



Assessment to Achievement

Improving Student Performance Through Assessment Data

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A typical student in the United States takes 112 mandated standardized tests during their pre-K to high school experience.ⁱ That amounts to about eight exams per school year, or nearly one a month.

While state and federal policymakers have endeavored to reduce the amount of testing required of students, one reality remains constant: We have a plethora of student assessment data, and we always will.

So while it is important to consider how much student assessment data *we need*, it is also essential to consider how to effectively leverage the data *we have*. Despite our intensely data-focused society, using student data to improve learning outcomes remains one of the least understood practices in education. This is unfortunate because data-driven instruction is one of the most effective components of improving student performance.

A CASE STUDY

Over the course of the 2015-16 school year, a group of 43 schools from a variety of local contexts across the state of Utah achieved an impressive feat: Their proficiency gains in math, literacy, and science averaged twice those of the rest of the state's schools. Even more impressive, more than a third of these schools averaged *seven times* the proficiency gains compared to the rest of the state.

What made these schools different from their counterparts? The short answer is that they learned how to leverage student assessment as a tool to improve student outcomes. As part of Utah's Assessment to Achievement (A2A) project, they worked relentlessly with state officials and external partners to implement transformative, data-driven instructional practices.

A more complete and detailed answer involves understanding the nuances of the A2A project. This white paper describes the model these schools used—and continue to use as they progress through the third year of A2A—to change the way their teachers teach and the way their students learn.

Project Purpose and Objectives

In 2013, Utah implemented its new Student Assessment of Growth and Excellence system, or SAGE. In order to help schools increase their capacity to leverage the new system and student assessment data in general, the state partnered with Ed Direction to lead the statewide A2A project.

To achieve the overarching goal of growing schools' capacity to leverage student assessment data, A2A focuses on three core objectives:

- Effective Data Use
- Evidence-Based Instruction
- Increased Collaboration

EFFECTIVE DATA USE

Participants use student assessment data as part of collaborative, inquiry-based improvement cycles to determine learning gaps that need addressing and areas of instruction that need improving. Schools can easily access a variety of student data through Utah's [Data Gateway](#), an online data reporting dashboard. This allows A2A participants to efficiently and effectively leverage student assessment data for important project priorities, including:

- Building teachers' capacity to collect valid assessment data
- Building teachers' capacity to analyze assessment data and identify learner-centered problems (LCPs)
- Increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of team data meetings
- Creating action plans to achieve specific, data-based goals
- Using data to inform the instructional approach teachers use with students

Teachers take the first step toward improving student performance by learning how to effectively collect, analyze, and use student assessment data to inform their classroom instruction. The next step is to ensure that instruction is not only data-driven, but also evidence-based.

"This is one of the first times in a long time that I can remember a long-term approach to how we're going to improve our school."

- A2A Teacher

EVIDENCE-BASED INSTRUCTION

Teachers are much more effective at improving their instruction when they understand students' needs *and* have an arsenal of research-proven instructional strategies to address those needs. For this reason, A2A focuses on helping teachers implement a number of evidence-based strategies based on the trends they see in their student assessment data.

A2A participants receive extensive professional learning, practice, and coaching opportunities to help them implement evidence-based strategies that are known to produce substantial effects on student learning. These strategies include Questioning, Feedback, Active Student Response, and Metacognition. Schools initially choose one strategy to focus on schoolwide, according to student needs. Over time, as educators' capacity grows, grades and individual teachers select their own strategies to implement.

Ed Direction and state and district partners visit each school to provide feedback and coaching on both classroom instruction and teachers' use of student assessment data to inform that instruction. Coaches even participate in teachers' data meetings to help brainstorm solutions for student needs and ensure meetings are grounded in concrete data and culminate in specific action plans designed to improve student outcomes.

Throughout this process, the connection between student assessment data and classroom instruction becomes increasingly natural and tangible to teachers. As they iteratively conduct data inquiry cycles, their capacity to identify and effectively address student needs grows, and improved student outcomes result.

INCREASED COLLABORATION

A2A's constant emphasis on using student data to drive evidence-based instruction is supported by the project's third core objective: to increase collaboration among teachers. This focus is essential to teachers' growth and success because improved student outcomes cannot be achieved at scale when teachers are isolated in their classrooms.

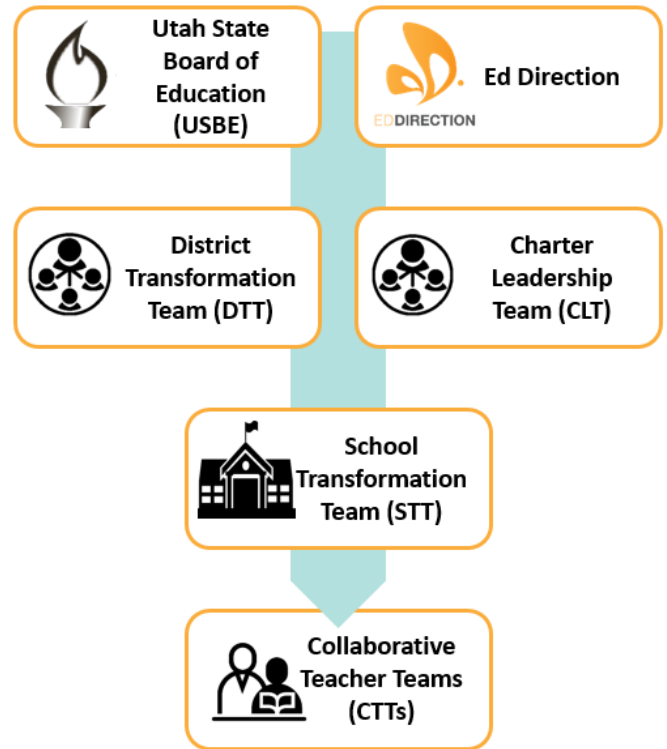
In order to promote a sustainable culture of collaboration at each participating school, the project helps teachers establish collaborative structures and systems designed to outlive staff turnover and other typical changes. For example, each school organizes a School Transformation Team (STT) to lead project implementation across all grades and classrooms. This distributes leadership across both the administration and teacher-leaders and makes full implementation much more feasible.

STTs and other school-based teams (called Collaborative Teacher Teams, or CTTs) meet regularly to discuss their student assessment data, pinpoint instructional changes to be made based

"Administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals are all brought to the table through efficient, highly-structured systems to improve all meetings."

- A2A Principal

on student needs, and action plan to ensure progress. These teams also use agendas, norms, and protocols to make their meetings as efficient and effective as possible. With practice, these meetings become the foundation for teacher collaboration and development.



A2A also prioritizes collaboration between individual schools and with external partners. School representatives attend project-wide professional learning sessions and share and learn from one another's challenges and successes. They also work with district and state personnel and Ed Direction's Improvement Coaches during these sessions and school-specific coaching opportunities. Because schools will work most closely with their district leaders in the long run, each district office also has its own District Transformation Team (DTT) to lead district collaboration with each school's STT.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

These three core objectives—effective data use, evidence-based instruction, and increased collaboration—work together to ensure teachers build their capacity to collaboratively recognize student needs and address those needs through improved instruction. A2A's success is illustrated not only by the gains in student proficiency as described above, but also by teachers' reactions to the project. After just the first year of the project, for example, participants reported that as a result of A2A:

- 89% use data more effectively to identify student learning gaps
- 92% have improved their instruction
- 94% feel their school culture is data-driven
- 88% collaborate more effectively with their peers
- 85% feel their teams function more effectively

Why A2A Works

In addition to the project's persistent focus on its overarching purpose and three core objectives, it also derives success from several important factors:

- The project is built on a close partnership between state and district leaders and Ed Direction. A2A is jointly led by the Utah State Board of Education and Ed Direction, and all professional learning sessions and coaching opportunities are designed to include state and district leader participation. This structure promotes a unified vision for the project and provides schools with multiple layers of support.
- The project itself practices what it preaches. Project leaders use student data to identify how to best support schools; leverage evidence-based instructional practices when leading professional learning sessions and coaching interactions; and collaborate extensively to continually improve the project.
- Because A2A is a statewide initiative, it encourages schools from a wide range of local contexts to learn from each other. Education experts point to a number of benefits that come from peer learning communities, including innovation and accelerated learning.ⁱⁱ
- The coaching feedback given to teachers by state and district partners and Ed Direction Improvement Coaches is specific and actionable. Teachers receive both verbal and written feedback, including feedback summaries that outline areas of strength and growth in detail. This feedback pushes participants to continually improve.

Of course, the most critical component of this or any other project's success is teachers' dedication to improving student outcomes. Through A2A, our team has been extremely fortunate to work with hundreds of talented teachers who are genuinely invested in the growth of their students.

Replicating the A2A Model

States and districts looking to change the way they leverage student assessment data can benefit immensely from adopting a model similar to A2A. We recommend retaining the overarching purpose and core objectives, then customizing the implementation method based on local needs. Regardless of how a state or district chooses to implement the model, there are several universal principles of assessment transformation to keep in mind:

- **Assessment and instruction go hand in hand.** It is essential to clearly and repeatedly outline the link between the two.
- **It takes time and a lot of practice to learn how to use student data to inform instruction.** Lasting improvement occurs when teachers have frequent opportunities to practice in low-risk settings and receive job-embedded coaching.
- **Instructional changes should be based on evidence.** It is not enough to rely on intuition when determining which instructional strategies will best address students' learning needs.
- **Collaboration between schools and state and district offices is key.** Schools and central offices have the same purpose: to improve student outcomes. There is no area or function in education—including assessment and instruction—that does not benefit from collaboration.
- **What matters most is implementation, not information.** Impressive professional learning sessions and abundant resources mean nothing if they do not translate to on-the-ground implementation. As Ben Levin notes, "One of the challenges in education is that the pizzazz is around having a seemingly new idea, whereas the real work is in making it happen. While innovations tend to get the profile, the slog work of implementation is what makes the difference in the end."ⁱⁱⁱ

The A2A model is a proven, scalable solution to transforming the way schools use assessment data to improve instruction and accelerate student performance. If you or your organization is interested in learning more about how to replicate this model, we would be happy to serve as a thought partner. Visit eddirection.com or see our contact information below.

About the Authors

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ⁱ Layton, Lyndsey. (October 24, 2015). [Study Says Standardized Testing is Overwhelming Nation's Public Schools](#). Washington Post.

ⁱⁱ LeMahieu, Paul. (August 18, 2015). [Why a NIC?](#) Carnegie Foundation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Levin, Ben. (2008). *How to Change 5000 Schools*. Harvard Education Press.