

Assessment Tracking Walls: a Focus for Professional Dialogue

'The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities.' (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; p. xi)

Using professional learning communities (PLC) to discuss student achievement is becoming a focus within many districts in Ontario. The purpose of posting 'evidence of' student learning on a data wall is to use student assessment results to learn about students' skills and the effectiveness of instruction which in turn has the potential to become an effective feedback system for professional dialogue to guide instructional improvements (Ross, 2004). Members of a professional learning community need to be purposeful and focused on results. Therefore, the professional learning community becomes collectively responsible for supporting **all** students to achieve based on a standard of reading achievement which in turn informs instructional practice.

Primary Reading Scores on Display:

The majority of districts in Ontario are asking schools to set targets for student reading achievement. Primary teachers are being asked to regularly submit data collected on student reading levels based on formal running record assessments (ie. DRA, PM Benchmarks, On the Mark, Alpha Kids, GB+). A running record is a literacy assessment tool that is formative and provides information about reading behaviours during the reading process. Subsequently, many schools have developed a visual representation of student progress - assessment tracking walls to display the results of these formal and informal assessments (see Figure 1). Unfortunately in many cases, these tracking walls have become a static display of student reading levels as

'... many school systems collect data and feed it back to districts and schools. Much of this feedback is rudimentary and surface level.' (Fullan et al, 2006; p. xvi)

Some schools, however, are using the assessment tracking board as an integral component and a forum for focused and interactive professional discussion during divisional PLC meetings. Often tracking walls simply display individual student reading levels as determined by a formal reading assessment tool. Students who are not meeting the pre-determined standards and targets set by the division, school and/or district are identified as being 'at-risk'. The discussion surrounding the 'evidence of' student learning as displayed by the tracking board serves the purpose of starting the discussion and setting an action plan by:

- identifying individual students who appear to be 'stuck' and/or struggling in the acquisition of becoming a proficient reader;
- identifying the strengths and gaps of the individual student by collecting and examining other pertinent data;
- setting standards and targets for individual students for whom the grade level standards and targets would be unattainable;
- ensuring that assessment and instruction are aligned by identifying, discussing and monitoring instructional approaches based on the analysis of the data collected and the individual needs of the students identified;
- determining and reassessing the teaching strategies chosen as determined by current best practices and the analysis of the data collected through ongoing observation of the students engaged in the reading process – reading, responding and interacting with print and;
- monitoring and reflecting upon the progress of the individual students by constantly analyzing the complexities involved in the student's behaviors during the reading process by asking – 'Is the student gaining the self confidence and competencies by applying these strategies in an independent manner?'



Visual Display of Running Record Data Wall
(Figure 1)

Although the data tracking wall displays the reading level attained, professional dialogue needs to be interactive with a focus on the evidence 'of learning' collected on repeated measurements of daily reading tasks that the child is undertaking. As Clay (1993) suggests, a running record is an observational tool to collect data on 'learners at work' and emphasizes that the process (especially with emergent readers) is as important as the final product. That is to say, that collecting data three times a year is not enough to determine starting points and hence the need for ongoing informal running records.

Information needs to be gathered in an ongoing systematic manner that documents a child's behaviours during the reading process for:

- competencies and confusions ;
- strengths and gaps and;

- ‘evidence of’ child’s understandings by observing the child’s application of the processes and strategies taught.

And although running records are the ‘window into how a child interacts with text’, teachers need to be able to understand and interpret this data collected through interactive sessions, observations and samples of student performance, as this is key to providing effective and timely instruction for all students (Stiggins, 1991).

One School’s Experience:

One primary division in a small northern Ontario school uses a simple framework (see Figure 2) to plan focused intervention for those students identified as being ‘at risk’ and/or struggling in learning how to read. Students from Kindergarten through Grade 3 are initially identified based on the student’s reading level as determined by a formal running record posted on the assessment tracking wall. The tracking wall is a visual display of each student’s reading level on a monthly basis (see Figure 1). The background of the board and the student record cards are colour co-ordinated which instantly provides a visual clue as to those children who are not within the identified and/or acceptable reading range as determined by the current research community (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999).

Time Frame & Identification of students	Reading Behaviours Identified	Focus for Instruction Based on Gaps in Student Application	Who & How
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • students are identified as being ‘at risk’ based on running records - targets & identified goals as determined by the school and/or district; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identification of the strengths that the student brings to the reading experience – gaps identified as those that the student is not being applying in authentic situations; • list of reading behaviours & 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • brainstorming & identifying the specific strategies to be employed based on the gaps and/or inconsistencies in application of strategies as noted through assessment(s) and/or observations by the classroom teacher; • explicitly identify 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • special Education, classroom and/or resource teacher(s) to work with individual and/or small groups of children as identified through process; • specific strategies identified through group consensus

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identified time needed for focused intervention – monitored by aggregate of assessment data and reviewed during bi-weekly PLC meetings; 	expectations according to individual grade levels - at the grade level;	strategies & resources needed to address the gaps; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitoring the effectiveness of programming based on formative assessments; 	during PLCs;
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Planning Guide to Identify 'Next Steps'
(Figure 2)

After the initial identification of 'at-risk' students, an aggregate of data is collected and presented by the classroom teachers during the initial primary PLC meeting in September. By analyzing the data collected, some students are selected (based on prioritizing needs) to work within a 'booster group' model while others are supported through specific changes in instructional strategies within individual classroom settings.

This school supports these identified students through a literacy team approach. The team is comprised of two special education resource teachers (one full time and one part time assignment) and two educational assistants. Their timetables have been structured to provide a 'flexibility' in their support to those students identified by the primary division during the PLC meetings – the team works as a flexible cohesive unit providing focused student intervention based on ongoing discussions and monitoring of student progress among the team, the division and the classroom teacher. The entire division shares the responsibility for ensuring that individual students receive the focused intervention best suited to augment classroom instructional programs.

Ongoing observations and the collection of complementary assessment data by the classroom teacher and literacy support staff are an integral component of the monthly PLC meetings. This critical and ongoing monitoring of student learning is the basis for

discussion and professional dialogue among the primary division during PLC meetings (Shepard, 2005).

Aligning Assessment to Inform Practice:

The discussion has been focused on using an assessment tracking wall to plan strategically for individual students as determined by ongoing formative assessment data and professional dialogue during PLC meetings. The monthly and/or bimonthly PLC meetings are critical for the primary staff and administration to explore questions critical to student success in reading achievement by explicitly articulating:

- starting points for instruction;
- the indicators of success at the stages of reading development;
- individual student strengths and gaps as measured by the aggregate of data collected and analyzed;
- instructional practices and supports to address the gaps identified – differentiated instructional approaches, personnel to deliver intervention, monitor growth & checks for success and;
- the appropriate resources to be used in the classroom.

Nevertheless, Ross (2004) cautions that

‘ ... assessment is tightly bound to deep-seated teacher beliefs about evidence, student motivation, and instructional effectiveness. (p. 187)

and suggests that improvement in student learning will be dependent upon an entire division using the data tracking wall as the forum for focused conversation regarding meeting the needs of ‘at-risk’ students by closing the achievement gap and raising the bar on expectations of the delivery of curriculum at the classroom level. Success is dependent upon a combination of staff members becoming knowledgeable about how to use assessment to inform practice and supporting a collaborative culture through a PLC in order to support **all** students in reaching their potential in reading.

References

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