A Principal's Perspective on Data Notebooks

As the principal of a school put into restructuring by the state of New Hampshire I was looking for something that would be embedded in our everyday way of doing business. We started out by aligning our curriculum with the state standards and we began putting a heavy emphasis on collecting data and analyzing it at each grade level which opened the door to collaboration and using the data we collected to guide instruction.

Mt. Pleasant School implemented the concept of Student Data Notebooks 2 years ago in our fifth grade. The fifth grade team was working on finding a way to empower students to become accountable for their learning. The teachers had committed a great deal of time into aligning our district math curriculum with our state's grade level expectations and they wanted the students to really grasp the ideas they were teaching and to learn to keep track of their own data as well as use that data to focus on where they needed to improve as students. The fifth grade team started out tracking only math. As the year progressed they began to add other components such as spelling, attendance, behavior and Language Arts.

The data notebooks were a huge success and the following year we implemented the concept throughout the school, including kindergarten. Each student in the building has a data notebook in which they keep track of their own learning, attendance and behavior. The notebooks contain individual goals and action plans, charts and graphs to self-monitor progress, objectives to guide setting goals, formative assessments created by grade level teams, and opportunities for communication with parents. These notebooks help our students manage their learning. They are able to observe short-term goals they set for themselves and they are a powerful motivator to achieve long term goals. The notebooks have become a powerful, motivational tool. The teachers and the students become co-producers of learning.

Our data notebooks provide teachers and parents an overview of student progress, what they have been working on and where more work is needed. They give students control over their pace of learning and documenting this progress can help students predict outcomes as to what their report card will look like. The notebooks also give the students the chance to see where they need to improve. The use of data notebooks fits right into our restructuring plan and working together as a professional learning community. They are a common thread between staff, students, teachers, support personnel and parents.

<u>A Teacher's Perspective on Data Notebooks</u>

As a classroom teacher, I always had an idea of where my students were in their academic progress. I had grades listed in my grade book and plenty of anecdotal notations on note cards to produce accurate report cards and complete parent-teacher conferences. I felt as if I had a good handle on each student in my class and where I wanted them to progress to during the school year. Then I began to complete student data notebooks with my students and realized that, despite my good intentions, I had missed the mark.

Student Data Notebooks
Student data notebooks are a way for each individual student to keep a record of his or her progress on certain key components, as well as personal and academic goals, each academic year. Each of my students has a three-ring binder divided into the following sections: attendance and behavior, reading, math, writing, and goals. In these sections, students kept track of attendance, behavior, spelling test scores, high frequency word mastery, math formative assessments, writing prompts, and personal goals; but the options are nearly endless. For the first month or two of school, we completed the pages together as a class; this aspect of data notebooks was time consuming (as is everything for the first 6-8 weeks of school!). After those first few weeks of modeling, most aspects of the data notebooks were completed individually and the process took no more than 10 minutes at the end of the school day.

Benefit for Teachers

I always had a good idea of where my students were in their academic progression, but after using student data notebooks I am able to be much more strategic and specific with my instruction and interventions. Instead of knowing that a student knows "most of her high frequency words", I now know exactly which 10 words she did not master in unit 2 and I can provide intervention and support to help her master those 10 specific words. I am also able to have conversations with my students about their progress that they understand. When I sit down to conference with a student and a graph that shows spelling test scores, a conversation begins easily between the two of us about studying habits at home.

Benefit for Students

As time went on completing our data notebooks, students began to see trends within their data and started commenting on it. "I did really good on spelling tests this unit, I only missed one word!", "I had 10 yellow days (tardy or dismissal), I need to make sure I get to school on time next month", or "I know all of my high frequency words this unit except for 3. Can I write the words down to practice at home with my mom?" were common comments I heard as we completed data notebooks. Not only were my students aware of the great progress and gains they were making, but they knew

exactly where their holes were and how to fill in those gaps. All of a sudden, my students were partners in their education, not simply on the receiving end of it. Did I mention that these students were only six years old?

Benefit for Parents

When I sat down with parents at conferences to discuss student progress, I often wanted a visual to help show what I was explaining. I feared that my "teacher talk" was too much for some of the parents to follow, especially those who spoke different languages. To make graphs for each student, on top of all of my other responsibilities, seemed to be too much to keep up with. Having students track their own data took the responsibility off of me and put it onto my students. Now at conferences I can show parents a graph that visually displays individual test results and progress that is easily understood, even to those who are not fluent in English. Not only do these graphs open up more conversation between parents and teachers, but they also open up conversation between parents and students. Students become so fluent in discussing their data with teachers and students in school, that they can easily discuss it with their parents as well. Our school has hosted a few "Data and Desserts" evenings where parents come in for student-led conferences. Students walk their parents through their data notebooks to celebrate successes and look for next steps. The data notebooks often give parents very specific areas they can work with their children on.

Student data notebooks have shown to be beneficial to students, teachers, and parents at our school. Though they take some time to prepare and model, their benefits far out way the time put in at the beginning. Students, as young as kindergarteners, have been able to track their own data and fluently talk about what each graph means to them as a learner. Our students are learning, that even at 5 years old, you can monitor your own learning and become part of the learning process. Young students can understand what they know and what they still need to learn; just imagine the metacognition these students will eventually have after years of completing data notebooks. Student data notebooks are worth the time and effort; give them a try, I assure you, you will not be disappointed!

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