

Preface

The Preface to the first edition of *Getting Excited About Data* began like this:

It doesn't seem so very long ago—except when I get things in the mail like invitations to 25-year reunions. But there are days when it seems like light-years. I'm referring to the “good old days” when I was a classroom teacher and my *opinion* counted. I could answer parents—or even principals—with a *subjective* statement in a sincere, confident voice, and I would be believed. Not so these days. It seems as if Missouri has taken over the union with everyone crying, “Show me.” Professional judgment isn't enough; people want proof. In short, they want to see the data.

That book was written for all the teachers, school administrators, staff developers, and advocates of public education who wanted to be proactive and responsive to their community. They were voluntarily learning and implementing new processes and practices so they could better understand their learners and evaluate their work.

This second edition, written just five years later, emerges in a different context. President George W. Bush and Secretary of Education Rod Paige just celebrated the first anniversary of No Child Left Behind, a major overhaul of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act requiring annual testing in Grades 3–8 in reading and math, and once again in high school, with “adequate yearly progress” to be made by all groups of students. Leaving no child behind—the act, not the Act—is exactly what the data volunteers of five years ago had in mind, but few of them came to the NCLB birthday party. The threats of takeover and further diminished resources through parent exodus to other so-called choices have turned idealism into legalism.

The career that didn't seem so long has now entered a new century, and more memories surface. Once, as young teachers, we greeted “the dawning of the age of Aquarius.” Now, we gasp for breath, drowning in the age of accountability.

For public education to survive, all schools and districts must develop the skills and processes needed to gather, display, analyze, interpret, make

decisions, and take action with data. For those who are just taking up that challenge, this book remains simple and basic—a starting point. For those who have already come a long way, creating school portfolios, setting data-driven goals, and adopting research-based strategies, this second edition adds new material on using formative classroom assessment; aligning instructional improvement work at the district, school, and classroom levels; and monitoring both implementation of new practices and the resulting impact on student learning. The three P's of people, passion, and proof are more consistently emphasized throughout, and a new final chapter on leadership adds three R's for leaders: reflection and relentless resilience.

What This Book Is *Not*

Even with the new material, there are still a number of things this book is not.

This is not a statistics book. The uses of data recommended in this book require the ability to count, calculate averages and percentages, and construct simple graphs. Students who meet the fourth-grade benchmarks of Washington State's Essential Academic Learning Requirements in the probability and statistics strand of mathematics would be able to assist with the data work discussed here. Regression formulas and correlation coefficients are omitted. Here, the term *significance* isn't represented as $p < 0.05$. It refers instead to what the *school* defines as significant—that is, as important, relevant, and useful to know.

This book is not comprehensive. If psychometricians describe this book as simplistic and basic, we will know we've been successful. There are legitimate reasons why most educators are uncomfortable with the use of data. The purpose of this book is to raise comfort and interest levels so readers will become ready, willing, and able to explore more sophisticated uses of data. My intent is simply this: to meet people where they are and help them take their next developmental steps into this standards-based, data-driven age of accountability.

This book is not bureaucratic and impersonal. Reading it and implementing its recommendations won't turn anyone into an accountant, auditor, or undertaker. Its purpose is to affirm and build on the nurturing nature of teachers, adding the support of objective information to their usually accurate professional intuition. Stories, such as the one in Chapter 12, illustrate how the use of data can stimulate greater sensitivity to the needs of students, not turn them into numbers.

This book is not a quick fix for the achievement gap. Almost every chapter highlights some equity issue I have experienced myself or encountered in schools and districts—urban, rural, and suburban—in over 30 states and several countries. These experiences began over 35 years ago, when I taught in an Alabama school that had just experienced forced desegregation, and my class of third graders spanned 11 grade levels in reading. The experiences became even richer 20 years ago, when I became principal of

a school with racial and socioeconomic diversity. The state department of education came to conduct an audit of our Title I program, because the fall-to-spring normal curve equivalent gains we reported were suspect. The gains were validated, and state officials described our elementary school as “the best kept secret in the state.”

In my latest position, I have spent four years working with urban schools in Seattle, Washington, including those with a majority of students of color, large numbers of English language learners, and 60%–70% qualifying for free or reduced-priced lunches. During this span of time, I have learned with pride that the best of classroom teaching and assessment most dramatically impacts challenged learners and accelerates their progress. I learned with frustration that schools most in need of stability and sophisticated instructional expertise suffered constant teacher turnover due to rigid salary schedules and seniority-based transfer policies. And I learned with humility that I need to partner with leaders of color, because learning cognitively, listening compassionately, and becoming culturally competent are not the same as “knowing” the realities of the achievement gap, especially for African American males.

In this book, I share what I can say with confidence from my own experience and observation. For more in-depth insights on closing the achievement gap, I highly recommend Ruth W. Johnson’s *Using Data to Close the Achievement Gap* (2002), as well as publications of the Education Trust and other resources listed in the Reference section, which have enlightened me.

This book is not written in jargon. For this book, I have intentionally chosen a casual, conversational style. My purpose is to use plain English to describe simple things I’ve done with real people that have created interest and opened doors. Because these activities have helped my colleagues and clients, I trust you will find them useful also.

I’m aware that the pronouns *I* and *we* are frequently interchanged throughout the book. I have let this inconsistency stand because it feels natural, because none of these activities could have occurred without the cooperation of others, and because I hope you will read as an active participant in mental dialogue with me.

What This Book Is

The purpose of *Getting Excited About Data* is better captured by the subtitle: *Combining People, Passion, and Proof to Maximize Student Achievement*. Collecting more data for the sake of having more data is an exercise in futility unless it engages people by connecting to their deep and authentic passions for teaching and learning. People who work incredibly hard because they care need the proof of their efforts to encourage and sustain them and to help them gain the respect they so deserve. The goal is not to be a more research-based, data-driven school. The goal is to increase student success.

The focus of *Getting Excited About Data* is the human element—hopes and fears, prior knowledge, beliefs about student potential and

professional practice, and current needs. This book offers a variety of tools and group activities to create active engagement with data and interaction with peers that will build more collaborative cultures with a shared sense of collective responsibility for all students' learning.

How This Book Is Organized

The content of *Getting Excited About Data: Combining People, Passion, and Proof to Maximize Student Achievement* is organized into five major sections with unique purposes. The first two chapters serve as the knowledge base and foundation for the rest of the book. Chapter 1 is the “what we need to do” chapter. It introduces a visual organizer that illustrates the relationship between components of an aligned plan to impact achievement and highlights the points where data is critical to align and maintain the process. Two high school scenarios are contrasted to illustrate the importance of engaging people, arousing passion, and documenting proof. Chapter 2 addresses “why we should,” emphasizing the important role of data in school effectiveness and successful school change over the past two decades.

The next section focuses on the human capacity to work with data. Chapter 3 describes the limited ways in which data are typically used in most school districts and examines “why we don’t” use it for more powerful purposes. It acknowledges the barriers that are embedded in the reality of school life and suggests ways to build interest and motivation for greater involvement with data. Chapter 4, new to this edition, describes the organizational infrastructure that needs to be built to engage busy people and explains how structure and process impact the school culture. The passion part of the subtitle is aroused in Chapter 5, which begins with an activity that stimulates reflection on the core values of the school and provokes the search for evidence that the mission is being accomplished.

Four chapters constitute the third section and focus on initial steps to initiate more deliberate and intentional use of data. For schools just embarking on the data journey, a road map is provided. Even schools that are well down the road will find these chapters helpful as a diagnostic review to strengthen their practices. Chapter 6 expands the definition of data beyond “just test scores; recommends types of data useful to elementary, middle, and high schools; and introduces five key questions that help determine the types of proof that will be meaningful and will stimulate curiosity and action. Chapter 7 describes characteristics of user-friendly data, with helpful tips and examples of data displays. The importance of engaging people in collaborative interpretation of data about their school is stressed in Chapter 8, and a professional development activity for this purpose is provided.

Components of the previous chapters are combined in Chapter 9, which outlines a Data Day activity that sends clear signals to staff and community about an increased focus on evidence of results. Even schools who have become accustomed to using data should reassert this practice publicly on a periodic basis, such as when major initiatives or change efforts are

being planned, or when staff turnover, a new principal, changes in attendance boundaries, or other factors present a “new picture” of the school.

The activities in the fourth section provide an overview of a school’s student characteristics, achievement, and other factors related to staff and community perceptions. The chapters in this section utilize the data to establish priorities and integrate accountability requirements with goals that are data-based, grounded in the school’s values, and within the range of maximum optimism. Chapters 11 and 12 actually add to the data and knowledge bases by providing recommendations for the deeper analysis of the data in the established priority areas, the study of strategies with documented success (data) in research and best practice, and more intentional reflection on current practices consistently used throughout the school.

Chapter 13—which opens the final section—intentionally shifts the focus from the school to the district. The deeper analysis of student data, study of research and best practice, and reflection on current practice will generate many ideas, needs, and concerns that are beyond the capacity and scope of authority of the individual school. It describes the alignment and support needed to contribute to successful change at the school level.

Chapter 14 returns to the school-level focus on planning the new work and describes a new type of data collection to verify that plans are being implemented and are having the intended impact on student learning. The challenges of sustaining focus and momentum until the effort shows up in student success are explored in Chapter 15.

Finally, this second edition closes with a new chapter on leadership. Michael Fullan (2003a) stated in a speech in January 2003 that “leadership would be to this decade what standards were to the 90’s.” The expectations for schools rise, the threats of punishment for “failure” escalate, and the resources diminish. To survive is success; to thrive is extraordinary. As the previous 15 chapters emphasized the three P’s of people, passion, and proof, Chapter 16 introduces the three R’s of reflection and relentless resilience for leaders in the 21st century.

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