It seems like a no brainer that principals must examine student performance data on a regular basis. Common sense would also suggest that student achievement, as well as teacher accountability, can be improved only by teachers who have an explicit knowledge of their students’ abilities.

Because you can’t manage what you don’t measure, teachers must assess the results of their teaching regularly so that they can use the data to determine where their students are in relation to academic standards. They must constantly question what they expect their students to know, and they must understand what their students have learned. They must use hard as well as soft data to develop plans to address student deficiencies.

Online Assessment
The cornerstone of the student intervention model at the Pennsylvania Distance Learning Charter School is its online assessment program. When I became the CEO and principal, the school abandoned paper-and-pencil tests and opted for a Web-based assessment system. Online testing has provided flexibility, instant feedback, individualized assessment, and lower costs than traditional paper-and-pencil exams. More important, the Web-based assessments have provided an enormous amount of high-quality data for each student that are readily available to teachers and administrators. Rather than waiting several months for test results, detailed reports are usually available almost immediately after the student completes the exam. These test results provide teachers with specific information that they can use to adjust instruction and enable administrators to actively monitor student progress. I implemented this intervention model at the school after successfully using it as a principal in the West Allegheny School District in Oakdale, PA.

Because test results are available almost instantaneously, teachers can use them to influence and inform their teaching strategies for individual students. In addition, the electronic testing system creates unprecedented opportunities for integrating assessment and instruction, enabling student retesting and serving as the means to appraise student growth in ways that are totally unavailable under a traditional standardized testing scenario. This assessment system also gives the school more-flexible test scheduling and shorter administration times and increases student motivation. One other benefit of the online assessment program is the availability of companion programs that help teachers develop remedial activities for students on the basis of the students’ assessment results.

The online testing program also offers computer adaptive testing. A computer adaptive test adjusts to the ability of the test taker, taking into account how the student answers questions and adapting subsequent questions to the student’s level of understanding. Therefore, students of differing ability levels will see different sets of questions. A student who does not understand the material will mainly see relatively easy questions, and a student who understands the material very well will be exposed to relatively difficult questions. Even if both students answer the same percentage of questions correctly, the student who understands the material better will obtain a higher score because he or she answered more difficult questions correctly.

After the online assessments are administered in early fall, teachers are asked to identify low-performing students and students who may become at risk for failure. Meetings are
Using data as the basis for decision making creates a results-oriented environment that is conducive to consensus among the team members.

Intervention meetings are scheduled during the teacher’s preparation times so that there is ample time for discussion. Before the meeting, the principal reviews the student data, and the teacher’s class data is available on a laptop during the meeting. The team discusses various students who have been identified using the testing data and focuses on a number of student achievement questions, including:

- How is the class performing in terms of specific academic standards?
- What are the specific student strengths and weaknesses?
- Which students are not performing well and in what areas?
- What specific interventions has the teacher implemented so far?
- What other factors may be hampering a particular student’s success on a particular indicator, such as behavior, attention issues, or attendance?
- What progress is the class or an individual student making toward proficiency?
- What does an individual student need to do to attain proficiency?

During the meeting, the team discusses collateral issues that may hinder a particular student’s performance, such as behavior or attention issues; decides which students should be monitored; and suggests some interventions. The teacher receives a folder for each identified student in which the teacher will record interventions. The folder also contains data collection templates and specifies the information the teacher will collect on a regular basis.

Assessments are administered again at midyear or 12 weeks after the test is administered in the fall. The intervention team, equipped with fresh test data as well as the data collected by the teacher, looks at each student to determine whether he or she has made statistically significant gains since the fall assessment. The teacher also reports on the interventions that he or she has implemented. If a student has not progressed, the team suggests additional strategies.

Getting Results

The results from the first year of using the intervention model have been promising. A number of students had made significant academic gains. Many teachers initially found this process demanding and somewhat intimidating because of the increased level of accountability. Not surprisingly, students of teachers who have recognized the worth of the process, actively monitored their students, used the available resources, and implemented many of the suggested strategies have showed the most significant gains. The process can reveal some grade-level and schoolwide issues. For example, the data may expose a staff development deficiency or reveal a pattern of disruptions that is interfering with learning for a specific group of students. In addition, by identifying students early and implementing specific interventions, the process helped students make significant improvements in the scores on the state-mandated test. Several students who probably would have scored below basic or basic on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment test attained proficient-level scores on the assessment.

Although the intervention process is a data-driven system, it is also a results-oriented approach. It seems incongruous that institutions that are supposed to promote inquisitiveness and teach problem-solving and data-analysis skills would have an aversion to using data. In the minds of most educators, however, the purpose of data is to assign fault, and it is difficult to persuade educators that information is a valuable resource for making informed decisions and increasing students’ academic achievement. The prudent use of achievement data is a force for change. Used wisely and well, data permits practitioners—principals and teachers—to improve practices by uncovering problems and transforming them into opportunities for growth.