Answering the Question:

'How Do You Know?'

Evidence-based leadership decisions permeate all processes in the Pewaukee, Wis., schools

BY JOANN STERNKE

We pride ourselves in the Pewaukee School District on being data-driven. Increasingly, we use the term "evidence" instead of the word "data." This is because we are focused on practicing evidence-based leadership. This distinction has a clear implication on our practice as leaders.

First, what's the difference between data and evidence? We often hear we are "data rich and information poor." With a heightened focus on accountability, data are something we have a lot of in education. We have more student achievement data than we know what to do with, actually.

Evidence gives you the information to make a determination from more than guess or gut feel. The trick is making data become evidence — something that supports a belief and guides a path of action. Herein lies the connection to the second part of the term evidence-based leadership.

The term "evidence-based" answers the key question, "How do you know?" The second part, leadership, answers the question, "So now that you know, what are you going to do about it?" Evidence-based leadership takes evidence and makes it actionable for us as leaders. Leadership focuses on a set of competencies that allow us to take systematic action to address what the evidence tells us.

Roots in Medicine

Evidence-based leadership originated in health care. Evidence-based medicine uses evidence to determine how well patients are being served. At its essence, evidence-based medicine espouses that with better evidence, better diagnoses could be made. The same can be said for "diagnoses" in education, I believe.

A health care and education consulting firm, The Studer Group, trademarked the term evidence-based leadership and created a framework that focuses on leadership behaviors and aligns goals, behaviors and processes in a way that moves and sustains results.

The firm coaches organizational leaders to use strategies that act on the evidence they learn. I like to say that it takes the work of the heart, that passion that we hold for the important work we do in the name of meeting our mission for all students and moves it forward to the work of the head as we analyze the evidence. Then, we

employ actions that take it into work of the hand.

It's the complete package. Evidence-based leadership links the work of the heart, head and, finally, hand. Quint Studer, founder of The Studer Group, says it more simply: "Are we linking operations to competencies that increase outcomes?"

Evidence-based leadership builds a *system of evidence* so you know with what quality all facets of your organization are operating ... and then focuses on employing strategies to address areas that need improvement.

While vital, we must look beyond student achievement data if we are going to truly improve as a system. We also must become more accountable in knowing how well we are serving and engaging key stakeholders, how well we are accomplishing the plans we create and how well our key organizational processes are being optimized.

In Pewaukee, our focus on people, plan and process has been a key to our organizational success. I call it "firing on all cylinders."

Serving People

Five steps exist for serving people in an evidenced-based model:

► Determine key stakeholders;

► Identify their key requirements;

► Attain the voice of the customer by assembling evidence about how you are meeting your stakeholder's key requirements;

► Analyze the results; and

► Take action to address opportunities for improvement and celebrate successes.

One way we have applied these steps is to create a dashboard graphic to monitor the school district's instructional technology service levels. In line with each of the five steps:

► We determined our key customers are students and their families.

► We know, through research and listening, that parents have three key requirements of us: a safe learning environment for their child, high-quality education and effective communication, particularly from their child's teacher.

► We survey our parents to attain their voice to determine how we are meeting those key requirements.

JoAnn Sternke (left), superintendent in Pewaukee, Wis., and Amy Pugh, district director of information technology, review a scorecard used in evidence-based decision making.

► We analyze the results by segmenting data by school, looking at comparables from other schools and analyzing how the data are trending.

► We share results with those we surveyed and set goals using a scorecard approach to address the areas we want to improve. All schools and departments use a scorecard to focus on the same five pillars: quality/student achievement, people, service, resources and innovation. The service pillar uses the voice of customer evidence in their goal setting.

Serving Staffers

Another key stakeholder group for us is our school district's employees. We have determined our employees have seven key work requirements including a positive work environment, a commitment to growth, the desire to perform high-quality work, a positive supervisor relationship, clear expectations, strong communication and competitive salary and benefits.

Similarly, we survey employees to capture their collective voice as to how well we are meeting the work requirements they desire. After analyzing these results, we set goals in the people pillar of our scorecards. We go a step further to engage our employees. As leaders, we have been coached to deploy strategies, including:

► **New employee interviews.** Supervisors take time to meet with each new hire to ask structured questions to learn their views concerning fit.

► **Rounding.** Performed in hospitals, rounding helps connect leaders with people using a structured set of questions.

As we hard-wire these competencies, we see employee engagement increase.

Supporting Documentation and Videos

Superintendent JoAnn Sternke compiled several documents that illustrate key points in her article relating to her system leadership in the 2,900-student Pewaukee, Wis., schools. They can be accessed at *http://bit.ly/evidence-based-leadership*.

The superintendent indicated the page numbers where these items can be found:

▶ Her conference presentation PowerPoint on evidence-based leadership (pp. 2-133);

▶ A department scorecard (p. 173);

▶ A building scorecard (p. 176);

▶ Pewaukee's strategic plan for 2015-16 (p. 205); and

▶ A Plan Do Study Act (p. 213).

She also is sharing three short videos involving Pewaukee administrators discussing aspects of their processes:

▶ On use of data in instructional technology operations by Amy Pugh, IT director in Pewaukee, and Michael Murphy, network engineer: *www.youtube.com/watch?v=OlWTiKD6e9Q*

▶ On strategically soliciting staff feedback by Randy Daul, principal of Asa Clark Middle School in Pewaukee: *https://userweb.pewaukee.k12.wi.us/~tooljul/Daul.mov*

▶ On the efficiency and flexibility of the scorecard at the school level by Marty Van Hulle, principal of Pewaukee High School: *https://userweb.pewaukee.k12.wi.us/~tooljul/VanHulle.mov*

Additionally, you can read about Pewaukee's distinctive operations in previous coverage in *School Administrator* magazine, shortly after the district received the 2013 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award: *www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=34306*.

The Pewaukee School District created short videos that show administrators discussing the practical use of data in instructional technology.

Monitoring Progress

How do we know we're making progress on our plans?

All too often, organizations create elaborate strategic plans but fall down on implementing them. In Pewaukee, we diligently monitor deployment of our strategic plan with 90-day action plans, formalizing a review and enabling us to answer the question, "How do we know if we are making progress?"

These 90-day action plans are on a template for what action is to be taken, by when and by whom. It also seeks evidence of completion. As members of the administrative team, we review plan progress quarterly to be certain we are moving forward. We have accomplished more with this approach.

Managing Process

Managing process is one of the most difficult challenges for me to get my arms around. This is where the rubber meets the road. Schools have many complex processes in both the academic arena (curriculum adoption, student assessment, intervention, etc.) and in the non-academic arena (hiring, instructional technology repair, etc.).

We work smarter if we truly understand what we want a process to do and then monitor it for those requirements. We collect evidence in all support-process areas and dashboard results so we can monitor process effectiveness. For example, the instruction technology department monitors such things as outstanding incidents and work requests so they can adjust their staffing to meet demand.

Likewise, the human resources office has four goals — to hire, engage, develop and, thereby, retain a high-quality staff. That is what we measure and focus on. Analyzing the evidence on their dashboard allows the staff to be more agile and responsive, thereby offering better service.

Managing process is key for us to work adeptly and leverage greater efficiency over time.

For our school system, evidence-based leadership is the way we meet increasing demands for heightened accountability and better service. We believe it's incumbent to understand what our customers want and then act accordingly as leaders to improve outcomes.

It's all about being as strategic as possible in the name of meeting our mission. ∎

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