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 commended 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 Donald remembers one of the questions teachers like Marianne McDonald. And practice, and it extends down to new teachers 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 a few 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. 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.

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who taught in South Carolina for most of her career. It’s an 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.

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 Ocean View.

Treating students who stumble over calculations as a classroom tool, this traditional approach and 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.

Teachers who are getting positive results as well as what needs improvement.

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.

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 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 legislators tell them what to do. I have learned differently.”

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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.