

## **A New York District's Journey to a Data-Driven Culture**

An interview with Kimberly Moritz, Superintendent of Schools at Randolph Central School District, Western New York

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### **What strategies have you used to adopt a data-driven culture in your district?**

Building a data-driven culture took us several years. A few key strategies set us up for success in this area. First, a lot of people talk about data inquiry meetings, but don't make them mandatory. Even as far back as the 2008–2009 school year, we were meeting as professional learning communities (PLCs) to get teachers talking to each other and to promote trust. Now, we have grade-level teams made up of teachers and building administrators meeting monthly to look at the data for every single student. This is a non-negotiable part of how we do business in our K–6 building.

Second, we also gave teachers the freedom to use their professional development days to work on the areas that were of most interest to them, in support of student learning. They submitted a proposal and then reported out to the large group on what they learned. This allowed them to take ownership of their own learning and has set us up for better collaboration on all issues related to data in the current school year.

As an administrative team we also looked at new programs and made all decisions related to the implementation of new state mandates collaboratively with teachers. We didn't just bring programs into the schools and hope they would work; we followed through and stayed involved in the process to ensure that they were being implemented and that teachers had what they needed to make them work well. These programs included Curriculum Associates' [i-Ready](#)® and [Ready](#)® programs. We used data from these programs to set up Academic Intervention Service periods in Mathematics and English Language Arts for all K–6 students. This allowed us to break students into groups based on their individual ability, so we now have classes for advanced, on grade-level and below grade-level.

Importantly, we were doing all these things before the state implemented the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR); so we worked with our union and implemented the APPR in the first year under the premise that our teachers and administrators were all going to get comfortable before it was required by NYS.

From the beginning, our conversations around data have always been about using it to make better informed instructional decisions. The instructional decisions may be on an individual student basis, such as what the child needs next in an intervention session. Or the decisions may be more about planning and grade level curricular decisions for the next unit or year. Instead of each teacher determining what to teach and how it aligns to the NYS standards independently, there's now much greater collaboration and students have a much more coherent, consistent learning path through our school system.

### **Which tools/processes are you using to ensure the right level of student assessment?**

For the past several years we have set up windows of time in which teachers conduct formative assessments, and then we meet to discuss the results to determine how each student is performing. Last year, we also implemented the New York State curriculum modules to raise the bar further on what our

students learn. With higher expectations and the increased rigor of the Common Core, we are now challenging *all* students, not just our challenged learners.

We look hard at what every student needs to achieve, and we have found the best way to get a complete picture is to integrate an online adaptive assessment with both online and print instruction—for us, it's with i-Ready and Ready. We found that results from the i-Ready assessments correlated closely with student performance on the state test, which was reassuring. And for our younger students, we want to make sure they get experience with the paper and pencil experience with testing; so Ready helps with that in addition to providing rigorous, on grade-level, standards-based instruction.

We've been talking about differentiated instruction for decades. The truth is, it's very hard to do it well for every student. Blended learning with adaptive testing and diagnostic instruction that offers online individualized content is the only way to truly differentiate instruction.

### **How is your district using assessment data to tailor instruction for students' unique needs?**

Our focus is on the fluency level of each child. We group students for intervention, from advanced to on grade to below grade. All students in each grade level receive intervention for 30–40 minutes per day in ELA and 30–40 minutes per day in mathematics. Our students are using i-Ready online instruction modules for 45–60 minutes per week to ensure that they are getting the differentiated instruction they need to advance.

We also use the assessment results to make better informed instructional decisions about what we have planned for the next unit, which NYS Common Core modules are most needed, and what we may need to add to the curriculum for a particular group of students.

### **What “lessons learned” can you share with other school leaders about using assessments thoughtfully?**

For years we, as administrators, have been experts at managing buildings and districts, but have not consistently and specifically focused on instruction. However, our most important job is how and what is being taught. My advice for any administrator is to become the instructional leader for your organization. You have to make yourself a good instructional leader even if it is uncomfortable or unfamiliar to you. This level of leadership will give your teams support and confidence that they can be successful.

I've been a school administrator since 2000 and was a teacher during the preceding decade; so I've seen program implementation done in many different ways, some good and some that faltered or failed. As school administrators, we spend a considerable amount of our time solving problems. When it comes to instructional leadership, we cannot continue to throw programs at our problems. Purchasing programs like i-Ready and Ready, no matter how rich and robust the programs are, cannot be implemented effectively if we're just buying them and handing them off to teachers.

Successful program implementations require ongoing leadership involvement, with clear expectations of implementation details and follow-through for consistent system-wide change. Otherwise, our teachers each end up picking and choosing the parts of the program implementation they like or that fit best with what they're already doing. We end up with something different in every grade level or classroom and

no sense of coherence or building-wide plan. It takes a building administrator who continues to attend to—to *administer*—the program to see real school improvement.

As school leaders we also have to attend to how we talk about assessments with our teachers. Teachers work hard and do the best that they know how. When we talk with them about their results, it's important that the conversations focus on the results without judgment. They simply provide more information that we can use to determine what our students know. The assessments help us to logically and reliably make better instructional decisions. Keeping the conversations focused on the data, the curriculum, and the instructional decisions made collectively for a grade level or group of students can keep everyone focused on school improvement and away from personal judgment.

Significant school improvement can be realized when we have school leaders who are focused as much on the instructional side of leadership as the managerial side. It takes high expectations for everyone, first of all for us, thoughtful collaboration, and constant follow-through. It's hard work and it's worth it.

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