

The Story

Excitement matters. When Ronnie Mackin took over as principal of Kingsbury Middle School in Memphis, Tennessee, he had to hit the ground running. Up to April 2007 Mackin had thought that he would be working as assistant principal of a six-year high school, but at the end of the summer he was told that the seventh and eighth grade of his school were being spun off into their own building and that he was to start as principal in September. When he arrived, Mackin found a school at which over 70 percent of students were black and Latino and 89 percent of students qualified for free or reduced lunches. Results were dismal, with 78 percent of students reading at below sixth-grade levels in 2006-07. In hopes of boosting student achievement, Kingsbury Middle School decided to put the lessons of the Data-Driven Instruction Comprehensive Leadership Workshop (see Chapter Twelve) into practice and adopt a model of data-driven instruction.

Before data-driven instruction could be put into practice effectively, however, it first had to be accepted by the faculty. As is often the case, the faculty was initially wary of the great changes that were taking place. Rather than require faculty buy-in as a prerequisite to implementation, however, Mackin used implementation to demonstrate the value of buy-in. Once he presented data as offering specific measures to help specific groups at the school, teachers began to realize that data did not represent a threat to their security but instead represented a tremendous opportunity for their students. Beyond creating a vision of data as a force for the good of students, Mackin also took the important step of ensuring that teachers were prepared for all data conferences before they began. This created a virtuous cycle: teachers who had done their preparation work thoroughly saw better results, and teachers who saw better results bought even further into data-driven instruction.

By the end of the year, a systematic change had taken place. Data-driven instruction had not only pointed the way toward better content and lesson plans, it had also fundamentally altered classroom dynamics; suddenly, lessons became so engaging that students did not want to act up, a far cry from the chronic discipline problems of earlier years. Teachers began to know students not only by their names and interests but by their specific areas of weakness on exams and the strategies that were being used to help them. Through data-driven instruction, the focus of Kingsbury had truly become student learning. By creating a compelling vision for data-driven instruction in his school, and by having the results show and not tell, Mackin was able to win over a wary faculty and, in doing so, significantly boost student achievement.