

From the Board



Data: From Autopsy To Physical To Wellness

by Greg Gibson

A journey of a thousand mile begins with a single step. - Confucius

I recently participated in my annual physical exam. I must say that I do not like every aspect of this exam; however, the accountability that comes with the process is helpful. In the months just prior to attending, I work out more, eat better and generally do a better job of taking care of myself because I know the moment of wanting to “please the doctor” will come soon.

Most of us know the benefit of these types of annual or semi-annual reviews. My doctor, however, is telling me that there are things I can do every month, on my own, and plot my own data in between doctor visits. He is using the broad term “wellness” to give it a name. The process basically involves me charting my own weight monthly. I would also chart other data such as blood pressure, blood sugar, etc...with simple tests that I could do myself. With this process, he was pushing ownership of this data to me... the person most impacted.

My experience with my physical is analogous to what Crowley ISD, our district, is trying to accomplish with student data and learning. In the past five years, we, like many districts, made the transition from data being used solely as a summative (autopsy) to data being used as a formative (physical). We defined these in our curriculum management plan as “assessment of learning” and “assessment for learning.”

In these same five years, we grew by 6,000 students, increased in low socio-economic students from 20% to 45% and became a majority-minority district. This fact has necessitated for us to become a more agile district that is open to change on a daily basis. During this transition, we have worked hard to communicate that just the act of analysis of high quality assessments does not guarantee student achievement. Looking at state tests or interim assessment results in isolation is like reading a newspaper summary of a sports event. The fact is that you learn more about the game if you are there. We have been relatively successful on this journey, but are now well into our next phase, “assessment as learning” (wellness). We have several components and several names for our new strategic planning process. They include:

- Continuous Improvement
- Data Dashboard
- Performance Measurement Indicators
- Balanced Score Card

However, the main goal of this phase is to utilize data in such a way that the students own the results... truly own them. There are two main premises to this transition:

- Assessment as learning does not require teacher buy-in, it creates it.
- Assessment as learning does not require student buy-in, it creates it.

By allowing students to own their own data, we are allowing them the opportunity to show us what they learn along the way. We can't expect students to hit a target without having them “shoot some practice arrows.” Some miss the target, others get close and others score a bulls-eye. By allowing students to own their own data and look at what others do as they “shoot their practice arrows,” we keep them motivated to learn.

At this point in Crowley ISD, all 20 campuses use a data dashboard which drives strategic planning. The main paradigm shift for us is that the strategic plan changes every time there is new data. This occurs three to five times a year.

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In a real sense, we are increasing our agility. The accomplishment of this task was major, and district staff deserves much credit. As a district, we have taken assessment for learning (physical) to a new level with this dynamic data dashboard. Entire campuses change their strategic plan in the middle of the year in order to respond to the most current set of data with updated plans of action. This alone is a huge accomplishment. The next step of getting data management into the hands of students is proving to be an even more daunting task. There are several key components to getting data management into the hands of students, and all of them are difficult to implement. A few of those components include:

- Conducting daily goal setting meetings
- Creating student data folders
- Maintaining wall charts of student progress
- Maintaining wall charts of classroom progress

Training campuses has proven challenging; nevertheless, we have several trailblazer campuses. I will conclude by highlighting one, Jackie Carden Elementary, a K-4 campus in southwest Fort Worth.

Jackie Carden began its continuous improvement journey in the spring of 2008 when Principal Vivian Lincoln took a hard look at the campus data (assessment of learning) and made the decision to adopt the continuous improvement model as a way to empower students on her campus to “own their own learning.” This was their first step.

Next, a core team of teachers received training in continuous improvement strategies. Then, they began using the strategies to set clear targets and engage students. The teachers collected data on the results and shared this information with other teachers and students. The teachers began to look at ways to use student data (assessment for learning) to help them refine their instructional strategies.

Before school began this year, all teachers on the campus received additional training and developed a plan for implementation. Teachers began the year by writing

strategic goals and mission statement with students. Goals and expectations were clear to both students and teachers. Teachers then began using tools to gather input and feedback from students on the instructional strategies that were most successful (assessment for learning). Throughout this school year, campus teachers made adjustments for more effective instruction and additional support where needed.

A giant step on the journey took place when student “ownership” began. Students keep their own data in personal data folders and reflect on their own learning (assessment as learning). They write their own action plans to enable them to perform better as the year progresses.

To date, Jackie Carden has shown incremental increases on their curriculum-based assessments, benchmarks and preliminary TAKS results (assessment of learning). Jackie Carden has become a campus of distinction for Crowley ISD. I think their transformation can best be typified by an experience that a district director recently related. When she recently visited Jackie Carden Elementary, she asked a pre-K student if he could read yet. He immediately ran to his data folder and brought it to her as if to say, “See for yourself.” That youngster owned his learning, and he carried it with him in his data folder daily.

There are some who say today’s students are not as smart as past generations. Nothing could be further from the truth. Today’s youth just think that their attention to adults is optional. Today’s youth seek desperately to own their future and not have one handed to them...they truly want to do it their way. The best way that we, as educators, can help them achieve this is by putting data folders in their hands and spending the time to let them describe what they see and what their goals should be. If we accomplish this task, then we truly have created an educational “wellness” plan for students and the “physicals” and end-of-year autopsy (TAKS) will show positive results. ♦♦♦