

team approach to improvement and offers support and respect to classroom professionals. In fact, O’Konek cites the quality of building-level leadership as a key variable in determining the success or failure of the approach at individual schools; and Flickinger says the union has and will continue to voice concerns whenever data are being used as a weapon leveled at teachers, rather than as a spotlight to illuminate opportunities for classroom excellence.

At Ocean View, teachers commend the collegial, supportive atmosphere that principal Lauren Campsen has maintained. Ann Raiford, a math specialist and NFT building representative says Campsen “has set the right tone” when it comes to using data. It’s supportive of teachers and practice, and it extends down to new teachers like Marianne McDonald. A first-grade teacher at Ocean View, McDonald remembers one of the questions at her interview was “What do you think of

data-driven decision-making?” She also remembers her response: “What’s that?”

Her first few months at the school brought a lot of support from literacy teacher Allison Bower, other members of the school data team, and from Campsen and other administrators.

Is the Ocean View approach working? Positive feedback from teachers would indicate it is, and so do test data. The school has made adequate yearly progress for the past three years. The achievement gap between subgroups and the general population has closed as well. Teachers at Ocean View are quick to dismiss any suggestion that “data-informed instruction” is synonymous with “magic bullet,” however. They stress it takes time and hard work to administer regular assessments, analyze results and incorporate findings into strategies developed by grade-level and vertical teams of teachers.

But, as Price points out, hard work was

always a given at the school, and data-informed instruction is merely a chance to concentrate that effort in places where it can do the most good. For example, she has used the approach long enough to employ it as an “early warning system” for future lessons. She knows, from experience and from data in prior years, which lessons will probably give a lot of students trouble and which will be relatively easy for them to grasp, so she can budget time accordingly. And, for those critics who suspect that data-driven instruction somehow saps the creativity and spontaneity from the classroom, Price is more than happy to recount how she showed up in class wearing swim gear and fins to teach a particularly tough lesson several weeks ago. “It doesn’t take creativity out” of the classroom, she says. “You just focus it” where it can do the most good.

Ocean View Elementary isn’t a school that focuses on testing, Price and other teachers explain. It just focuses.

# Game Plan

Ideas on how to improve public schools and enhance student learning are everywhere. Not so widespread are programs that have stood the test—on the education frontlines. Here’s a sampling of AFT and affiliate initiatives that have taken good ideas and put them into practice.

## Use test data to improve achievement

Teachers take data-informed instruction from ‘reform du jour’ to sustained improvement

It’s tempting to describe Ocean View Elementary as a school that focuses on testing. But that label misses the mark and the point.

Regular testing is a big part of what happens at Ocean View, but the people who work at this Norfolk, Va., public school manage to keep the horse before the cart. The real driver at Ocean View is early identification of academic needs and opportunities for individual students through monthly assessments—information that’s married to concrete teaching strategies, presented in a constructive



manner to teachers, and circulated through classrooms at Ocean View before little problems become big ones.

You can see the approach at work throughout this squat, sand-colored school that sits just a few paces off the Chesapeake Bay. In Ronetta Fulmore’s fifth-grade class one morning in January, about half of the students grab hall passes and head to the media center to research a paper on the Civil War. The remaining students stay behind to work on summarizing skills in small-group activities led by Fulmore and a classroom assistant.

Fulmore doesn’t have to guess which students should be included in the small groups or which skill areas should take center stage. The latest round of monthly assessments reveals that summarizing is the challenge these students find tough.

“I’ve used data in other schools. You get standardized tests from previous years and you focus on that,” says Fulmore, a 13-year teaching veteran and AFT member

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who taught in South Carolina for most of her career. It's ancient history, based on the performance of a completely different set of students. When it comes to testing as a classroom tool, this traditional approach helps explain why so many teachers feel they've been given screwdrivers in a world full of nails.

Ocean View goes another direction with testing, one that "helps us fine-tune instruction," Fulmore explains. Students are tested monthly in reading, writing, math, science and social studies. Each assessment takes about 30-40 minutes, with longer blocks reserved for writing. The results are tabulated for each class, individual student and subgroup populations (ESL, special education and black males are groups that are monitored closely because the data indicate they perform at the lower end of the Ocean View student achievement spectrum).

A building-level committee composed of teacher leaders in each subject area, guidance counselors and administrators then reviews the results, grade by grade,

subject by subject, and subgroup by subgroup.

Test data form the backbone of these monthly discussions, which focus on what went right in the last round of assessments as well as what needs improvement. Teachers who are getting positive results teaching difficult subject matter are identified so that other instructors can observe and model the successful techniques.

Discussions touch on students who once had struggled in their studies but who now seem to have turned the corner and are ready for new classroom challenges. And when the data indicate that students may be having problems in one area, the conversations are deliberately guided to remedies like one-on-one work in specific skills between students and retired teachers who continue to tutor at the school, or graphing paper exercises for students who stumble over calculations with decimals. In each and every instance, conversations at the monthly meeting end with "what's the next step" rather than "who's to blame."

Third-grade teacher Debbie Price has taught at Ocean View for seven years, and the AFT member remembers well the feelings of frustration and concern that predated this constructive use of student data. "When I started here, scores were in the toilet and it was hard as a new teacher walking around the room, figuring out who's getting it and who isn't," she recalls. Today, "everything is skills-specific, [and] you're able to pinpoint" problems and opportunities in the classroom, she says.

"I don't think I could go back" to the old way of doing business, she adds.

### Institutional memory

Ocean View is not the only Norfolk school to take this approach to data. The district encourages every school to monitor progress but also to make the information classroom friendly—giving fresh, constructive and, above all, usable options in the classroom. In fact it was this approach, contained in what the district has labeled its Comprehensive Accountability System, that was specifically



With the weight of test data behind her, Norfolk teacher, Debbie Price, knows best how to help her students.

lauded when Norfolk received the 2005 Broad Prize for Urban Education after being named as a Broad finalist in what is dubbed to be the "Nobel Prize for Public Education" the two previous years.

Marian Flickinger, president of the Norfolk Federation of Teachers, says there is another achievement that is perhaps more important than these national plaudits: Norfolk's approach to data-informed instruction has remained in place and flourished through three superintendents. "That doesn't happen unless there's support from individual classroom teachers," she observes. Approaches like this quickly dissolve—becoming "the other guy's thing" with each successive change in leadership—unless individual teachers buy into the approach and see it making a concrete, positive difference in the classroom, she explains. The union has taken its cue from members in this area and worked with the district, building by building, to make sure the use of data is constructive, collegial, and beneficial for students and teachers alike.

Linda O'Konek, executive director for elementary schools in Norfolk, estimates Ocean View is one of about three-quarters of the district's elementary schools that reaped exemplary results from this approach to data-informed instruction. "It's about looking at the individual needs of students and constantly adjusting" to meet those needs, she says. The approach has stuck in Norfolk, she adds, because "it's hard work that pays off, and we see the result."

### The human factor

Flickinger, O'Konek and the teachers at Ocean View offer an important caveat for any schools or districts considering a similar approach to using data: Don't take this course thinking that you've somehow "idiot proofed" reform. Things can and will go wrong if you don't have building-level leadership that embraces a

## Making data work for you

Education data are tools. How you use them makes all the difference. That's the idea behind new training opportunities designed by the AFT and its affiliates to help education stakeholders use school data as instruments to improve teaching and learning.

"Making Data Work for You" is an intensive training session that takes the mystery out of data analysis by training educators in the language of assessment and the appropriate uses of data. The training, typically offered over several days, was developed by the AFT, the New York State United Teachers, the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals, the Toledo (Ohio) Federation of Teachers and the United Federation of Teachers in New York City. It debuted in New York City last year after a two-year field test, and the audience of almost 100 AFT leaders, members and school administrators immediately saw the value in this training.

"The union is on the cutting edge of what is needed in our field," commented one member who attended the training. "I think I understand the union's position on instructional issues better," added an administrator who participated in the training. "I used to think that [the union] passively let business leaders and legislatures tell them what to do. I have learned differently."

Making Data Work for You is currently up and running in nine states, with more to be added this summer. In January, teams from Colorado, Illinois, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island and Texas were trained as course facilitators and will be offering the instruction in their home states and districts. "The course is structured to help educators become savvy consumers of data by providing them with the language, knowledge and tools to make informed decisions about school improvement, to inform and adjust instruction as needed and to advance student learning," explains AFT executive vice president Antonia Cortese.

Training will be expanded in the months ahead to incorporate more information specifically targeted to individuals in the classroom. It will focus on classroom-based assessments and assistance for individual teachers when it comes to designing good classroom tasks, tests, and other activities that allow them to diagnose what students know and don't know.

Smart testing and effective use of data also will be featured topics at the AFT's QuEST conference July 12-15 in Washington, D.C.

Far right, Ocean View Elementary staff meets monthly to turn test data into concrete action plans that help teachers like Ronetta Fulmore, below, polish their classroom strategies. Data-informed decision-making has supported the work of new Norfolk teachers like Marianne McDonald, right.

