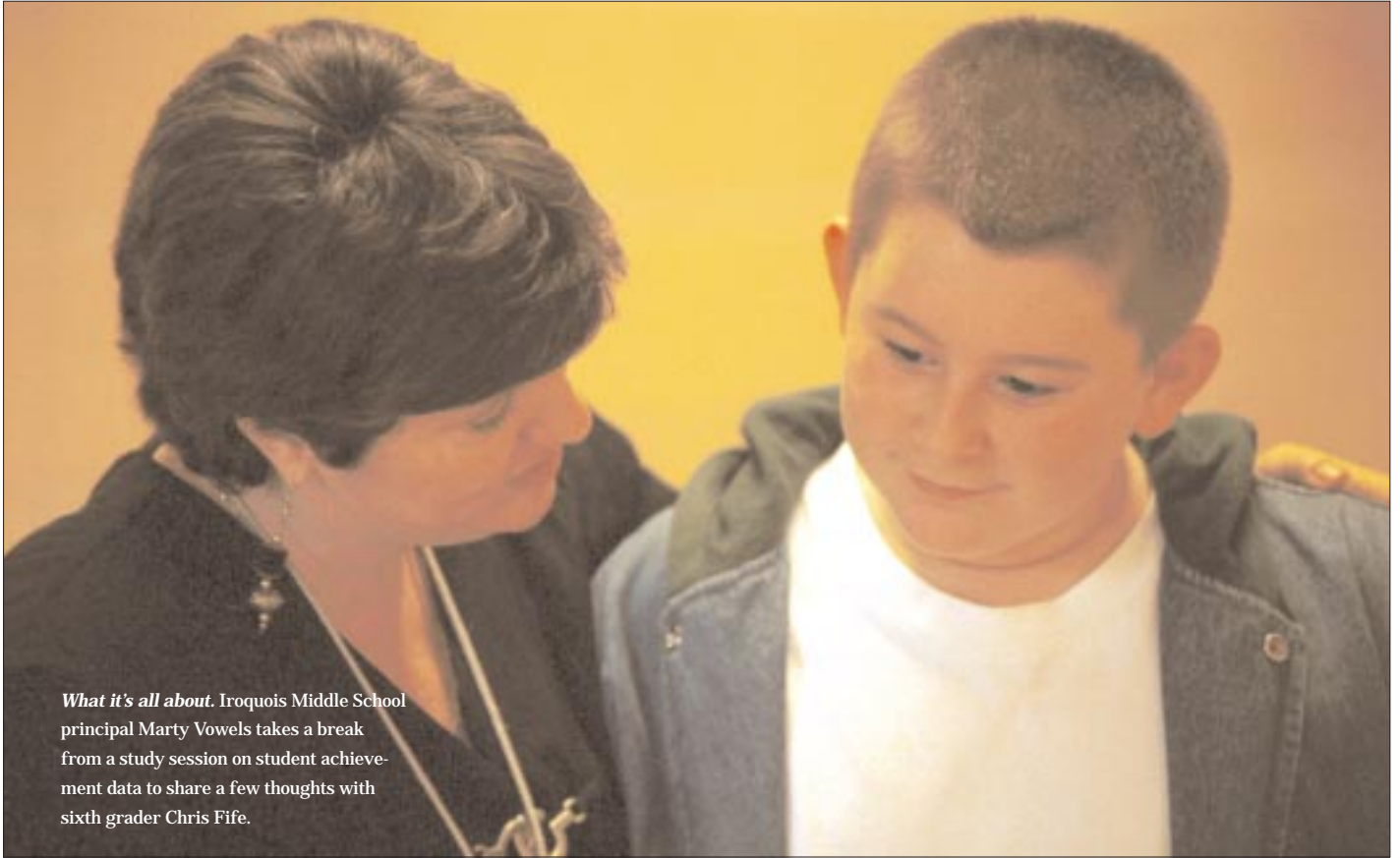
This kind of message runs counter to the whole purpose of standards-based reform. It perpetuates the notion that disadvantaged kids are unlikely to reach the same standard of performance as kids with “better demographics.” Admittedly, this is a common public perception, and one that’s shared by many educators. But, examine the performance of high-poverty schools in Brazosport, Texas (<http://schmidel.com/bisd/index.html>), where educators have raised student scores on the state’s accountability tests above the 90th percentile — in every grade and every socioeconomic group.

How did they do it? Leadership and high expectations. Gerald Andersen, the Brazosport superintendent, says the district’s path to results began with a review of core beliefs: “We believe that all children can learn. Excuses for low academic performance based on socioeconomic or racial differences are unacceptable.”

That kind of common vision seems to be missing in the Jefferson County Public Schools. The district has the know-how, the resources, and the hard-won savvy about what works and what does not. But the Emerald City still seems far away.

Of course, as fans of *The Wizard of Oz* know, the answers weren’t really hidden in the Emerald City — or, for the purposes of our analogy, in a new program or project or a reshuffling of staff. As Dorothy learned, the power to change things comes from inside ourselves, and we use it or we don’t. Real leaders understand this. And blaming outside forces for our failure to act...or lead...well, that’s what the Wizard did. And who wants to be the Wizard?

As the Good Witch Glinda tells Dorothy: “You’ve always had the power.”



What it's all about. Iroquois Middle School principal Marty Vowels takes a break from a study session on student achievement data to share a few thoughts with sixth grader Chris Fife.

CHANGING SCHOOLS IN LOUISVILLE

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Changing Schools is written and produced by the Focused Reporting Project, a team of education writers supported by a grant from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. The school district supports the Project's work in many ways; however, the reports produced by the team are written independently, without prior approval of the district.

Photography by Jonathan Roberts