MOVING YOUR NUMBERS

A Synthesis of Lessons Learned

How Districts Used Assessment and Accountability to Increase Performance for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-wide Improvement

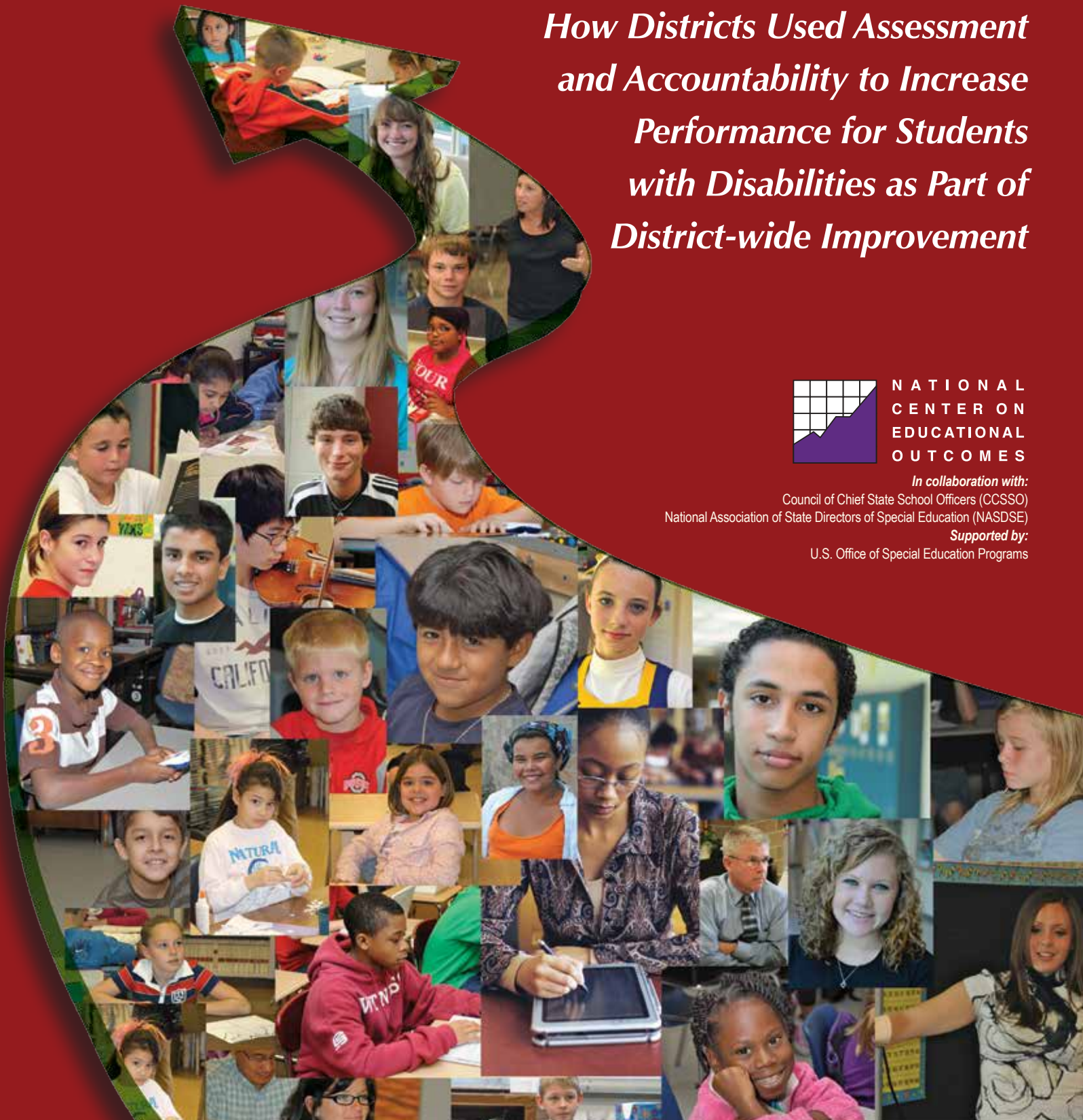**NATIONAL CENTER ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES**

About Moving Your Numbers

Moving Your Numbers: Improving Learning for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-wide Reform, examines how school districts with vastly different demographics increase the performance of students with disabilities and other at-risk learners as part of whole-district reform efforts. Case studies of featured districts, as described in the full report, provide evidence that students with disabilities, like all other students, can learn at higher levels when adults focus their collective efforts on improving instructional practice, consistently implement core work across the district, and use assessment and accountability as a lever for ongoing system and student learning and improvement.

Moving Your Numbers identifies six essential practices that must be in place to improve the performance of students with disabilities. Evidence suggests that these six practices, when used in an aligned and coherent manner, are associated with higher student achievement. These practices are *use data well, focus your goals, select and implement shared instructional practices (individually and collectively), implement deeply, monitor and provide feedback and support*, and *inquire and learn.*

Moving Your Numbers was initiated and is supported through the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) under the leadership of Dr. Martha Thurlow, NCEO Director; Rachel Quenemoen, NCEO Senior Research Fellow; and Dr. Laurene Christensen, NCEO Research Associate. Dr. Deborah Telfer, Director, School of Education and Allied Professions Grant Center, University of Dayton, coordinates the development and review of *Moving Your Numbers* on behalf of NCEO. NCEO was established in 1990 to provide national leadership in designing and building educational assessments and accountability systems that appropriately monitor educational results for all students, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs).

This *Moving Your Numbers* Synthesis of Lessons Learned report was developed by Dr. Deborah Telfer, Director, University of Dayton School of Eduction and Allied Professions Grant Center, with input from the *Moving Your Numbers* Advisory/Work Group members. The document should be cited as:

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Photographs used in this publication have been provided courtesy of the districts featured, the Ohio Department of Education, the Mahoning County Educational Service Center, and State Support Team Region 5.

Additional case studies of featured districts will be added to the *Moving Your Numbers* website as they are developed. Go to www.MovingYourNumbers.org for the complete report and additional tools and resources, and to submit success stories.

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MOVING YOUR NUMBERS: *WHAT MATTERS MOST*

Moving Your Numbers features the work of ten districts with varying demographics that have used assessment and accountability as an impetus for positive change. In each case, districts used the increasing demand for accountability for all students and groups of students to change the conversation and practice across the district, "moving their numbers" in a positive direction for all children as a result. The stories of the ongoing journey of each district, while far from done, describe the actions of adults committed to improving their own practice as a way to support higher levels of learning for all children.

Each was identified for inclusion based on three factors: (1) the district was known to be engaged in certain practices believed to be associated with higher student learning; (2) the district was committed to district-wide implementation of such practices; and (3) the district was committed to and showing evidence of improving the performance of all students and student groups.

Moving Your Numbers, initiated by the National Center on Educational Outcomes, is not intended to *tell* people what to do. Rather, it is designed to showcase the work of these districts as an impetus for encouraging people at all levels of the education enterprise to *examine what they do* and the degree to which their collective actions are making a positive difference for all students, including those identified as special education students, English Language Learners, and other children often characterized as "high need." While the 'conclusions' provided through this work are limited to the districts featured, it should be noted that these districts share many of the same demographics and characteristics of large numbers of districts across the country.

While each district featured in *Moving Your Numbers* had its own framework or set of guiding core beliefs for organizing its work, each of them implemented a set of practices that was very similar. Evidence suggests that these six practices, when used in an aligned and coherent manner, are associated with higher student achievement:

1. Use data well;

2. Focus your goals;

3. Select and implement shared instructional practices;

4. Implement deeply;

5. Monitor and provide feedback and support; and

6. Inquire and learn (McNulty & Besser, 2011).

The lessons learned from featured districts are presented in this *Synthesis* across each of the practice areas delineated above. To download district stories and associated district resources; additional products on the role of state education agencies, regional providers, higher education personnel, and parents and families; and additional information about the assumptions underlying this work, go to the *Moving Your Numbers* website at: www.movingyournumbers.org.

USE DATA WELL: *LESSONS LEARNED*

The importance of effective data use as a foundational practice was described as essential by each featured district. *Effective* means using data well and on an ongoing basis, not only to identify critical needs, but also to gauge performance and make better decisions about the effectiveness of the instructional practices being used, and the degree of student progress and learning.

In many districts, effective data use was the conversation changer, allowing adults with varied perspectives and roles to move beyond individual preference and opinion and, instead, share in honest and open dialogue around the quality of the instruction and services being provided to all children across the district. Often, the combination of (1) changing who was "at the table" by involving teachers, administrators, related services personnel, and others, in collective dialogue; and (2) organizing relevant data for easier review and more strategic decision making, was the starting point for becoming a learning organization able to continually improve its own capacity to better meet the instructional needs of all learners.
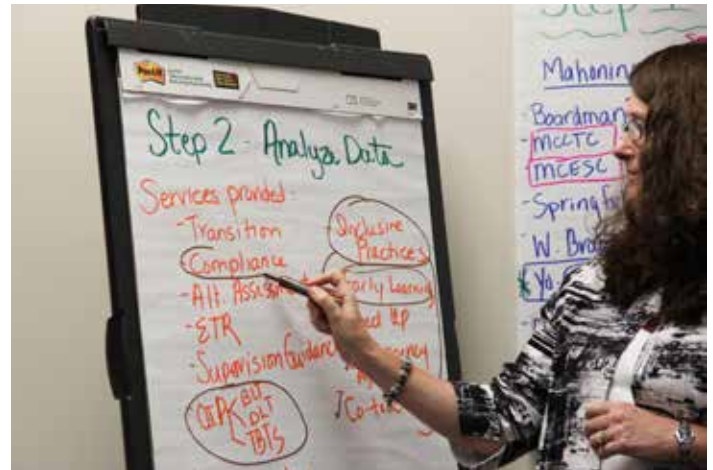
Data use played a prominent role in the districts' strategic plans, from being described by one district as a pillar, and by another as an operational belief. While featured districts varied in terms of the types and complexity of internal district-wide data systems used to make a variety of data accessible and available on demand to teachers and others, each featured district used data to change adult professional practice by:

"We took a hard line on the use of data and teaming – everyone had to do it – and the results were ridiculously good; it was hard to argue with them."

Dan Goldman, Director of Curriculum & Instruction
Tigard-Tualatin School District
Tigard, Oregon

• Engaging all personnel in looking at district-wide data to foster shared responsibility for the success of all students.

• Making data use for instructional improvement a district-wide priority and expectation for all staff.

• Using state assessment data in combination with a variety of other (both formative and summative) sources of data to identify needs, gauge progress, and make instructional decisions on an ongoing basis.

• Identifying and using relevant data, rather than allowing personnel to become inundated with too much data and information.

• Providing support (including, for example, professional development, tools, guidelines) to all personnel in effective data use.

• Using data as feedback to the system (i.e., feedback on the effectiveness of the adults' efforts).

Focus Your Goals: *Lessons Learned*

Gaining the kind of focus needed to fully implement agreed-on core work was an essential component of the improvement processes used by *Moving Your Numbers* districts. In all cases, the districts identified the improvement of instructional practice and student learning as *the* priority for the district. They were unconditional in their commitment to ensuring that the improvements put in place across the district were designed to include every student. A unified message, making clear the fact that this focus was not negotiable and that *all* personnel had a role in contributing to needed improvements, was sent frequently and consistently by district and school leadership to internal and external stakeholders across the district.

Each district featured in *Moving Your Numbers* developed a foundation for making and sustaining improvements in teaching and learning. This foundation was operationalized through a district-developed framework or strategic plan that delineated core beliefs and key areas of work, and that was used to guide decision making related to such factors as the use of time, how personnel were employed and assigned, and the nature and use of professional development (PD).

> *"I believe in the power of unification around purpose and ours is to help all kids learn at high levels."*
>
> **Rick Carrington, Superintendent**
> **Bloom Vernon Local Schools**
> **South Webster, Ohio**

Whether the district employed a multi-tiered system of support, a state mandated/supported improvement process, universal design for learning, integrated comprehensive services, or a combination of these or other approaches, did not appear to matter as much as how they were used to bring all adults in the district together in sharing the responsibility and ownership for the success of each child.

In selecting an approach to use in undergirding the core work of the system, featured districts were intentional in:

• Engaging personnel from all levels of the district in shaping and identifying with the district's focus.

• Ensuring that all schools in the district aligned their work with district-established goals and strategies.

• Limiting the number of priorities or goals to a small number, thereby increasing the capacity for district-wide implementation.

• Clearly defining the role of central office and school principals as being about the improvement of instructional practice and student learning.

• Involving everyone in professional development directly aligned with the district's identified needs and focused goals and priorities.

• Actively working with the school board and members of the community to contribute to and continually improve the district's capacity to support higher levels of learning for all students.

Select and Implement Shared Instructional Practices: *Lessons Learned*

Two common themes characterized the evolution of the featured districts' work in improving outcomes for all students. The first centered on the increasing focus on instruction as the priorty or core work of the district. The second theme involved the increasing use of collaborative structures (e.g., professional learning communities, learning teams, data teams, teacher-based teams) that provided a mechanism for teachers and other instructional personnel to inform each other's practice, thereby building the capacity of the system to more effectively identify and meet the learning needs of every student.

> *"Breaking down isolated practice and raising the capacity of the entire system of 850 teachers through collaborative teaming is a substantial cost to the district but one that is necessary for improving learning for all students."*
>
> **Michael McCormick, Assistant Superintendent for Educational Services Val Verde Unified School District Perris, California**

In several of the featured districts, the commitment to ensuring that all students were held to high expectations aligned with grade-level standards resulted in structural changes to the organization with personnel dedicated to special education being subsumed within larger departments responsible for *teaching and learning* or *educational services*. This change underscored the district's shift from a more traditional programmatic focus with special education being responsible for the education of children with disabilities, to a more unified focus with all adults in the system sharing responsibility for the education of all children, regardless of label or funding source. In other featured districts, while departmental structures did not change, the same shift toward a more unified focus occurred. For example, one district's catchphrase became, "it's not about special ed or general ed; it's about ed." In all districts, central office functions changed from controlling the work (what one district described as a *pedestal* function), to supporting shared understanding and implementation of core work across the district.

In selecting and implementing shared instructional practices, featured districts:

- Held all adults to high standards and clearly defined expectations around the core work of teaching and learning, and for supporting all children to learn at higher levels.

- Developed a common vocabulary for what constituted high-quality instructional practice in the district, embedding intervention as part of the instructional framework, and avoiding programs or initiatives as the "answer" or next "silver bullet."

- Provided structured opportunities for teachers to learn from each other, embedding ongoing PD as part of the work of collaborative learning teams.

- Provided structured opportunities for principals to learn from each other, and for schools to learn from each other.

IMPLEMENT DEEPLY: *LESSONS LEARNED*

In recent years, research in the area of implementation science has revealed the critical importance of fully implementing evidenced-based practices or strategies so that desired effects in adult professional learning and student learning can be achieved. It has also called attention to the challenges involved in supporting the full implementation of any practice on a systemwide basis. Specifically, Blase, Fixsen, and Duda (2011) point out that, often, what is adopted is not used with fidelity, what is used with fidelity is not sustained for a useful period of time, and what is used with fidelity is not used on a scale sufficient to impact social problems.[1]

The districts featured in *Moving Your Numbers* identified implementation as the most challenging part of their work. They were intentional in attending to factors that affected their capacity to support more effective implementation at all levels of the system by first defining what full implementation looked like, and then providing structures and tools for increasing the consistency and quality of implementation in all classrooms within all schools across the district.

- Featured districts took steps to intentionally support systemwide implementation of identified practices by:

- Moving from a focus on individual school buildings to a focus on district-wide implementation of identified practices.

- Engaging in the ongoing self-assessment of instructional practice as a district through the use of aligned team structures and customized protocols that facilitated focused team discussion.

- Delivering targeted PD – *that is, PD that is directly aligned with identified practices* – to everyone.

> *"Even though teaching and learning is the business of school districts, I don't think we've done a good job talking about how we get people from different levels and different perspectives talking about the work and having a few focused goals that we implement deeply and across the district to make a difference and leverage a change."*
>
> **Dr. Sue Long, External Facilitator (Retired)**
> **Wooster City School District**
> **Wooster, Ohio**

- Holding personnel at all levels accountable for the implementation of identified practices, while providing multiple opportunities for practice and support.

- Setting expectations for the direct involvement of administrators (e.g., principals, superintendent, central office personnel) in supporting effective implementation of identified practices.

- Aligning district resources (e.g., time, fiscal resources, personnel resources) to support effective implementation of identified practices.

[1] Blasé, K.A., Fixsen, D.L., & Duda, M. (February 8, 2011). Implementation science: Building the bridge between science and practice. Presentation made to Institute of Education Sciences. Chapel Hill, NC: National Implementation Research Network at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina.

MONITOR AND PROVIDE FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT: *LESSONS LEARNED*

Featured districts emphasized the relationship of their core work to its impact, when fully implemented, on student learning. Conversations among personnel and teams moved away from a focus on *what* to teach, to a focus on *how* to teach to better meet the needs of all students, and the impact that instruction was having on student growth and achievement.

Hand in hand with this shift in focus was the commitment on the part of districts to ensure consistency in the implementation of specific targeted strategies so that their degree of implementation could be monitored and their use in achieving desired effects could be evaluated. One district said it this way: "We need to be able to connect results to specific action steps. We wouldn't be able to do that if schools worked in isolation."

The concept of monitoring also changed – from a negative term associated with externally imposed compliance requirements, to an essential part of the instructional process believed to be necessary for continuous improvement. Data resulting from monitoring implementation provided needed feedback to teams at the classroom, school, and district level, and was used to make decisions about the type and level of support that needed to be provided to individuals, teams, and schools.

In monitoring the degree of implementation of identified strategies, and providing associated feedback and support, featured districts:

• Measured both adult implementation and student achievement to gauge the effect of district actions on student performance.

• Valued internal accountability and made results the central focus of the school system.

"We used to identify islands of excellence; now we're hoping for peninsulas of excellence. For those people who haven't gotten it yet, they can see positive examples elsewhere in the district…it's the consistent and persistent professional conversations that teachers have around working with, understanding, and challenging the (UDL) framework, and the impact on student learning, that lead to growth."

Dr. Loui Lord Nelson, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Consultant
Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation
Columbus, Indiana

• Developed and used a consistent set of procedures and protocols for measuring district-wide implementation of identified strategies/ practices, the effect of such implementation on student learning and progress, and the effect of feedback and/or differentiated support to schools and teachers.

• Provided feedback to principals and school-level teams, and required principals to provide feedback to teachers and teacher teams, on the implementation of identified practices.

• Took steps to replicate successful practices across the district.

INQUIRE AND LEARN: *LESSONS LEARNED*
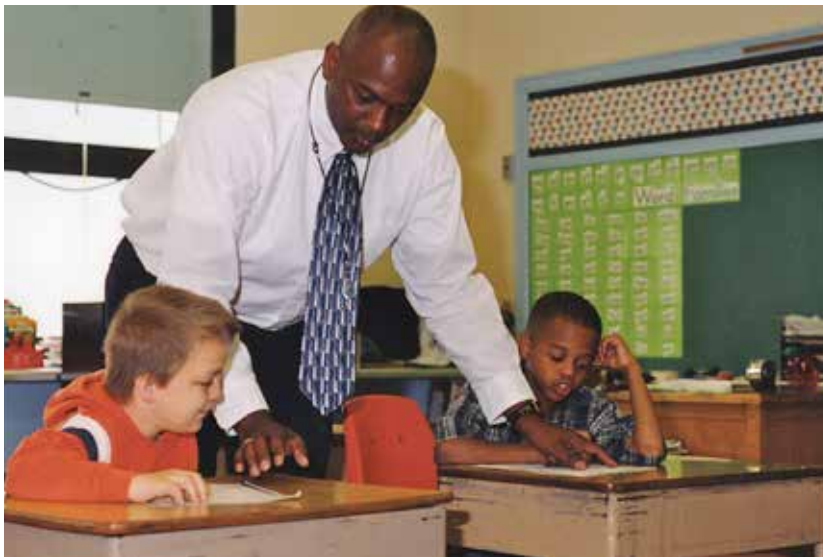
Becoming a learning organization requires the willingness to closely examine, reflect on, and learn from one's own practice. Districts featured in *Moving Your Numbers* were committed to continually improving their capacity to meet the needs of every student. A common characteristic among featured districts was the collective dissatisfaction among staff members with the present level of student progress. Instead, district and school personnel acknowledged that their work is never done, and that they must always strive to reach the next level of effective practice in supporting student progress and learning.

Using an active inquiry process to evaluate their own practice was seen as a positive, described by one district as *learning from structured failure*. In this district and others, central office personnel actively sought out exemplars – aligned with district-identified strategies – and shared them with other schools and teams across the district. The follow-through and application of what was learned by adults in targeted PD and through structured team meetings was evaluated so that improvements in implementation could be made and supported in more focused ways.

In develping a culture of inquiry and learning, featured districts:

• Established a decision-making process for supporting shared learning across and among central office and school personnel, and teacher team members.

• Engaged everyone in continually evaluating the effect of the district's core work on both student learning and district and school performance.

> *"People across the district hold other people across the district accountable for student learning. All adults in all buildings are responsible for all children. It's not a thing you have to do; it's evidence of our core beliefs."*
>
> **Dr. Judy Singletary,**
> **Director of Curriculum &**
> **Instructional Services**
> **Stoughton Area School District**
> **Stoughton, Wisconsin**

• Constantly asked and sought to answer questions related to the level of implemetation of district-identified practices, and those conditions that contributed to success or created roadblocks to success.

• Provided resources to support district-wide professional learning focused on improving instructional practice and student learning.

• Have established parameters for making decisions about needed changes to the district's improvement strategies.

• Communicate and foster a sense of urgency for continuous improvement and positive change in student learning.

NCEO Resources

NCEO offers the following kinds of materials and services for state personnel, educators, parents, and others concerned with the educational outcomes of all students:

• An extensive publications list that includes technical reports, state activity updates, policy documents, and self-study guides.

• Criteria for evaluating existing policies on large-scale assessments.

• Recommendations for developing assessment policies and guidelines for participation, accommodations, reporting, and accountability that include all students.

• Current information on assessment projects and other efforts to collect data on the educational outcomes of all students.

• A national network of people who can assist states and other agencies as they consider assessment issues.

References

McNulty, B.A. and Besser, L. (2011). Leaders make it happen! An administrator's guide to data teams. Englewood CO: Lead + Learn Press.

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Available *MOVING YOUR NUMBERS* Publications:

• Administrator Preparation Guide: Using Assessment and Accountability to Increase Performance for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-wide Improvement.

• District Self-Assessment Guide for Moving Our Numbers: Using Assessment and Accountability to Increase Performance for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-Wide Improvement.

• **Moving Your Numbers: A Synthesis of Lessons Learned from Districts Using Assessment and Accountability to Increase Performance for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-Wide Improvement.**

• Moving Your Numbers: Five Districts Share How They Used Assessment and Accountability to Increase Performance for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-Wide Improvement.

• Moving Your Numbers: The Critical Role of Regional Providers in Facilitating School District Capacity to Improve Achievement for Students with Disabilities.

• Moving Your Numbers: The Critical Role of SEAs in Facilitating School District Capacity to Improve Achievement for Students with Disabilities.

• Parent/Family Companion Guide: Using Assessment and Accountability to Increase Performance for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-Wide Improvement.

• Teacher Preparation Guide: Using Assessment and Accountability to Increase Performance for Students with Disabilities as Part of District-Wide Improvement.

For More Information on

***Moving Your Numbers*, Contact NCEO or Visit:**
movingyournumbers.org