

Data Wins from Day One: Acing Back-to-School as a Data Leader



Tip #1:

Clean Slate with
Clean Data



Tip #2:

Build in
Data Literacy
Basics



Tip #3:

Demonstrate
that You're on
Their Side



Tip #4:

Empathy from
Day One



Tip #1: Clean Slate with Clean Data

Before you share data with anyone, you need to be confident that it's accurate. That's especially true now because your colleagues' first experience with the data can have a lasting impact. If they can't trust it at the beginning, it may be hard to regain that confidence later in the year.

Of course, every school has some data issues! That's natural. The trick is to set up systems--both high-tech and people-powered--to minimize errors in your data. Plus, most of these practices will save your data team time as well!

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- ▶ **Set-up automated systems.** Whenever possible, choose a single source of truth so data entry has to be done only once. That might mean using a roster-syncing service like Clever or an SSO provider like Okta, Active Directory, OneLogin, or Google.
- ▶ **Choose live integrations over static ones.** Regular data refreshes (whether via API, ODBC, FTP, or some other form) prevent data sets frozen in time from creating version control issues.
- ▶ **Choose products that match records based on multiple data points.** For example, if your data warehouse matches SIS and assessment data on either a student ID or a state ID, then you don't have to worry as much about missing student IDs in your assessment platform. Although you may want to go back and correct that, this feature means more accurate data in the meantime.
- ▶ **Cultivate data neatniks.** Align on the reporting level needed before creating data entry norms. Doing so will help you straddle the tension between educator autonomy and organization-wide reporting that often results in either poor data quality or a lack of investment in data entry procedures.
- ▶ **Consider how data could help day-to-day.** Do the people managing data entry utilize those data too? With a clear understanding of the consequences of poor data quality, you're likely to see higher engagement in proper data entry.
- ▶ **Hire for attention to detail, experience with databases, and a strong sense of ownership.** Develop high-quality trainings and documentation, especially if you have high turnover in data entry positions. Be sure to make troubleshooting tips and helpline supports clear alongside data entry instructions.

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Tip #2: Build in Data Literacy Basics

We can't assume that everyone in the room is immediately familiar with a scale score...or even a small n-size. Set your entire team up for success by building in data literacy instruction that helps make insights clear to all.

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- ▶ **Choose intuitive systems.** You can make a big difference from the beginning by picking displays that feel natural on sight. For example, anyone in the U.S. is likely to understand “stoplight colors”: green for at grade level or above, yellow for at-risk, and red or pink for below grade level.
- ▶ **Create intuitive reports.** If you're designing homemade visualizations, make it clear which information they display, what they're used for, and what data points indicate. For example, label reports with the questions they answer (e.g. “how many students in each grade were absent this week?”)
- ▶ **Scaffold data interpretation.** During data days, meetings, or presentations, demonstrate what you see in the data, what you conclude, and what questions you'll ask as a result. Then transition to an analysis tool like the [8 Essential Questions](#). It'll help your team develop a curious attitude about data.
- ▶ **Differentiate instruction.** Just as with students, adults don't learn in the same ways. So offer information in different forms: consider live trainings, staff portals, office hours, support lines, or a help email. The easier you make it for all learners to improve their data use, the more they will.

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Tip #3: Demonstrate that You're on Their Side

Many educators and school system staff have an uneasy relationship with data. Maybe it's been used to penalize or judge them in the past. Perhaps it's intimidating. Or it may simply feel disconnected from the other work they do on a daily basis. Whatever the case may be, assume that some of your colleagues don't feel as comfortable with data as you do. And, until they trust the data you give them itself, show them that they can trust you. Here are several ways to help you do that.

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- ▶ **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Surprises can make people feel nervous or disregarded, so put them at ease by setting expectations clearly multiple times in a few different venues.
- ▶ **Share data before meetings.** Everyone processes differently, let folks review results and generate questions before a live discussion. This is especially true for high-stakes data: with the element of surprise eliminated, everyone will have more emotional and mental bandwidth to engage constructively.
- ▶ **Save them time.** What's the single most precious resource in a school or central office? Ask around and your winner might well be: time! Find the data tasks that consume a lot of time and offer them a solution!
- ▶ **Express data quality confidence, not perfection.** You want your audience to trust their data— but data quality is an ongoing process, and you need help to uncover errors! Walk the line between confidence and humility, and provide a clear process for reporting data errors.
- ▶ **Make conservative promises.** It's tempting to agree to everything asked of you, but exceeding modest expectations is much better than scrambling to meet ambitious ones.
- ▶ **Respond to all feedback.** Even if you can't give an answer set expectations for when you can. If you have to decline, explain why and offer a work-around. In all cases, thank people for their suggestions--this is what data engagement looks like, so ask them to keep it up!
- ▶ **Act on data insights.** Someone used data and found an opportunity to improve. Hurray! But your job is not yet done; now reward their efforts with action. A district in South Carolina made a special effort to act upon the observations and ideas that principals found in their data. "Principals quickly noticed that girls were performing at higher levels than boys in English language arts, and boys were performing at higher levels than girls in math", their testing coordinator recalled. "In response, the district brought in a consultant who's showing teachers new techniques for more effective math instruction."

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Tip #4: Empathy from Day One

Trust is only part of helping your coworkers develop a positive relationship with data. After all, as an assistant principal in Oregon once told us, “data is always emotional and personal because district and school staff’s dedication to students is emotional and personal”. It’s crucial to anticipate when other feelings may arise and how to react supportively.

- ▶ **Don’t lose your “why”**. Data can too often be perceived as cold, clinical, or punitive. If you kick off the discussion with a clear connection to your mission— your students—you’ll get both analytical and emotional engagement from your audience.
- ▶ **Know what people want to know**. Capitalize on the natural appetite for data. The beginning of the school year is an excellent example; so too is the release of benchmark and state testing results. Use interest in those data to reinforce login instructions for data tools, data literacy principles, and other opportunities to use data.
- ▶ **Focus on specific data points**. When presented with too much data and too little focus, groups tend to either shut down from information overload or scatter into individual rabbit-holes. Keep the group focused on what matters right from the get-go.
- ▶ **Model positive data culture**. The purpose of data is two-fold: the discovery of new insights and the investigation of new solutions. The second part isn’t always second nature; model what an open-minded, solutions-oriented data attitude looks like to those who might otherwise shut down.
- ▶ **Highlight bright spots**. Working in education is hard! Keep the team motivated by sharing wins in a way that feels genuine. When presenting data live, don’t race through the positives; that will feel artificial. Instead, slow down and go beyond results by asking how they were accomplished. You’ll have a more productive conversation and folks will truly feel that their good work was appreciated.
- ▶ **Define the behavior you want to see**. A partner once said, “data presented without an expected action feels punitive.” To minimize this, you can incorporate some practice time during a training. For example, some districts arrange “scavenger hunts” to ensure that all staff know where to find certain data points when they need them.
- ▶ **Encourage ownership**. Ultimately, the goal is for users to see data as their tool, a valuable one. So encourage them to be proactive in using it for their own work! One school district in South Carolina asked each principal to develop two goals and to measure their progress over the course of the school year. Principals felt committed to their goals and as a result, they used the data to meet them by the end of the year.

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