

Systemic Data Use with an Equity Mindset

Within the current educational landscape, “data-driven decision making” is promoted as a powerful lever for improvement. In this module, we have focused on the importance of fostering the conditions necessary to achieve systemic data use, the consistent and effective use of data at all levels of a system to improve teaching and learning, and to reach a more equitable outcomes for all students. Additionally, there is evidence that data use can support improved outcomes when it is grounded in a firm belief that all students can achieve (Bertram & Marsh, 2021). However, evidence also confirms that without an explicit commitment to acknowledging systemic inequities and dismantling biases in beliefs and practices (e.g., tracking practices and low expectations), data use can justify, reinforce, and perpetuate inequities (Bertram & Marsh, 2021).

Accountability culture in education, which emphasizes achievement data as a measure of how well education systems are serving students in specific student populations, has the potential to condition educators to reduce students to the labels placed upon them, from racial categories to the services they receive in schools, like special education services (Bertram & March, 2021). In this context, implicit biases and deficit-thinking can influence educators to use data in ways that fuel inequities.

Implicit bias is the associations, beliefs, or attitudes toward any social group outside of one’s own. These may not correspond with the surface-level views held by an individual; instead, they operate on an unconscious level, reflecting the cultural messages we absorb throughout our lives, and they influence the way we make sense of the world around us. When analyzing and interpreting educational data, it is essential to recognize and unpack these assumptions, not only in ourselves but in our policies, practices, and procedures (Regional Education Laboratory Northeast and Islands, 2022; Boudreau, 2019).

Deficit thinking is grounded in the idea that poor academic outcomes can be attributed to students’ traits, families, and communities. By assigning blame for unfavorable outcomes to who students are, deficit thinking can result in low expectations for students and shift focus away from the responsibility of educators and educational systems for the academic outcomes of all learners. Deficit thinking contributes to faulty conclusions that students in marginalized groups cannot achieve at high levels because of their identities and experiences. In contrast, an **asset-based approach** to data use is anchored in recognition of the strengths that students and

families bring and in the potential of all students to achieve at high levels (Regional Education Laboratory Northeast and Islands, 2022). When taking an asset-based approach, data are analyzed and interpreted with a focus on the policies, practices, and beliefs producing outcomes. In other words, an asset-based approach to data use identifies how systems can be fixed, not on fixing students and families.

Recommendations

Explicitly acknowledge inequity. Start by grounding all data use initiatives and activities in the explicit recognition of systemic racism, educator bias, and other structural barriers that impact the experience of students and their families and may be reflected in the data. Make a shared commitment to engaging in data use as a tool to center equity, identify inequity, and improve systems to achieve more equitable outcomes (Regional Education Laboratory Northeast and Islands, 2022).

Build a shared understanding of equity-minded data use. Establish a clear picture of the expectations for equity-minded data use, including (Regional Education Laboratory Northeast and Islands, 2022):

- identifying and challenging biases,
- an asset-based approach,
- an orientation toward system improvement (including instructional and programmatic improvement), and
- a focus on factors within the locus of control of educators and leaders at the school.

Provide a supportive environment. Build in supports, including professional learning, coaching, modeling, time, and facilitation of data discussions to help educators and leaders deepen their capacity to engage in data analysis with an equity mindset effectively (Boudruea, 2019).

Couple outcome data with opportunity data. Ensure that analysis of achievement data is done in the context of students' opportunity to learn by bringing to bear multiple sources of data about student experiences in learning, including data that honors student and family voices (Bertram & March, 2021).

Support capacity for difficult conversations. Provide norms, protocols, and facilitation that can provide structure for challenging conversations about race and equity (Boudreau, 2019).

References:

Bertram, M. & March, J. (2021). *How data-driven reform can drive deficit thinking*. Phi Delta Kappan, 102(8), 35–39.

Boudreau, E. (2019). *Uprooting systemic bias in schools*. Harvard Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from: <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/19/11/uprooting-systemic-bias-schools>

Regional Education Laboratory Northeast and the Islands. (2022). *Data coaching to examine, interpret, and use student data equitably*. Retrieved from: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/northeast/Docs/Tools/REL-NEI_DataCoachingtoExamineInterpretandUseStudentDataEquitably.pdf