



Ring Lardner Middle School

Quick Facts

- Public school district in Michigan
- Rural and suburban areas
- 29,800 students
- 300 staff members
- 8 schools and service locations:
 - 2 elementary schools
 - 1 sixth grade center
 - 1 middle school
 - 2 high schools
 - 1 special education school
 - 1 early development center

Snapshot

Information from *DataDirector* helps Niles achieve a 96% graduation rate in a district with 20% special ed, 20% minority, and 60% socially disadvantaged students.

Niles Community School District

Ten years ago, reaching the state average in student achievement seemed a lofty goal for the Niles Community School District. “Today, we’re blowing the state average out of the water,” said Jim Craig, Executive Director of Curriculum. In the Fall of 2009, the district exceeded the state average in all twenty-one Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) tests.

This progress didn’t occur because of improvement in socio-economic factors. The number of minorities and free-and-reduced lunch students remained high. In addition, Niles became the seat of the county’s special ed programs, as the number of special ed students increased from 20% to 40%. “The challenge has grown greater,” said Craig, “Still, our achievement growth has far outstripped the challenge.”

Niles educators credit data-driven learning with the district’s considerable, rapid turnaround. “You need good, concise, accurate data on what students know and what they are able to do,” said Craig, “Then you can use the data to improve the quality of instruction by differentiating instruction.”

Whole-classroom instruction, where a teacher stands up gives the same lesson to all students, rarely occurs any more in Niles. Throughout the district, advanced students are given challenging work, emerging learners are given the chance to practice, and struggling learners work closely with the teachers.

“Data is not going to teach your kids for you,” said Craig, “But it can create relationships that make learning possible for every student at every level.”

Challenges

- Move away from teaching all students the same material.
- Improve student achievement by improving the quality of instruction.
- Make students aware of their own skills and deficits.

Solution

- *DataDirector*
- *Assess2Know*

Benefits

- Gwinnett County educators.
- *DataDirector* identifies individual deficits so Niles educators can differentiate instruction.
- Teachers share and discuss the data to identify successes and build portfolios of proven techniques.
- Instructors meet with students to show them the data, so each student clearly understands his or her accomplishments and improvement areas.

Bunking performance assumptions

It's commonly assumed that standardized test performance is a reflection of socio-economic levels. But the educators in the Niles district, at the extreme southwest corner of Michigan, refused to accept that idea. "It doesn't have to be that way," said Jim Craig. Craig and his colleagues in this high poverty, high minority district decided to change their paradigms rather than succumb to a belief that their children were fated to low academic performance.

Educators in Niles decided to align their thinking with researchers who believe that quality instruction is the number one predictor of success. In order to improve instruction, the district decided, they had to make a jump from teaching all students the same material to differentiating instruction.

Identifying deficits

"The way you increase student achievement," said Craig, "is to find out what each student knows and improve on it." In Niles District, *DataDirector* is the key to unlocking what each student knows and making that information accessible to every teacher, every day. "What *DataDirector* has done is allow us to more easily identify specific skills that individual students have yet to master," said Doug Langmeyer, Principal of Ring Lardner Middle School.

The best way to understand the differentiated approach in Niles District is to first consider traditional classroom dynamics. In a typical classroom of thirty, a teacher opens a book and proceeds to demonstrate examples from the text. A third of the students may already know the material, so they're bored. A third of the students, with good instruction and practice, may master the concepts that day. And the final third of the students, who may not have the underlying knowledge or skill to grasp the concepts, might find themselves floundering. Those kids, as well as the kids' in the first group, sometimes manifest their frustration in off-task behavior.

Students working at their own levels

At Niles, however, learning is customized. Teachers know their students' strengths and weaknesses when they walk through the door, because that information is in an easy-to-understand report from *DataDirector*. Each student in Niles is assessed quarterly and the results of each test, as far back as kindergarten, is at the teacher's fingertips.

For the students who have mastered the standard, the teacher can offer more in-depth or higher-level work. For the students in the middle, the teacher can show them what to do then provide practice work. Then the teacher can bring the struggling students up to speed individually.



Ring Lardner Middle School

A new way of teaching

Differentiated instruction sounds labor intensive. With traditional whole-classroom teaching, a teacher creates one lesson plan per class. At Niles, several types of learning are going on simultaneously in every class. Have teachers balked at the change? "No one ever went into teaching because they didn't want kids to learn," said Craig, "Teachers love it because kids are learning."

The district makes it easy to put into practice by providing teachers the resources to support differentiated learning. Unit extensions, practice sheets, and computer learning systems that map to the students' different levels are all available for teachers to use in individuated instruction. "DataDirector is very easy to use," said Langmeyer. "The system provides teachers with the knowledge of what each student knows and is capable of doing. Providing the resources and time for staff to work with individuals is the key to improved learning."

Collegial discussions

The professional development calendar in Niles is devoted around the assessment schedule. "We don't do flavor-of-the-month speakers," said Craig, "Our teachers are having discussions about students and data."

After the first common assessment in October, for example, teachers at Ring Lardner Middle School use professional development time to look at the test results, with data disaggregated by student and by teacher.

These meetings are called Data Days. "Data Days allow time for teaching staff to have professional conversations with colleagues. Departments collectively analyze how they're doing in terms of time, instruction, and resources," said Langmeyer. "We also look closely at whether or not we're correctly interpreting state content expectations." After areas of weakness are determined, departmental goals are created. These goals become part of Ring Lardner's school improvement plan.

Real professional growth

At Niles, professional development is clearly distinguished from professional evaluation. No administrators sit in on the professional development discussions. "The teachers trust us to keep this apart from any kind of performance review," said Craig.

The sole objective of classroom-by-classroom comparisons is to generate collegial discussions and share techniques, not judge teaching efficacy. The teachers, as colleagues, help each other build a portfolio of techniques to choose from when they go back to the classroom.

"We have great discussions," said Craig, "Teachers ask, 'Why do your kids know how to do this and mine don't?' and 'Your kids did well on that, how do you teach it?' That's professional growth."

“Test talks” with students

At Ring Lardner Middle School, teachers hold periodic “test talks” with their students in which they sit down and review the *DataDirector* results. “Our students take assessments very seriously because they know we’re using the data,” said Langmeyer. At both Niles High and Ring Lardner Middle School, *DataDirector* is used by teachers to hold “test talks.” These five-minute conversations have proven to be very meaningful for both students and staff. “We tell each student, ‘Here’s where you’re doing well and here’s where you need to focus to improve.’” This highly focused approach has proven to be very effective.

“We’re very honest in talking to students about the results,” said Langmeyer. “Asking students to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses goes a long way toward helping them take ownership for their learning. The key is getting an accurate snapshot and *DataDirector* helps us do just that.”

“It’s nice to show a kid who perceives himself as a poor science student that he might be struggling at some parts, but not at everything,” said Langmeyer. *DataDirector* lets educators show growth as well as deficits. “When you show a student who typically gets little academic praise how much they’ve grown, the smiles on their faces are priceless.”

Improving instruction with data

Niles educators knew they needed to improve its academic achievement and embarked on a specific strategy of enhancing the quality of instruction by providing differentiated lessons based on students’ individual needs. Providing clear, accurate, timely data to everyone in the district, from administrators, to teachers, to the students themselves, is key to this strategy.

“The way you increase student achievement is to find out what each student knows and improve on it,” said Craig. “*DataDirector* is the key to unlocking what we’re trying to do.”

For more information about *DataDirector* and *Assess2Know*, visit www.riversidepublishing.com or call 800-323-9540.

RIVERSIDE

 HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT

www.riversidepublishing.com
800-323-9540

© 2011 Riverside Publishing Company. All rights reserved. *DataDirector*, *Assess2Know* and their associated logos are trademarks or registered trademarks of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Company. Other product and company names mentioned herein may be trademarks of their respective companies.