When considering how to boost her district’s graduation rate, Newberg Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Kym LeBlanc-Esparza made an alarming discovery: every male English language learner student in her district had received at least two Fs during his middle school career. She immediately sprang into action with her staff, adjusting courses and bolstering support systems. As a result, they are already seeing improvements.

“We wouldn’t have known had I not gone layer by layer to analyze it,” said Dr. LeBlanc-Esparza. “That’s the kind of question I want to be able to ask. I want data to tell us whether we’re getting the results we think we’re getting, and if we’re not, I want us to be nimble enough to pivot and do what we need to be doing to avoid undesirable outcomes.”
Why Data Culture Matters

Dr. LeBlanc-Esparza is a statistician. Not surprisingly, when she arrived at the district four years ago, data-driven decision making became a fundamental part of her brand new strategic plan. But it wasn’t her personal love of data that earned it that central role; it was her love for the students.

She explains that Newberg Public Schools has limited resources with which to serve their students, many of whom face circumstances that put them at risk for failing academically or dropping out of school. As a result, “I know that we’ve only got one shot at getting it right. I know that if we don’t help kids access the power of education, we really do push them back into a life where doors are shut.”

For her—and for educators across the country—it’s the urgency of students’ needs that makes data indispensable. “You can take a handful of dots and throw them at the wall and see what sticks, but that’s not going to improve student performance,” she explained. “In education, we can’t afford to be haphazard. We have to know how the students are doing to see if what we’re doing is making a difference in their achievement.”

After visiting schools in her new district, then recently-appointed Dr. LeBlanc-Esparza learned that many teachers were intimidated by data and concerned it would be used to criticize their performance. “We really had to change the culture to use it to inform practice,” noted Dr. LeBlanc-Esparza. “We had to prove to people that we weren’t going to use it as a weapon. We were going to use it to determine good decisions to get the best outcomes we could for our students. I wanted our teachers to feel like they were ‘data-powerful.’”

“The Partner that Could Help Us Do the Work”

One of the first steps was selecting a data dashboard that could support the culture shift that Newberg Public Schools needed. At the time, the district used what Dr. Luke Neff, director of instructional technology, remembers as an “antiquated toolbox system” provided by their region’s educational service agency. “You could get to the data, but it was really clunky and slow, so no one used it.”

Dr. LeBlanc-Esparza went to bat for a new system, one that would be easier and more appealing to use. After vetting six other vendors, Dr. Neff recalled that, “Schoolzilla was the obvious choice.” Dr. LeBlanc-Esparza says, “It came down to not only a powerful tool that could organize all our data, but also a malleable enough tool that we could use to ask questions. Honestly, we felt like Schoolzilla was the partner that would help us do the work and it happened, it truly happened.”

“We are being very thoughtful about not trying to do more than we can right up front. We are connecting deeply with principals and assistant principals and making sure we are building a tool that they are going to use, that they start to trust, that it’s got some credibility for them.”

Dr. Luke Neff, Director of Instructional Technology, Newberg Public Schools
The district’s senior staff and school leadership now use Schoolzilla’s Mosaic District Progress Monitoring, a multiple-measures dashboard system, to check progress against their high-level goals. Even before diving into more granular data, “people can look at it on one screen and get a boatload of information they can do something with,” said Dr. LeBlanc-Esparza.

However, cultivating a positive perception of data takes more than the right tool. For Newberg Public Schools, promoting continuous improvement and collective responsibility has become a district-wide project.

**Continuous Improvement**

Every teacher at Chehalem Valley Middle School has a poster that reads, “Fail Faster. Then You’re Assured Success.” The message is simple: it’s ok to experiment so long as you learn from failures and successes. The posters aren’t intended for students alone; Cassandra Thonstad, now the assistant principal at another Newberg school, has seen this philosophy permeate the staff culture too. When behavior incidents spiked last year, she remembers her leadership team trying new lunchtime interventions. “We were very public about how we were experimenting in our own roles and that we weren’t always successful. And that was okay because we learned from it.” Thonstad says this spirit of continuous improvement is catching on. “People are starting to get to a place where it’s okay if a teacher doesn’t have all the answers because they’re not supposed to.”

In the context of data use, this means that staff on-site at the school are encouraged to engage in their own data-driven learning with support from the central office staff. With the adoption of more user-friendly tools like Mosaic, Dr. Neff says, “The narrative has really shifted. It’s our job to empower people to do the work, not to fulfill their data requests. It’s being able to not just give instructors the fish but teaching them how to fish too.” Once instructors have the data they need, they use it to develop their own hypotheses and run their own experiments. “What I’ve learned,” says Dr. LeBlanc-Esparza, “is we’re not looking over their shoulders but rather we’re asking them how they used the data, what they learned, and how it has value for them.”

**Collective Responsibility**

Back in the central office, the posters are replaced with printouts of the district’s three pillars, one of which is collective responsibility. “[Dr. LeBlanc-Esparza] does a great job of making sure that we don’t ever forget that it’s not about [senior staff members] going out to schools and dispensing wisdom and then walking away and saying good luck,” explains Dr. Derek Brown, director of data and assessment.

“*What I’ve learned is we’re not looking over their shoulders but rather we’re asking them how they used the data, what they learned, and how it has value for them.*”

Dr. Kym LeBlanc-Esparza, Superintendent, Newberg Public Schools

“In my conversations with other people who do similar work, I find that they struggle because they forget that doing data is heart work. Above all, you must be vulnerable because this work is personal. Staff and teachers take student success very personally because that’s what they do. This is their work, and this is their love. They are in education to make a difference for our students. Data is heart work, but it’s so easy to shrug it off like it’s not. Honoring that first is the most important step.”

–Cassandra Thonstad, Assistant Principal, Mountain View Middle School
“We all own our results. That is really big, being able to see clearly what our results are and take responsibility for them.”

Owning results means ingraining data into everyday work. “We’ve talked a lot about the data habit idea, where we want senior staff, principals, and eventually teams to get into the habit of matching the tool with the meeting, purpose, and plan of action and coming back to it,” continued Dr. Neff.

Dr. Neff says the process started with senior staff, who use their newly accessible data for high-level decisions. Mosaic now frames their Monday morning staff meetings and the data they discuss guides their work for the week. Next came the “trailblazers,” a half-dozen principals and classroom teachers already enthusiastic about data use. They helped Dr. Neff adjust report settings before sharing them with the staff at other schools. From there, they chose a couple of teams that could apply it deliberately to their work.

“We are being very thoughtful about not trying to do more than we can right up front. We are connecting deeply with principals and assistant principals and making sure we are building a tool that they are going to use, that they start to trust, that it’s got some credibility for them,” Dr. Neff explained.

The combination of an intuitive, accessible dashboard system and an empowered staff has meant a smooth adoption process so far. “It was organic in a way,” says Dr. LeBlanc-Esparza. “Mosaic is so intuitive that [people] jump right in and start playing with it before you even give them any explanation. Then you start showing them how you can strip away or add variables, and they’re off to the races. I don’t have to convince anybody of anything. They just start clicking, it goes to deeper and deeper levels, and they get caught up in it. We just get out of the way and let them explore because they’ll figure it out,” said Dr. LeBlanc-Esparza.

What’s Next for Newberg Public Schools

The Newberg Public Schools team is making progress, but the work is hardly done. True to form, they look toward the future with a balance of eagerness and careful thought. “We’re at a place where we’ve got this great, powerful tool and there’s a handful of us that use it really well,” said Dr. LeBlanc-Esparza. “Now it’s a matter of the whole system becoming really good at using it so that our performance is indicative of our ability to ask the right questions.”

According to Dr. Brown, they will identify “trailblazer” teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school levels this winter and ask them to try Mosaic. “This year is dedicated mostly to administrators, but with the teachers involved, perhaps we can start to think about rolling out the next phase by the end of the school year or over the summer.” But Dr. Brown isn’t rushing anything. For him, collaboration is more important than speed. “I think focusing on the administrators is a good investment of time. They’re truly leading the work.”

“We’re in an interesting place,” Dr. LeBlanc-Esparza says in reflection. “We’re a school district that has lots of potential for growth. We’re a long way from my vision of where I want us to be, but we’re moving in the right direction. We’re doing the right work, I know that.”