

# Data as a Barometer of Social Justice

By Dr. Tracey Severns, Director of Student Performance, Mount Olive Public Schools



**“I believe that education is the civil rights issue of our generation.** And if you care about promoting opportunity and reducing inequality, the classroom is the place to start. Great teaching is about so much more than education; it is a daily fight for social justice.”

- Secretary Arne Duncan, Oct. 9, 2009

At a recent conference in south Jersey, an attendee approached me and asked, “Are you the data lady?” I smiled. I guess I am.

For more than a decade, I have been on a mission, to help everyone, from politicians to parents and superintendents to support staff, learn how to use data. I wanted them to understand it as I did. I wanted them to “get it.” What I didn’t realize was why it meant so much to me.

Until recently. It took a while, but it finally occurred to me. Now I know why I have so much more than an intellectual interest in data. Why I get so fired up when I talk about it. So intense when I teach how to use it. Why I get so angry when others ignore it, reject it, hide it,

or hoard it. Because when it comes right down to it, data is more than an educational resource. It is a barometer of social justice.

## **Not everyone sees it that way.**

*Most* educators see data as an accountability measure — as a way for the State to condemn or condone district, school and teacher performance. *Many* see data as a compliance instrument — as a way for regulatory agencies to monitor adherence to rules and requirements. *Some* see data as

a supervisory tool — as a way for administrators to assess the effectiveness of teachers and dole out kudos or consequences. *Others* see data as an instructional resource — as a way for teachers to identify and address the needs of students. *All* of these reflect a limited understanding of the power and purpose of data.

Above all else, data is an instrument of truth. It reveals the degree to which we are fulfilling our ethical obligation to provide children equal access to a prosperous future. Data discloses the degree to which we are reaching and teaching *each and every* child — not just the willing, or the able, or the English speaking, or the ones with advocates or affluence. Data exposes whether we are teaching kids who look like that, act like *that*, live like *that*, come from *there*.

1. **What is your truth?** Grab a pen and see if you can answer these questions.
2. **What are your areas of strength?** What are you, as a school or teacher, really good at getting kids to be really good at doing (e.g. identifying text evidence, reading and writing about grade level texts, collaborating with peers)?
3. **What are your areas of weakness?** Despite your best efforts, in which areas do students continue to struggle (e.g. solving complex problems, constructing mathematical arguments, recognizing bias)?

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4. **Who is performing well?** Which students are gaining ground in relation to themselves?
5. **Who is performing poorly?** Which students are losing ground in relation to themselves?
6. **Which practices are contributing to your outcomes?** What choices are you making about programs, practices, policies and personnel that are influencing your answers to the preceding questions?

If you're like most people, you don't know. And you probably won't know the answer to these questions either.

- What happens when you assign students to certain teachers or tracks?
- Which courses, interventions or programs result in gains? For whom?
- How does the performance of students with special needs vary by program, placement or personnel?
- How is your schedule (allocation of minutes) influencing your outcomes?
- How are your boys doing? Your girls?
- Are your “basic skills” students improving?
- Are your English language learners progressing?
- Are your “best and brightest” maintaining high scores?
- Who is chronically absent? Why don't they come?
- Are gaps between subgroups widening or narrowing?

While questions like these can be used to assess how organizational and instructional decisions are affecting your students, they may leave your most important and impactful data unearthed and unaddressed.

Consider these. On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), to what degree do you agree with the following statements?

- I believe I am responsible for the success of my students.

- I believe the majority of students with special needs can achieve proficiency if given enough time and the right supports.
- I believe all students are capable of achieving grade level standards.

What if you asked these questions and found the majority of teachers, leaders, CST members, guidance counselors and support staff don't see themselves as responsible or believe proficiency is possible? How might these perceptions influence how students are taught, where and with whom they are placed, and whether they are required to learn at high levels? How might the “soft bigotry of low expectations” (McIntyre, 2008) be robbing certain students of their right to a quality education?

In the absence of honest (data-based) answers to these and other important questions, we are likely to persist and pray — doing what we've always done (regardless of effectiveness) while hoping results improve. And when they don't, we blame the kids, or the parents, or the principal, or last year's teacher, or the tests, or society or social media or any other factors that absolve us of responsibility. And the students suffer. And so does our nation.

This is why data is a social justice issue. Data reveals the reality in our schools and determines what is possible for students. Data forces us to face our truth. It shines a light on our blind spots. It illuminates the kids who are living and learning in the shadows. Data is the “BS” detector that challenges the claims of the leader. It is the evidence that supports or refutes the mission statement. It is the manifestation of our belief in the rights of each child to achieve his greatest potential.

Perhaps this is why we are so data averse. It is simply too risky to draw this information out into the light. It may reveal that graduation rates can be predicted by where we place kids in eighth grade math. It may demonstrate that affluent districts are high performing because their economically privileged majority

hides the underachievement of their educationally disadvantaged minorities. It may prove that the poor performance of classified students is due more to “dispedagogia” than disabilities. It may indicate that the performance of ELL students is affected more by limited instruction than limited English. It may show that

while we’re good at helping “low” kids rise, we’re not good at keeping “high” kids high.

To change the future, we must know the facts that shape the present. The first step is to embrace the data. We must amass the courage to ask and answer questions that bring us face to face with our “brutal facts”

(Collins, 2001). Then we must act. A genuine belief in social justice would necessitate educational activism — a relentless effort to deliberately, continuously, systematically and systemically act in ways that eradicate obstacles and ensure equitable access to equal opportunities for all children.

## References

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't*. New York: Harper Business.

McIntyre, J. (2008, September 3). The Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations. Daily Kos. Accessed at [www.dailykos.com/story/2008/09/03/584487/-The-Soft-Bigotry-of-Low-Expectations#pm](http://www.dailykos.com/story/2008/09/03/584487/-The-Soft-Bigotry-of-Low-Expectations#pm) September 3, 2008.

## About the Author



**Dr. Tracey Severns** is currently the Director of Student Performance in Mount Olive and owner of Teach4Results, a company dedicated to helping others improve student outcomes. Previously, she was a special education teacher, vice principal, principal, superintendent, adjunct professor, and the Chief Academic Officer for the New Jersey Department of Education. In 2011, she received the Middle Level Leadership Award and was New Jersey’s Visionary Principal of the Year and a National Distinguished Principal. In 2014, Dr. Severns was named Educator of the Year by the Peace Islands Institute and was awarded an honorary Doctorate in Public Service from Georgian Court University.



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