

A NEW CHANGE PROCESS: Listening to People, Not Data Dashboards

From *Street Data* by Shane Safir and Jamila Dugan



A New Way of Thinking About Data: Flipping the Dashboard

Big data has long perpetuated the idea that Black, brown, and Indigenous students are somehow “broken” and that it is up to schools to “repair” them. Instead of blindly accepting external testing mandates and the resulting myth-perpetuating data, what if we pivoted away from big data and toward data that is locally-sourced and human-centered? What if we looked at a new kind of data—street data.

What is Street Data?

On Google Maps, you can set your view to satellite-, map-, or street-view, depending on the type of detail you need. We can apply the same framework to data about our schools. “Satellite” data shows you large patterns of achievement, “map” data will get you information about skill acquisition, but only “street” data is the qualitative data that is needed to better understand students, staff, and parents. As school leaders, to truly transform our schools for equity we need to examine “street” level data – what’s really going on.

Here are examples of ways to collect street data:

Interviews, Surveys, Focus Groups, Listening Campaigns, and “Fishbowls” – Focus groups of students or parents whose voices are typically absent from the decision-making process are asked their views on a specific equity challenge. Be sure to gain permission and/or provide complete anonymity if their statements are to be shared at a later meeting.

Equity Observations – This could include classroom observations in which you track who participates and the responses they get by various demographic categories, or you could observe staff meetings with a similar equity lens. School-wide equity observations might include scans of class categories such as remedial, honors, and career tech courses, etc. Who is in enrolled in these classes?

Ethnographies, Home Visits, and Student-Led Community Walks – Gain a greater understanding of a group of students through entering into deep research of their life experiences. You might explore a campus sub-culture, seek permission to visit students and families at home or elsewhere in their neighborhoods, or ask students to act as your guides to important aspects of their communities.

Shadowing – Principals could shadow students or teachers. District leaders might shadow principals (or teachers or students).

Instructional Rounds – A practice originally designed by educators from Harvard University, consider inviting students (as young as 3rd grade), visit three classes, and after orienting students to the purpose, ask *them* for ideas for what to look for!

With any of the above methods, be sure to seek permission, and ensure that the students and families feel comfortable and in control of the situation. Not only can you learn from the interaction, but it is also an opportunity to build trust and relational capital.

A New Model for Transforming Schools: Deep Listening

The way we gather street data *and* build trust and relationships is through *deep* listening. This means listening that is not just an item on your to-do list. It is not transactional. Instead, it is a genuine attempt to understand context and root causes in the most human way.

Deep Listening – What to DO	Deep Listening – What NOT to Do
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Offer a clear reason for the conversation• Promise and keep confidentiality• Actively solicit feedback• Set aside your own assumptions and deficit-based stereotypes• Pay attention to tone and body language• Allow everyone equal time to speak• Express appreciation and gratitude to the speaker	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Become defensive• Interrupt or jump in with solutions• Blame or finger point• Embody power and bureaucracy by taking notes on a computer

A New Change Process

But of course, listening alone doesn’t make the changes to transform our schools. We must embrace a new human-centered *change process* that stands in contrast to the “improvement science” model frequently pushed on schools across the past two decades.

An Old Way to Change (for Scalability)

Improvement science, as championed by the Carnegie and Gates foundations, encourages practitioners to test new ideas in rapid cycles by following the “plan-do-study-act” formula. According to this formula, you would **PLAN-DO-STUDY-ACT**:

(1) develop a change idea, (2) test it out, (3) collect data on it, (4) evaluate if it worked and should be implemented at a larger scale.

The purported advantages of this formula are reliable results and scalability. But consider the irrationality of planning the change *before* collecting data. *Shouldn’t we first determine what challenges we’re facing before planning what we will do?* This approach is unlikely to get us the best quality educational and whole-person approach we desire for our students.

A New Way to Transform Our Schools – LISTEN-UNCOVER-REIMAGINE-MOVE

It is time to replace **plan-do-study-act** with a new, human-centered change model. To make change that works *for* instead of *against* equity, we must embrace a new process: (1) listen, (2) uncover, (3) reimagine, (4) move.

(1) Listen – In this step we *seek out the marginalized voices* in our communities and those who are most impacted by equity issues, proposed changes, or incidents we are investigating. We *use deep listening* (to students, families, educators) to gather data and ask:

- What is going well for you/your child/your students? What do you feel proud of?
- What is your biggest frustration or challenge right now?
- What changes would you like to see and why do they matter?
- What feedback do you have for me to help make our school more equitable and inclusive?

(2) Uncover – In this step, we *review and probe the street data* we gathered to *uncover the root causes* of our equity challenges. We:

- Work as a team and study the data collaboratively so as to “see” from as many perspectives as possible
- Consider a variety of street data sources such as interviews, student work, and observation notes
- Slow down and be curious instead of decisive. Avoid jumping to solutions
- Follow established protocols, such as the “Street Data Analysis Protocol,” “iceberg,” or “peeling the onion” protocols to ensure we are inquiring deeply into patterns, trends, and systems, and not just reacting to surface-level information.
- Consider *our own thinking* or mental models as possible factors contributing to the problem.

Questions to **consider during this phase**:

- What were our initial assumptions and how does the street data challenge them?
- What is surprising in the street data?
- What root causes are revealing themselves?
- What entry points are emerging for disrupting business-as-usual?

(3) Reimagine – In this step, we get creative and plan *next steps*. We must push beyond the usual solutions we “know” because we learned them from broken systems. Now, we align ourselves with those at the margins—those most impacted by the issues at hand—and inquire alongside them. Rather than paternalistically searching for a solution *for them* we search for a solution *with them*.

- To stimulate openness and creativity, consider carefully how you’ll set the tone for a meeting to plan and reimagine. The materials we offer (pens vs. colored markers), the way we arrange the space (rows vs. circles), and what we put on the agenda (just talking vs. other modes like movement or quiet reflection) can make a big difference in the group’s creative output.
- Share the trends and patterns found in the street data you collected.
- Ask what emotions the data elicits, and engage stakeholders in a visioning activity to dream about new possibilities.
- Discuss emerging themes as a group, and set clear next steps (which might include gathering more street data).

The key to the “reimagining” phase is maintaining a firm belief that the very communities with the “bad test scores” also possess vast cultural wealth. We need those partnering with us to reimagine school. Seek the wisdom of cafeteria workers, paraprofessionals, custodians, security guards and those who come from the same communities as the students. At the conclusion of this phase, ask:

- What are the people we listened to telling us they want and need?
- What creative approaches are naturally emerging?
- What would success look like if we moved in these directions?

(4) Move – The final step in this new equity-centered change process is to move on your emerging ideas with courage and love. You will have to act without complete information or a perfect design, but you can be brave and you can act with love because you desire what is best for your students and communities. You can step away from your tired, old role as a consumer of programs and curricula designed by someone who never met your students or their families, and step into a new role as a change agent.

Questions to **consider at this phase**:

- What is the team’s call to action emerging from the data?
- What will you try to do together in the next four to six weeks?
- How will you know if your experiment has succeeded or failed? What additional data will you gather?
- What will enable you to be brave and stay the course?

Keep in mind that change is non-linear. You may not be on an incremental and direct path toward exactly where you hope to go. Your experiment may not produce the change that you hope for. You may need to collect more data and try again. But, by keeping your process human-centered and by listening to and collaborating with those at the margins, you can trust that you are pointed *toward* equity instead of away from it.