

## PROMISING PRACTICE AND IMPLEMENTATION TOOL

The following is the Lever for Educator Excellence that most closely applies to the practice detailed below.

### Professional Culture

**Name and Position (Contact person):** Richard Bransfield, Principal of the Linden STEAM Academy, Malden Public Schools

**Email and Phone:** rbransfi@malden.mec.edu (781-388-0868)

**Title of Promising Practice:** *Cultivating and Sustaining a Data Culture*

**District where implemented:** Linden STEAM Academy, 29 Wescott Street Street, Malden, MA 02148

**How would you describe this practice?** As a new principal interested in the collection and use of data to improve instruction, Mr. Bransfield used his prior coaching experience to communicate his vision of how best to cultivate a data culture at the Linden. To this end, he discussed with staff members the importance of looking at data in real time (akin to a coach and team members looking over the film of a game immediately afterwards). His goal was to have teachers prepare data walls in every classroom, walls that attached a face and name, rather than simply a number, to existing data. Because the school had long been involved with Bay State Reading and other related initiatives, literacy data provided the initial data wall focus.

To provision teachers appropriately, the principal bought tri-fold boards for everyone, obtained photograph stickers of each student from the school photographer, and disseminated Bay State Reading benchmark data. Though these materials provided the basis for creating the initial data walls, an important component of the work was the principal's holding one-to-one meetings with individual faculty members to discuss the data wall concept and to alleviate concerns as well as receive suggestions about the work.

To provide a location for data walls that allowed professionals access to student data as a group but did not make that data available to the general public at will, the principal used an empty classroom to create a “data room” in the school. It is in this room that data-based decisions have been made.

After meeting as a group with representatives from BSRI (Bay State Reading Initiative), the literacy staff used 4”x 6” cardstock to create student data cards reflecting DIBELS and GRADE testing results. Each card was codified with either green, yellow or red dots signifying DIBELS scores that identified students who were at *benchmark*, those who were *at some risk* and those who were *at risk*. Green, yellow and red flags were also used to represent each student’s comprehension scores based on GRADE assessment results.

Once a card was created for each student, teachers placed the cards in wall charts according to their scores. Immediately, the proficiency levels of all students became visually apparent; subsequently, an instructional plan was devised for any student not currently at benchmark. That plan was noted on the back of the student’s card. Then interventions were put into place and progress monitoring was done every two weeks to ensure that adequate progress was being made.

During the winter benchmarking period, a similar process was undertaken. All students were assessed using DIBELS and GRADE and their results were represented on their data cards using green, yellow or red dots for fluency and colored flags for comprehension. During a data meeting teachers worked with various interventionists in the data room manipulating cards based on the data. Cards were placed in one of three categories--*up*, *same* or *down*--signifying the progress made by individual students in literacy development. At that time, teachers discussed questions such as “what did I do instructionally to help that child move?”, “what can we do differently to help this student achieve benchmark?” Best practices were shared, new strategies were developed and collegiality became more evident than ever before. Even if students were not predicted to reach benchmark by the next cycle, the team was asked to commit to some realistic goal for that student. “If all students are capable of moving yet current data does not reflect that progress, then what do we need to do to make that happen?” Like a coach with a specified number of

team members, teachers were thinking about how to get all of their students “ready to play.” In this way the principal played a key role in ensuring that teachers learned from the data, digging deeper to increase their capacity to take action to meet student needs.

At the end of the data meeting, teachers placed their student data cards back on the data wall according to students’ most recent scores. Again, teachers and administration were able to see those students who were now at benchmark, had some risk or were in the at risk category. Results were compared with a photograph taken of the data wall from the previous charting. Results were dramatic. Teachers were able to see that not only were students moving individually, but also that the grade level as a whole was progressing toward reaching benchmark.

As work on cultivating a data culture progressed at the Linden, the school, which already has a gifted and talented strand, created a plan for submitting an application to become a Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Innovation School with a focus on STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math). The application was accepted, allowing the school to have more autonomy to make decisions that best meet the needs of its particular student body.

The practice previously described above exemplifies many of the criteria necessary if professional culture is to be a lever for positive change in a school district, as it . . .

Allows teachers to regularly engage in instructional conversations, peer observations, collaborative planning, and ongoing collegial support.  
Creates a school characterized by a climate of shared responsibility for continuous improvement, including a willingness to discuss “undiscussable” issues.  
Ensures that data are continuously examined and analyzed to guide instructional decision-making.

**6. What are the goals of this practice?** As Peter Senge has noted, “Learning is not about taking in information; it’s about enhancing our capacity to take action.” Cultivating and implementing a data culture meets many educational goals, including the following:  
To improve instruction

- To provide students with feedback on their performance
- To gain common understanding of what quality performance is and how close we are to achieving it
- To measure program success and effectiveness
- To understand if what we are doing is making a difference
- To ensure that students “do not fall through the cracks”
- To get to the “root causes” of problems
- To promote accountability

**7. How does this practice reflect your district’s mission and core values?** The Linden’s concentration on data aligns well to the district’s strategic plan and its particular emphasis on analyzing relevant external and internal trends to determine their implications for improved student achievement. It also reflects several of the major elements of the district’s vision in which classrooms are places where teachers, administrators and other staff ensure access to high levels of learning for all students and encourage, inspire and have high expectations for all students.

**8. What grade levels are applicable?** K-8, with the initial concentration on grades K-5.

**9. How did you implement this practice so that has been more successful than others you have used?** Early in his first year as the school leader, the principal introduced to faculty the importance of cultivating a data culture at the school. Besides meeting with every teacher to discuss his beliefs and seek feedback, the principal also worked closely with representatives of the Malden Teachers Union to garner input. He also elicited the assistance of other existing groups and services such as BSRI (Bay State Reading Initiative), Title 1 services and A-Net (Achievement Network). Such collaboration helped to minimize resistance to the work.

**How has this practice changed your district?** As a result of the success of the Linden's data room, the superintendent has requested that all other K-8 principals in the district take the time to visit the room and discuss with the principal those steps he took to change the culture of his building to become a community that embraces using

data to drive instruction, to see data not just as cold numbers, but as a very personal link to real, unique children who can achieve great things when an examination of data informs learning plans for each child. In addition, the superintendent will be working with all principals to replicate in other K-8 schools the practices initiated at the Linden.

**What are the resources (time, money, materials, etc.) required for successful implementation?** Materials to create data walls and the data room to contain them were typical school supplies. However, the principal did bring in A-Net at a cost in order to provide ELA and Mathematics test data four times a year for grades 6-8, adding that data to Bay State Reading data collected three times a year in grades K-5 and to data from bi-weekly progress monitoring. Also important to successful implementation was (1) the allotment of a room large enough hold teachers' meetings specifically for the examination of data walls and related tasks and (2) the provision of time for teachers to collaborate. Forty-five minutes a week of collaborative time was carved out of team time with the literacy coach, restructuring team time to focus on student achievement. During this time in the data room, teachers examine updated student learning cards, change student groupings, and decide how to change and enhance services and teaching practices to reach all learners

**Photographs of the grade level data walls used as tools to implement and advance this practice.**

