

USING RESEARCH FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Students' lives are affected profoundly by the decisions that educators make on a day-to-day basis. Poor decisions and mistakes tend to result when policymakers and school personnel either ignore data or rely on inadequate data.

Where should schools focus their improvement efforts? What changes in school or teacher practices are likely to provide the biggest impact on student achievement? From research on effective schools to studies on school restructuring and high performance school organizations, evidence abounds on the many school, teacher, student and home factors and practices that are related to student achievement. Their effectiveness however, often depends on the school context, student characteristics and previous improvement initiatives that must be taken into consideration in any school improvement project.

Studies on factors that impact on students' learning can empower educators to introduce or make adjustments to programs, teaching methodologies and resources. Personnel involved in school improvement, however, need to know clearly, understand intricately and communicate effectively how their students are benefiting from these interventions – in other words the “value added” to the changes. To construct this knowledge, data, which provide compelling evidence that ground theories and conclusions in actual results rather than perceptions or speculation, are required.

The appropriate and effective use of data enables policy makers and school personnel to make good decisions, work intelligently and efficiently, change and improve processes, document and comprehend the impact of actions.

The Ministry of Education, consistent with this view, continues to strengthen its capacity for research and data collection to inform decision making at all levels of the education system. Some areas targeted include:

Student assessment/Learning

The advances in student knowledge, skills, behaviours and attitudes, measure the ultimate success of the school improvement process. The collection, analysis and reporting of examination data including assessments such as the National Tests and the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) provide a basis for valid comparisons among schools and educational districts. It also provides reliable data on student achievement, which allow schools to focus on important outcomes/areas of weaknesses and in conjunction with other data collected at the school level form the basis for development of school improvement plans.

The Ministry of Education, in an attempt to better understand and explain the performance of students in the different districts and educational contexts, is also investigating those factors that may be related to student performance.

Demographics

This includes descriptive information about the school community such as attendance, enrolment, gender, suspensions, expulsions, teacher training and socio-economic status. These allow us to:

- Establish the school's context
- Describe trends
- Plan proactive approaches to meet the needs of future students

School processes

School process incorporate educational events and practices occurring in the classroom and at the school level such as instructional strategies and programs. These allow for the identification of strategies that produce desired classroom and school results. In addition it allows for the building of hypotheses and action plans to achieve desired results. On-going training of senior teachers and heads of departments in action research is geared towards supporting the development of action/school improvement plans.

Perceptions

Perceptions are individual views, values and beliefs on various aspects of school and schooling. Individuals act upon these views as if they were real. Research and data collection in this area allow us to understand views about the school community and the learning environment. It also assists school personnel to know how well they are performing and to identify new possibilities.

International Benchmarking

The Ministry of Education has begun the process of International Benchmarking starting with participation in the Progress in International Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2006 conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) targeting students in Standard Three. Benchmarking is an ongoing, systematic process for measuring and comparing the work processes of one organization

to those of another, by bringing an external focus to internal activities, functions, or operations (Kempner 1993).

The goal of benchmarking is to provide key personnel, in charge of processes, with an external standard for measuring the quality of internal activities, and to help identify where opportunities for improvement may reside. Benchmarking attempts to answer the following questions:

- How well are we doing compared to others?
- How good do we want to be?
- Who is doing it the best?
- How do they do it?
- How can we adapt what they do to our institution?
- How can we be better than the best? (Kempner 1993)

Previously, questions like these may not have seemed important to institutions of education. However, in the competitive and rapidly changing markets, characterized by declining enrolments and funding in education, organizations are learning never to be satisfied with the status quo, and to continually question their internal operations and relative position in the eyes of prospective clients.

While the use of use data from research and other sources may be difficult and time consuming, the Ministry of Education in strengthening the capacity for research and data collection, recognises that time is saved as baseline indicators are established, improvements are monitored and adjustments are made accordingly. Furthermore, school personnel who understand their students' needs and uses data in the service of those needs are better prepared to make decisions, remain better focused during implementation, recognize whether their efforts are effective and are more capable of institutionalising change and improving continuously.

Students deserve the best possible education - one based on sound data and well informed decision-making.