



**STRATEGIC DATA PROJECT**

## **SDP FELLOWSHIP CAPSTONE REPORT**

# **Enhancing Data Use for Effective Program Planning: A New District- Wide Framework in Wake County Public School System**

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**SDP Fellowship Capstone Reports**

SDP Fellows compose capstone reports to reflect the work that they led in their education agencies during the two-year program. The reports demonstrate both the impact fellows make and the role of SDP in supporting their growth as data strategists. Additionally, they provide recommendations to their host agency and will serve as guides to other agencies, future fellows, and researchers seeking to do similar work. *The views or opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or position of SDP or the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University.*

### **Abstract**

School district staff and building leaders too often rely on anecdotal evidence, peer recommendations, and vendor-conducted research to justify program and policy adoption and implementation. In recent years, however, increased rigor of education research methods and the availability of evidence based on these methods have become more widespread. The Wake County Public School System is capitalizing on this trend through its Enhancing Data Use framework. Enhancing Data Use is a district-wide effort that will result in the adoption of programs and policies that are supported by rigorous evidentiary guidelines, implementation of pilot programs such that high-quality evidence is generated (e.g., through randomized control trials), training across departments on evidence-based best practices, and codification of the adoption/implementation process in Board of Education policy. WCPSS's Fellows and affiliated staff hope the Enhancing Data Use framework will serve as a model for districts hoping to increase the role of rigorous evidence in all facets of district operations, including, but not limited to, classroom instruction, human resources, facilities, and technology.

### Introduction

A recent piece in the *New York Times* summarized the current state of education programming and policymaking, whereby guesses, hunches, and marketing hype tend to drive decision-making in so many areas of the education sector (Kolata, 2013). However, recent initiatives driven by the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) at the U.S. Department of Education have attempted to change this culture of decision-making to include the use of randomized-control trials—which are prevalent in the sciences and medicine—as well as quasi-experimental techniques that can provide causal estimates of impact (Kolata, 2013 and What Works Clearinghouse, 2013). Given the benefits of providing stronger evidence and upon realizing the tendency of districts to rely on anecdotal information to drive decision-making, the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) has begun to implement the “Enhancing Data Use for Program Planning” (hereafter referred to as Enhancing Data Use) process, which employs much of the methodological rigor championed by IES and enhances both process evaluation and fidelity required for effective program and policy implementation.

Located in Raleigh, North Carolina, WCPSS is the largest district in the state of North Carolina, serving more than 150,000 students across 170 schools. Through the implementation of the Enhancing Data Use process, we planned to describe with specificity what is working in our district, identify policies and programs that are ineffective, and change the culture of using data to inform decision making. This effort was initially launched as the district’s “problem of practice” during the April 2012 SDP Spring Convening. Data and Agency Fellows were joined by Judy Pepler (Chief Transformation Officer), Nancy Baenen (Senior Director), Lindsay Page (CEPR) and Andrew Rice (Faculty Advisor) to define an entrenched problem that keeps the district from reaching its full potential. A full working group comprised of Fellows, Senior Directors from the Data and Accountability Department (D&A), and the Assistant Superintendent of Academics has developed the framework since the original group identified the problem—that school leaders and central office staff have a tendency to adopt programs and policies with insufficient consideration for evidence of effectiveness. Overcoming the problem required a plan for developing evidence-based programming guidelines, inviting key stakeholders to the table (See Appendix A, WCPSS Organizational Chart), and implementing the effort in a way that navigated the sensitive landscape between centralized- and site-based control.

The process for implementing Enhancing Data Use has included four primary strategies:

- Develop a process for review and recommendation of programs to adopt within WCPSS;
- Develop a database to easily document and share evidence-based approaches;
- Build support and train and on the use of the process; and
- Determine what programs the district already has through a comprehensive program inventory.

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In the remainder of this document, we outline our project's vision, describe these strategies in more detail (see Appendix B for a full logic model), summarize implementation progress to date, present a communications strategy going forward, and identify our lessons learned.

### The Enhancing Data Use Vision

*An ongoing process for adopting and reviewing programs and initiatives will be in place and become part of the WCPSS culture. WCPSS will support student achievement with programs that have strong evidence of prior effectiveness or a strong plan to assess their effectiveness. Over time, a smaller number of highly effective programs will be in place and improved student outcomes will result.*

The vision of Enhancing Data Use will be realized inasmuch as it is part of the district's broader comprehensive planning process. Such planning is critical to WCPSS's continuous improvement efforts and attainment of goals, and must guide and support the work of WCPSS in providing a world-class education for the district's students. As such, a planning process like Enhancing Data Use serves to align the focus and work across all divisions, departments, and schools in improving services and programs that support the district's mission. To that end, WCPSS has identified the integral components and features necessary for such a comprehensive planning process. The superintendent shall be responsible for the implementation of this planning process (through a formal strategic plan, for example) with defined components that create a common framework. This planning process will be used when developing any district, division, department, and/or school-based plans.

The planning process shall be systematic in its approach, comprehensive in scope, integrated in function and include the following components:

- Alignment with the school district's mission, goals, and priorities;
- Involvement of the appropriate stakeholders;
- Assumptions that underlie the development of the plan to include research-based evidence;
- Comprehensive collection and analysis of data that identifies need and intended purpose;
- Specific, measurable goals and the supporting action steps, resources, and timelines; and
- A time-bound evaluation procedure that uses data to monitor progress and evaluate effectiveness.

The pursuit and fulfillment of the vision of Enhancing Data Use will, over time, result in a culture that relies on evidence to support our efforts and whereby the process of using evidence is understood, supported, and consistent. Central office and school staff will review instructional research and program evaluation data and include support for proposed efforts in all applications for adoption. Vendors should be asked what research, evaluation, or other evidence they have for the effectiveness of their proposed

program. The long-term goal associated with the realization of this vision is that the entire system will use evidence of success to drive its efforts, thereby decreasing the overall number of programs in place in WCPSS and improving student outcomes.

### Implementing the Process

Each primary strategy includes a litany of action steps situated within a calendar of short-term (6 months from inception), intermediate (12 months), or long-term (18 months) goals, as well as desired outcomes (see Appendix B for a complete logic model). The project gained momentum shortly after SDP Spring Convening when Cathy Moore (Deputy Superintendent for School Performance) expressed her support in May 2012 for moving forward with the primary strategies.

The original district-based team convened a working group, inviting Todd Wirt (Assistant Superintendent, Academics) and Brad McMillen (Senior Director). Throughout summer 2012, the working group held twice-monthly meetings to complete short-term action steps and made meaningful progress, including collecting program information, drafting a roster of steering committee members, and presenting the Enhancing Data Use framework to the Office of School Performance (OSP, an office that includes Area and Assistant Superintendents).

The first potential barrier the working group faced occurred when the WCPSS Board of Education (“Board”) fired the superintendent in fall 2012. This leadership vacuum made it difficult for the working group to socialize its progress with the Superintendent’s Leadership Team (SLT). The SLT was subsequently led at first by an interim superintendent and then by an acting superintendent for most of the 2012-13 academic year. Moreover, resistance to a key step of the process—linking program adoption to a budget case—existed among certain sectors of Administration Services. During this period most action steps in the short-, intermediate-, and long-term calendar were pushed back six months.

Despite limited access to leadership toward the end of 2012, the working group continued to meet short-term objectives and achieved new visibility when the district’s Data Fellows assumed ownership of Enhancing Data Use after being transitioned from the defunct Office of Transformation to OSP. This transition gave the Data Fellows seats at a leadership table and, accordingly, a regular audience with the district’s Area Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents.

Two short-term wins, which occurred within a year of Enhancing Data Use’s launch, included completing a majority of the program inventory database and introducing OSP to standards of evidence that met the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) *Procedures and Standards Handbook*. Requests for program information were sent to principals, area superintendents and assistant superintendents. The working group also succeeded in drafting a roster of steering committee members, but this process

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ultimately became a major roadblock to progress. While it was fairly easy to identify steering committee members capable of advancing the mission and vision of Enhancing Data Use, it was more difficult to clear one critical invitee through her supervisor, who expressed concerns about the scope of the project. These concerns have contributed to delaying the formal convening of Enhancing Data Use's steering committee.

Completing the program inventory database was a meaningful win, as it helped the district update its inventory of programs, the last of which was about two years old. While the initial response rate was low and inputs insufficient, repeated requests over a six-month period resulted in the successful capture of most program data. The working group concluded that telephone and personal follow-up might have resulted in higher response rates early in the process.

The second of the short-term wins was particularly significant, as it provided the groundwork for an even larger win: the district's first independently-led and largest randomized control trial. This RCT demonstrated that senior leadership was willing to adopt an implementation protocol that, despite being unpopular in some district circles, is considered by WWC to be the gold standard for evidence in education. One of Enhancing Data Use's long-term goals is to revise Board Policy 5101, which governs the adoption and implementation of instructional programs. While the Board has yet to codify the working group's necessary condition that experimental and quasi-experimental evidence be used to justify program adoption, the implementation of an RCT is a significant step in this direction.

The first half of 2013 brought enhanced visibility to Enhancing Data Use, but a sea-change in scope and strategy occurred with the arrival of the new superintendent. Enhancing Data Use was originally conceived as a pilot project within OSP, an office that includes Area Superintendents (and their schools) and Assistant Superintendents (and their departments). Jim Merrill, the new permanent superintendent, revised this scope to include the entire district—a move that incorporates Finance/Budget, Facilities, and Human Resources, among other divisions—and the strategy for re-introducing the effort to SLT as opposed to OSP alone. This charge sets in motion a revised framework that the working group hopes will influence program and policy adoption throughout the district in ways that transcend academic programming.

Implementation going forward will require revising the list of steering committee members to include non-OSP stakeholders, re-introducing the Enhancing Data Use framework to SLT, identifying and developing best practices that guide the adoption and evaluation of district-wide programs and policies, and identifying Board policies (beyond 5101) in which Enhancing Data Use's processes and principles can be codified.

## Communication Strategy

The Enhancing Data Use working group plans to share the revised framework with SLT, all WCPSS' divisions (School Performance, Human Resources, Finance, etc.), and principals (at the monthly principals' meeting). The working group also plans to populate a dedicated Blackboard site with training materials and resources designed to help all stakeholders understand and implement the process.

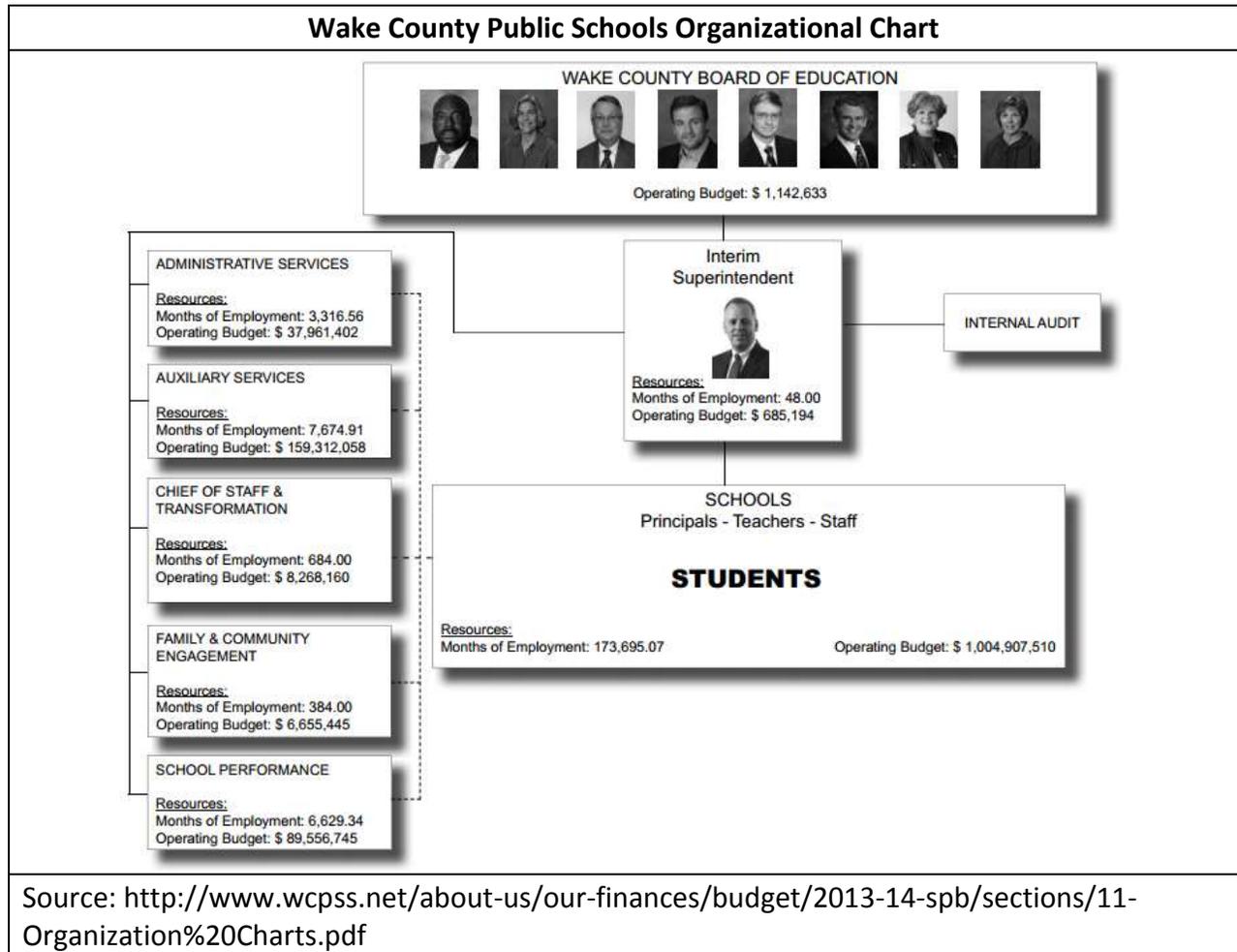
Staff from Data and Accountability Department plans to conduct training on logic models, data collection and monitoring (electronically and in person). An additional effort that is being communicated to principals is called the Reflective Practice Project, through which D&A staff conduct data workshops with individual school leaders. These workshops are designed to help principals rank programs in order of perceived effectiveness, identify sources of high-quality research, generate data tables, and interpret statistical measures. The Reflective Practice Project began in fall 2013 and will evolve based on the needs of individual school leaders while maintaining the principles of the Enhancing Data Use process.

The working group also hopes to engage the Graphic Design Department in an effort to design and produce documentation for all district stakeholders that describes the various facets of Enhancing Data Use. For example, a pamphlet with district-branding describing the importance of randomized control trials in English and Spanish might have a greater impact with parents than a comprehensive report produced by IES.

## Lessons Learned

- Define the audience of your effort early on in the process. This helps facilitate much more effective communication strategies.
- Determine the anticipated level of leadership buy-in required to proceed with strategies and action steps.
- Be patient and persistent, as various aspects of the project might not have an acceptable degree of momentum at first.
- Invite the right people to the table.
- Develop a strong understanding of district politics and bureaucracy, as misplaced assumptions or expectations can stifle progress in any number of areas.
- Build purposeful relationships across the agency whether or not you think you need them.
- Socialize a new process with senior leadership early on.
- Balance the importance of hierarchy with the potential for progress.
- Ensure that a formal structure is in place that supports the culture of your project regardless of which original team or committee members remain in the agency.

Appendix A



Source: <http://www.wcpss.net/about-us/our-finances/budget/2013-14-spb/sections/11-Organization%20Charts.pdf>

Appendix B

| Enhancing Data Use for Program Planning Supporting Strategies <sup>1</sup>                      |   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| Strategies  | Short-Term Goals<br>(by July 2013)  | Intermediate Goals<br>(by Dec. 2013)  | Long-Term Goals<br>(by July 2014)   | Desired Outcomes   |
| <p><b>Develop a process for review and recommendation of programs to adopt within WCPSS</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [✓] Share the status of this effort with the School Performance Leadership Team</li> <li>• [✓] Form a cross-department steering committee for this effort within School Performance (Academics, Student Support Services, Special Education, Area Superintendents)</li> <li>• [Shared with CQM] Steering Committee: Finalize a common process for use in making decisions about discretionary spending, including guidelines and an application</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pilot the process during fall budget planning within appropriate groups in School Performance for DSSF and Title 2 (as well as any other efforts in which changes in use of funding are possible)</li> <li>• Create a database of initiatives reviewed and approved or declined</li> <li>• SLT members use the form to request additional information for any budget expansion or re-purposing proposals</li> <li>• Discuss proposed changes with Steering Committee</li> <li>• Steering Committee reviews and revises R&amp;P 5101</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Steering Committee membership revisited</li> <li>• Revise process if needed (by January 30)</li> <li>• Notify schools to start using the process for any new programs they would like to try which are not reflected in the recommended list</li> <li>• Review school proposals</li> <li>• Share status at Supt’s Leadership Team along with recommended revision to R&amp;P 5101. Discuss recommendation to expand use to all divisions in WCPSS for 2014-15</li> </ul> | <p><i>Codify a revised R&amp;P 5101.</i></p> <p><i>Programs utilized to increase student learning and success will be supported by positive evidence of their effectiveness, be aligned with the district’s curriculum, and sustainable (by July 2015)</i></p> <p><i>Over time, long-term evidence of success will be a decrease in the overall number of programs in place in WCPSS and improved student outcomes (2015-16 and beyond).</i></p> |
| <p><b>[A] Develop a database to</b></p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key efforts being piloted or</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central and school staff will make</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central research continues for high</li> </ul>   | <p><i>Central and school staff</i></p>   |

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| <b>Enhancing Data Use for Program Planning Supporting Strategies<sup>1</sup></b> |   |   |  |  |
|--|---|---|--|--|
| <b>Strategies</b>  | <b>Short-Term Goals<br/>(by July 2013)</b>  | <b>Intermediate Goals<br/>(by Dec. 2013)</b>  | <b>Long-Term Goals<br/>(by July 2014)</b>  | <b>Desired Outcomes</b>  |
| <b>easily document and share evidence-based approaches</b>                       | <p>considered in WCPSS will be researched by the proposer for evidence of effectiveness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Electronic documentation and sharing method will be developed (e.g., Wiki or Blackboard site) for easy access, use, and contributions.</li> <li>• Directions for use by any staff within the Office of School Performance and school staff will be shared.</li> <li>• D&amp;A will develop summaries for key initiatives being considered for adoption or expansion.</li> <li>• D&amp;A will develop a bulletin rating the effectiveness of programs studied in WCPSS.</li> </ul> | <p>contributions to the shared electronic system.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A list of initiatives to be supported centrally will be developed and disseminated</li> <li>• Existing web and book resources of promising practices will be shared by members of all School Performance departments.</li> <li>• D&amp;A will update the bulletin rating the effectiveness of programs studied in WCPSS in improving student achievement.</li> </ul> | <p>priority and other existing efforts of key interest.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As new proposals come in citations will be added to database by D&amp;A or central/school staff.</li> </ul> | <p><i>will review instructional research and program evaluation data and include support for proposed efforts in all application for adoption. Vendors should be asked what research, evaluation, or other evidence they have of the effectiveness of their proposed effort.</i></p> |
| <b>[B] Build support and train and on the use of the process.</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build support for the process by sharing with School Performance Leadership team, and all departments within School Performance (Academics, Student Services, Special Education, Area Superintendents).</li> <li>• Share overview with principals at their meeting.</li> <li>• Consider sharing at Central Services</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As departments start the budget development process, share/ remind them of processes and sources of support.</li> <li>• Support central staff as they develop proposals with evidence and possible ways to pilot and roll out programs to allow sound evaluation of effectiveness.</li> <li>• Provide training on</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As departments start the budget development process, share/ remind them of processes and sources of support.</li> <li>• Support teams as needed.</li> </ul>             | <p><i>Program staff will display a culture in which use of the process is understood, supported, and consistently used.</i></p>  |

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| <b>Enhancing Data Use for Program Planning Supporting Strategies<sup>1</sup></b>   |  |  |  |   |
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| <b>Strategies</b>  | <b>Short-Term Goals<br/>(by July 2013)</b>   | <b>Intermediate Goals<br/>(by Dec. 2013)</b>   | <b>Long-Term Goals<br/>(by July 2014)</b>  | <b>Desired Outcomes</b>   |
|  | Administrator meeting as well.   | logic models, data collection and monitoring (electronically and in person).   |  |   |
| <b>[C] Determine what programs we already have through a program inventory.</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process used earlier will be revised to be more electronic and capable of easier updates.</li> <li>• Data collection form for new efforts will include key elements from review and recommendation process.</li> <li>• Database will be developed for easy access and use as well as ongoing updates.</li> <li>• Connections to evidence database will be worked into the process.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Database will be made available to central and school staff.</li> <li>• Ways to sort and use the database will be disseminated.</li> <li>• Programs in place will be counted by type.</li> <li>• Programs will be sorted by cost and scope.</li> <li>• Other analyses of trends will be done on request.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing process will be developed for central and school updates of program use.</li> <li>• Program participation will be updated online for all programs utilized in WCPSS.</li> </ul> | <i>Number of programs in place in WCPSS will decrease and will be more closely aligned with central list of supported programs.</i> |
| <p><sup>1</sup> Based on original framework to be piloted within the Office of School Performance and will be revised to reflect district-wide effort (last revision: July 2, 2013).</p> |  |  |  |   |

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