



SLDS Topical Webinar Summary

Principals' Use of Teacher Effectiveness Data: Findings from the Vanderbilt Study

To better understand how principals use teacher effectiveness data (including teacher observation, student achievement, stakeholder surveys, and other data) to make talent management decisions such as hiring, placement, professional development/support, and retention/dismissal, researchers at the Peabody College of Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University studied the data use habits of principals in eight school systems. This research was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Although this study focused on the data use of principals, its findings—including barriers to and recommendations for improving data use—are generalizable and can help guide the broader use of data in education settings, including data included in statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs).

Overview of the Study

Researchers studied principals in school districts that were frontrunners in the use of data systems technology and teacher evaluation systems, although the length of time those systems had been in place varied. Eight school systems in six states were chosen for the study.¹

To understand how hiring and placement decisions were made, how feedback and professional development were organized, and how data were used for compensation and nonrenewal decisions in each school system, researchers interviewed central/home office leaders, individuals who provide direct support to principals, and staff in charge of talent management decisions for each district. In addition, a random sampling of principals was interviewed from each district, balanced across grade level and achievement distribution. Principals in six of the eight districts were also asked to fill out surveys on data use, and 82 percent responded. Finally, researchers performed case studies of four principals who were identified as displaying a “deep and robust” use of data for decisionmaking. Video interviews with these principals are available at <http://principaldatause.org/case-studies.php>.

Below are some high-level findings from the study.

- Few principals use data when making hiring decisions, and principals vary greatly in their knowledge of the existence of relevant data, where to find them, and/or how to use them.
- Many principals use data to place teachers into classrooms where they can be most effective. The same data are often also used to place less effective teachers into classrooms that do not have standardized testing.
- When deciding which teachers need which sorts of professional development, principals rely almost entirely on observational data.
- Principals find it difficult to use data for nonrenewal decisions because the data often are not available until after the decisions need to be made; they also find it hard to find the time and documentation needed to make and justify such decisions.

¹ The eight school systems studied were Alliance College-Ready Public Schools (Los Angeles, CA), Baltimore City Public Schools (MD), Denver Public Schools (CO), Green Dot Public Schools (Los Angeles, CA), Hillsborough County Public Schools (Tampa, FL), Houston Independent School District (TX), Memphis City Schools/Shelby County Schools (TN), and Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (TN).

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For more information on the IES SLDS Grant Program or for support with system development, please visit <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/SLDS>.

Findings Related to Data Systems

Accessing the needed data is a barrier for many principals. The study highlights the following issues and challenges related to data systems and data access:

- *Most data systems fail to provide easy organization, manipulation, and analysis of data.* Most of the school systems involved in the study had invested time and money to develop a data warehouse with a single-login approach to accessing data. Nevertheless, many principals still found it necessary to cut and paste data from different sources to have all the needed data in one place.
- *Principals would like ongoing access to data in a centralized, integrated location.* Particularly for nonrenewal decisions, the ability to view all relevant data in one location is vital to see and interpret the full story of a teacher's history and success.
- *Principals would like to access data from home and other off-site locations.* Many school data systems do not allow off-site access to data warehouses for security reasons. However, many principals stated that working from home after hours was necessary to complete all the work that needed to be done. For example, a great deal of in-school time may be devoted to teacher observation, leaving little time for reviewing data.
- *Principals would like data dashboards organized by talent management decisions rather than data elements.* Data tend to be organized from an IT or technical perspective, and therefore are generally organized by data element. This type of organization is not conducive to making the evidence-informed decisions that principals need to make. Instead, principals would like to see data organized in a decision-oriented fashion—that is, having all the data needed to answer a particular question grouped together so that the data are presented in a coherent and consolidated way.

Figure 1 summarizes principals' responses to proposed ideas for facilitating the use of teacher effectiveness data.

The Five Barriers

Researchers identified five key barriers to principals' use of teacher effectiveness data. These barriers can also apply to data use by educators in general:

- *Time.* Many principals do not have enough time to gather and analyze multiple sources of teacher effectiveness and observation data. Possible solutions to this barrier include allowing off-site access to data systems, encouraging principals to

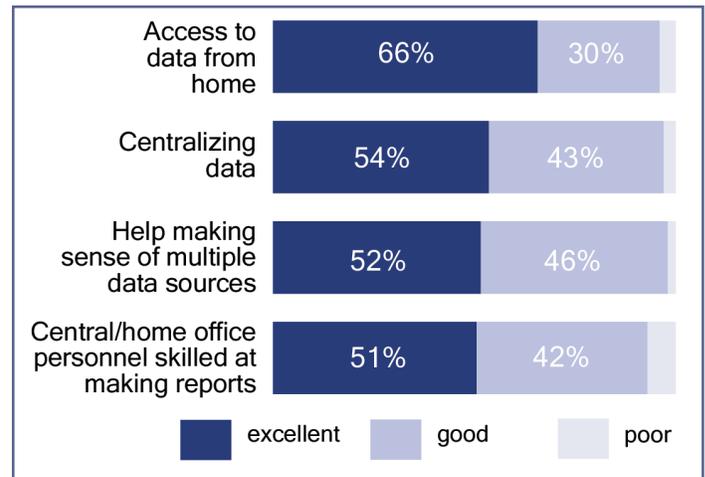


Figure 1. Principals' perceptions of ideas to develop skills in using teacher effectiveness data for talent management decisions

delegate leadership and administrative tasks to others, and developing simple, intuitive data systems.

- *Technology.* Accessing the necessary data can be cumbersome for principals when they have to deal with multiple data systems and logins. Also, the availability of too many types of data reports can be confusing and distracting. The development of centralized, easy-to-navigate data systems that organize the data by decision type is essential to effective data use by principals.
- *Timing.* Principals do not always have the data needed in time to make talent management decisions (see figure 2). For example, nonrenewal decisions may need to be made in the spring, but data from stakeholder perception surveys may not be available until the summer. Principals can be trained to look at multiple years of data when making such decisions, but ideally data availability should be synchronized with talent management decisions.
- *Training.* Principals need support and training to ensure that they understand what data they need to review and how to make sense of the data when making talent management decisions. Also, they need to be held accountable for using data to inform these decisions. Face-to-face time with data coaches, the use of data in trainings that are real and relevant to the trainees (i.e., using the principals' own data during training sessions), and the specification of relevant data elements for each talent management decision may help address this barrier.
- *Trust.* Principals cite their own lack of trust in the evaluation measures available, as well as a lack of trust between them and the central office when talent management decisions are made. Teachers may distrust the teacher effectiveness data as well as the use of those data for talent management

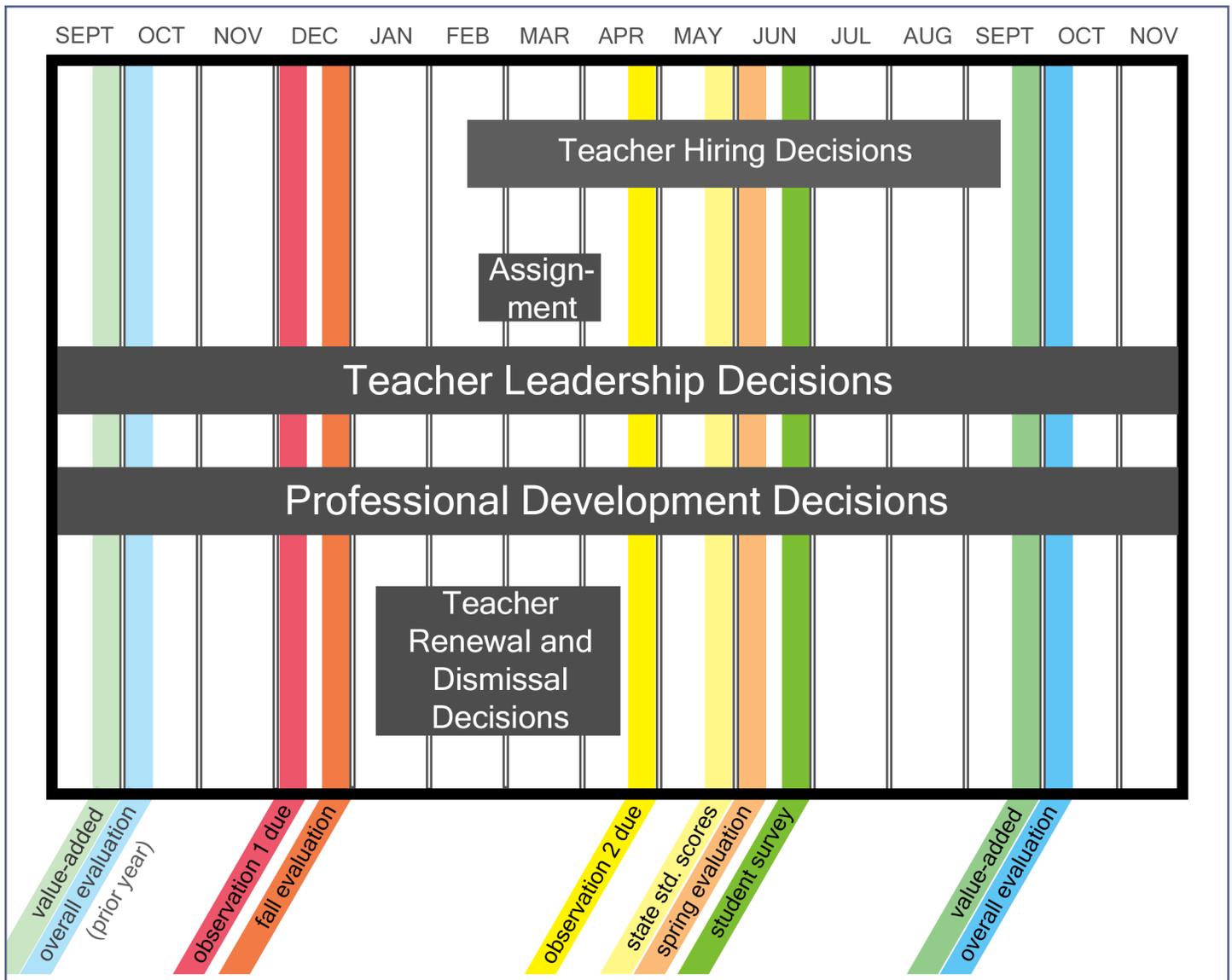


Figure 2. Sample calendar for talent management decisions and the availability of teacher effectiveness data

decisions. To alleviate concerns, principals should be supported in developing a culture of trust around the use of teacher effectiveness data for talent management decisions.

Implications for SLDS Programs

The five barriers cited in the Vanderbilt Study are relevant to almost all data use efforts. For SLDSs, the barriers are even more important to address as grants come to a close. Following are strategies for alleviating each of the five barriers in SLDS programs.

Time

- The SLDS team should consider collaborating with those who support data users directly to communicate data use as an embedded tool for rolling out new initiatives. Instead of framing data use as a task requiring additional time, consider how

it can be a resource for informing and improving stakeholders' existing work.

Technology

- A single sign-on system will prevent SLDS users from having to navigate multiple sites and remember multiple user names and passwords. As much as possible, the SLDS should be integrated with systems that its intended stakeholders already use.
- Clean and visually accessible displays of SLDS information are vital, particularly for novice data users. To further bolster use, tailor the data and reports to the specific user role. For example, teachers and researchers have different data needs and should be served differently by the SLDS.
- As cited in the Vanderbilt study, data users often prefer to see data organized by the decisions the data are meant to inform, and not by type of data. Instead of guessing at what users will find acceptable or

usable, engage groups of stakeholders and identify what their specific needs are. SLDSs are, by nature, able to create reports and analyses over time and across domains; harness this power to provide each group of stakeholders with the integrated information they are looking for in the way they would like it displayed.

- Be careful not to overwhelm users. More is not always more; consider a phased-in approach to new reports and products by building on features that have had the highest use from prior phases and garnering ongoing feedback from stakeholders.

Timing

- Discuss with stakeholders the decisions they would like SLDS data to inform and when those data are needed to inform those decisions. Cross-reference the decision timelines with when the SLDS data are available. If the specific data that stakeholders need are not available at the time they need it, consider whether the data could be made available earlier, either through changes to the collection calendar or by making the subsequent phases of the data use process more efficient.

Training

- Training should encompass not only teaching users how to access the SLDS and use the associated

tools, but also how to appropriately understand and correctly interpret the data coming out of the SLDS. Consider collaborating with the professional development staff within your agency, regional service centers, or other sources of support for your intended users to develop and deliver data literacy/ use training.

Trust

- Demonstrating to stakeholders that data quality is a priority can help with issues of trust. Be clear about the data quality checks in place as data move from the local level to the state level and about other methods of ensuring data quality. Report data quality metrics if available.
- Transparency is key. It may be impossible to eliminate all concerns about data use, but being clear about what data are used and how calculations such as teacher evaluation scores and graduation rates are made can help build trust.
- Be sure that the data provided to stakeholders are not being used punitively. If so, the data that are meant to be a support and resource will only be seen as a punishment.

Additional Resources

Atlanta Public Schools' Teacher Effectiveness Dashboard
www.atlanta.k12.ga.us/site/Default.aspx?PageID=416

SLDS Data Use Standards: Knowledge, Skills, and Professional Behaviors for Effective Data Use
<https://nces.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/5204>

SLDS Webinar: Supporting Principals to Use Teacher Effectiveness Measures for Talent Management Decisions
<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/6567>

SLDS Webinar: Training Educators to Use SLDS Data
<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/5195>

Vanderbilt Principal Data Use Project Overview: Supporting Principals to Use Teacher Effectiveness Measures for Talent Management Decisions
<http://Principaldatause.org>

Vanderbilt Principal Data Use Project – Case Study Principals
<http://principaldatause.org/case-studies.php>