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Mining for Meaning in Michigan's Data Book

One principal's quest to make the numbers count

By Richard Lee Colvin

Richard Lee Colvin is a veteran journalist who heads the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Sitting in her cluttered office on a brutally hot July morning in the southwest corner of Michigan, school principal Ericka Harris-Robinson gazes past the full candy dish on her desk at piles of notebooks and reports filled with numbers. The school year's two months off, but she's here to oversee a summer book club and fine-tune her plans for the upcoming year. She can consult the reading test results of the previous year's kindergarteners, think about her students' national standing based on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, or examine their performance on the Benton Harbor district's curriculum. She has other sources of information, too. But the mother lode is the nearly foot-thick report dubbed the "Golden Book," in which she can find out how every student and population group in grades 3 through 6 performed on every question on the state Michigan Education Assessment Program.

"We test kids so much," the veteran principal said in mild exasperation as she scanned the pages of a report. "It would be OK if we could use the data the way we want. But there's so much of it, we end up doing a quick overview and glean what we can."

Don't assume from Harris-Robinson's comment, however, that she's part of the crowd that sees more harm than value in tests. In fact, she prepares aspiring principals to use data well in classes she teaches at a nearby Indiana University branch campus, serves on a statewide team to help principals work with data, and is a member of a national group gathered by The Wallace Foundation to consider how leaders can best use education data to improve student achievement. But neither should you assume that she thinks the mountain of numbers holds within it a neat solution to the messy questions about how to effectively teach the mostly poor students at Boynton Montessori Magnet School, which she leads.

"It makes you ask a lot of questions about what's working and what's not working," she said of data. "It does you no good to just get numbers. Numbers tell you nothing. You need to get information. I'm looking at the data to see what I want to focus on and asking, 'Does the data support what we're doing, or do we need to move in a different direction?'"

Moreover, test results are hardly the only type of data she thinks is valuable. "It only gives you a glimpse," she said. "You need to know if English is the child's first language, whether there are books in the home, the extent to which parents are engaged in the learning process. Sometimes we're asking parents to help with homework, and they can't."

Valuable information also comes from knowing what’s going on in classrooms, she said. “How is the class structured; what strategies are being used; is there too much down time; is there too much teacher guidance or not enough?”

Educators always have had data: grades, quizzes, tests, graduation rates, college-going rates, attendance figures. According to a report by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington for The Wallace Foundation, school leaders customarily used data fitfully according to their personal predilection, analyzed it using their “accumulated experience, intuition and political acumen,” and then “chose the wisest course of action.” Today, principals have more data on student achievement than ever before. Digital tools make it possible to organize the data to reveal previously unknown issues. Principals no longer can use data however they wish. Schools and districts are required to provide extensive reports on student performance to the public and to submit improvement plans to local and state education officials.

Harris-Robinson — low-key but purposeful, commanding respect through her mastery of a large body of education research on teaching and her comforting manner — taught at Boynton Montessori in the 1980s. Back then, she said, teachers “gave tests at the end of the year, the scores came back, and you looked at them a little bit and sent them home, and that was the end of it. No

one took them out again.” Then she became the math coordinator at another school. In that role, she used test scores to help her identify strengths and weaknesses of the instructional program and the students. She examined student records, talked with teachers, and suggested strategies for improvement. She credits that experience with giving her an appreciation of the uses of good data, as well as practice in using it.

She returned in 1999 as principal to Boynton Montessori, a nondescript brick and glass structure in a semi-rural area on the edge of town. Benton Harbor is on the north side of the St. Joseph River where it empties into Lake Michigan. St. Joseph is on the south side. The population of St. Joseph is 95 percent white, home to professionals and well-paid workers employed by the Benton Harbor headquarters of the giant Whirlpool Corporation. Crossing the bridge from the tidy downtown of St. Joseph into Benton Harbor, one crosses multiple boundaries — of race, class, and education. Benton Harbor is 95 percent black; family income is one-quarter that of St. Joseph; many of its homes and stores are abandoned; and 40 percent of the adults lack a high school diploma.

When Harris-Robinson became principal, test scores were falling. Boynton is a magnet school created in response to a long-running school desegregation lawsuit and had managed to attract a relatively affluent, racially diverse population that drew from nearby communities. “This was a school for elite kids, teachers’ kids, the school board’s kids,” she said. But when the court order that settled the lawsuit was lifted and the district stopped providing free busing, many of those students returned to schools in their neighborhoods. Now, most of her students are African-American, as is she.

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Soon after she became principal, Harris-Robinson gave copies of the school's test scores to teachers and convened strategy sessions.

"There's always trepidation because people feel like 'they're going to use this against me,' " she said. But she used the data to begin a conversation with her faculty, not end it. She asked the teachers to come up with an explicit plan to improve, based on the data.

"It's not OK to just say we're going to get better," she said. She also wasn't interested in singling out anyone for blame. If the 5th grade scores in a subject or skill were low, she wanted the teachers to trace that skill back into the earlier grades to find out where students had gotten off track.

Using data: Just part of how the school operates

"It's not a private issue," she said. "Everyone has to buy in and talk about why our kids aren't meeting this standard and why that's happening every year. It paints a very clear picture. And if you're not interested in doing that kind of stuff, then why are you here?"

Working at Boynton is demanding, and she said teachers aren't "beating down the door" to get jobs there. But, she said, once teachers come, they rarely leave because they feel they can be successful and part of a team pulling together. She said teachers pass the key to the building among themselves so they can get in on weekends to do extra work. Teachers even come in over the summer.

Using data — thinking about it, talking about it, devising instructional strategies based on it — is now just part of how the school operates. Once, Harris-Robinson said, educators wanted their students to start each year with a "clean slate" and didn't want to know much about their test scores or their families. The teachers, therefore, had to "spend the first month or two finding out who they had in their classrooms." Now, she can provide teachers with data from the "Golden Book," as well as other test scores. She and her teachers pore over the data to correlate the students' performance with Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs), provided by the state. The GLCEs are a detailed curriculum guide, illustrating the material students need to learn to do well on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program.

Eventually, she said, she'd like teachers to be able to tap into data about each student's health, mobility, and family; trends in their achievement; and so on.

"As a profession, we're still not doing a good job of knowing our kids when they come into our classrooms," Harris-Robinson said.

Identifying issues early

She requires teachers to come to her by the end of September each year with a list of students who need extra help with specific issues.

"If we're noticing in September that a kindergartner is not holding on to beginning sounds or is not able to count to 10 and things are just not coming together, then I want to be talking about that little fella when we still have a chance to make a difference," she said.

Harris-Robinson, the student's teacher, and others, including the school's Title I coordinator, Beverly Taylor, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the students identified as needing extra help. They share their recommendations with his parents and then meet weekly if necessary to discuss the child's progress. Data informs these discussions.

“I try to be very up on who is successful and who is not successful and what we are doing to assist the student,” she said.

Another way the school uses data is to prepare for what Harris-Robinson called “school improvement readouts.” The “readouts” are meetings attended by a team from the school, the superintendent, the director of assessment, an assistant superintendent, and outside consultants. The school team presents a report on their progress toward previously set goals and identifies areas in which they need help, such as additional training.

“That’s been a very valuable piece offered to us,” she said.

Over the past several years, the school made its classrooms multi-age so teachers could get to know their students better; departmentalized instruction in math, science, and language arts; purchased several online services where students can go for extra help; and used federal Title I funds to bring in two retired teachers to provide one-on-one assistance — all in response to issues that surfaced in analyzing data.

Using data strategically is hard work and requires time as well as skill and dedication. Harris-Robinson rearranged the weekly schedule of the school so that all of the classroom teachers can meet one afternoon a week to go over data and discuss individual students.

“It’s a constant conversation,” she said. “It’s not like it’s something you can do once and not talk about again.”

These efforts seem to be paying off. More than 90 percent of the 6th graders tested proficient in reading, language arts, and math last year; nearly 80 percent in writing; and 86 percent in social studies. More than 80 percent of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders were proficient in reading, language arts, and math. Math scores were up from the previous year for the 5th grade but were down slightly in the 3rd and 4th grade. The trend in language arts also was mixed, showing a strong increase for the 6th grade and declines in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th. The school’s performance has kept it in demand. Every year, the parents of more than 100 children apply for only 36 spots.

The most recent data has revealed a trouble spot. Only about 45 percent of the 3rd graders and a third of the 4th graders tested proficient in writing. That contributed to the school receiving a “B” for performance last year, down from an “A” the previous year.

That’s why the school’s major focus this year will be on improving writing. In examining the results and talking to teachers, Harris-Robinson and her team realized that most of the writing Boynton students did was narrative. “They were used to writing about ‘My dog ...’ or about ‘My party ...’ But the test involved writing in reaction to a prompt.” That was a skill they were not being taught.

In addition to working hard on their instructional goals, Harris-Robinson and her teachers have to put together lengthy reports. Last year, they had to do two such reports, the first a 96-page document that covered the school’s efforts to teach to standards, a rundown on the school’s curriculum, and how they were working to get parents involved. Teachers worked in teams on different parts of it, and Harris-Robinson pulled it together into one voice. That kept her working some Sunday nights until 1 a.m.

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The second report was on how the school spends Title I funds. “We had to review all of the indicators, check where we are, our rationale, and then go sit with the state people and testify,” she said.

“It is excessive,” Harris-Robinson said. “It takes away from what you can do at the school.” She has even taken sick days so she could stay at home and work on reports. “I can’t see bringing in a substitute teacher to have the teachers do it because it takes instructional time away.”

The principal’s role in student success

Still, she sees value in compiling the information, and she said she “tries to make the staff see that this is not just a dog and pony show for the state or the district or whatever. It’s a great opportunity for staff to participate in it, and it provides us with a wealth of information we don’t normally have.”

It’s the role of the principal, in her mind, to provide this leadership. “What is it we want principals to do in order to be part of student success?” she asked. “That’s a question we’ve never asked before. We ask it about teachers but not about principals.”

The work of a successful school principal cannot be defined only by their skillful use of data, of course. That’s why Harris-Robinson visits classrooms frequently. She keeps an open door and a full candy dish, inviting her staff to drop by any time. She makes congratulatory certificates to recognize teachers for good lessons or other accomplishments. She keeps boxes of cards in her office so she can write a note of encouragement, appreciation, or condolence. She bakes bread for the staff and throws pasta parties, for which she does the cooking.

“The teachers are working for low pay, in the heat, without comforts, teaching 20 or 30 kids, some of whose parents are close to being volatile, and so you need something that will encourage you,” she said.

“When you let people know that they are valued, they come back and bring something to the table,” she said.

All the data in the world won’t make a difference if teachers aren’t motivated to make use of it, she said.