MOVING EVERY CHILD

Building a Data Culture to Promote Academic Growth

A Case Study of McKinney (Texas) Independent School District

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—Joe Miniscalco, Assistant Superintendent of Learner Support at McKinney ISD

Since 2000 the population in McKinney, Texas, has almost tripled. Remarkably, the school system has kept apace, opening a new school building almost every year. The city has now reached the point of 50% build-out, and more growth is expected. Demographers, contracted by the school district, predict that the student population of almost 25,000 will double before McKinney expansion slows.

As the population of this Dallas-Fort Worth area bedroom community has diversified in recent decades, so has the student body of McKinney ISD. Students come from neighborhoods of 19th-century Victorian homes, or 1960s-era ranch houses, or the sprawling modern mansions of the Adriatica development. The school system also serves children from seven small farming towns on the Texas blackland prairie.

AT A GLANCE: MCKINNEY INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT	
Total enrollment	25,000 (approx.)
Elementary schools	20
Middle schools	5
High schools	3
Alternative schools	4
Early Childhood Center	1
MAP implementation year	2008
Grades tested with MAP®	2–8
MAP tests used	Math, Reading, Language Usage, Science

Despite the challenges inherent in a rapidly growing school district, McKinney ISD is one of the highest performing public school systems in the nation. The graduation rate is above 97% and SAT/ACT scores are consistently above the national average. In the 2011-2012 school year, McKinney schools produced a Presidential Scholar and nine National Merit Scholarship winners. The Fine Arts program at McKinney ISD rates among the best in the state.

A guiding principle in McKinney ISD is that students from all economic backgrounds can and should reach high levels of academic achievement. To that end, McKinney ISD has built a strong district culture around the use of assessment data to make informed decisions around curriculum and instruction. In four years of using Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP®) assessments, they have expanded their use of test data to guide all levels of district planning, from individual student goal setting to norms-based national comparisons.

INTRODUCING A DATA CULTURE

McKinney ISD began their partnership with Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) in 2008 as a response to federal legislation around Response to Intervention—the requirement that districts nationally restructure the way they identify students in need. The district used MAP as a universal screener, testing all students at the start of the school year and employing the test data to identify students at risk, as well as those in need of advanced academic service—the talented and gifted. Chief Accountability Officer Geoff Sanderson, encouraged by the accuracy of the data and the immediate turnaround for test results, was

quick to recognize the potential of MAP data as a tool that could be used to work through other daunting district challenges.

"We were really trying to get out of the business of leveraging a lot of our goal setting on a summative instrument via the state assessment," Sanderson recalls, noting that the state tests were insufficient because they only indicated minimum on-grade level expectations, and did not show progress. Sanderson resolved to establish goals around MAP data instead. When he met with his board of trustees and McKinney parents to build understanding around the concept, he found that they too were enthusiastic about the positive aspects of a data culture in general, and a growth model in particular.

EMPOWERING STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

The shift to a data culture has been well-received in McKinney classrooms as well, where both teachers and students have embraced the concept of establishing and working toward data-based individual student goals. Jennifer Wilhelm, Coordinator of Elementary Science, says teachers use the MAP Student Goal Setting Worksheet to identify areas of strength and weakness, but also to engage each student in the process. Wilhelm explained, "We sit down and conference with the children one-on-one about the data. We talk about what growth looks like for that year and that grade level. This empowers students to take ownership of their learning." Sanderson adds, "When they are able to see tangible numbers, it allows them to see their progress. They understand it conceptually."

IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL STUDENT NEED

After several years of phasing in MAP, the assessments are used in McKinney ISD every fall, winter, and spring for every student in grades 2-8. The comprehensive data that resulted has quantified and clarified issues that the school administration previously could only approach with guesswork. Sanderson states, "In some cases and on some campuses, our kids are not coming to us as ready to learn as students on other campuses. And that's where the awareness has been raised." He further explains, "MAP has been pivotal for us in raising the bar for all. It's about making sure that teachers have the information they need to be able to intervene."

Joe Miniscalco, Assistant Superintendent of Learner Support, agrees, and explains, "From an alignment standpoint MAP really reinforces what we thought we knew: That the performance of our economically disadvantaged children is more of a challenge for us. MAP data identifies that need. The data helps educators focus on individual skill acquisition in the classroom." He further clarifies, "Our teachers take an urgent approach to ensuring that kids do not leave their class—I mean day-to-day—not knowing what they need to know. We are moving away from what people call *gap closures*; we are trying to get into the *gap prevention* game."

INFORMING CURRICULAR DECISIONS

Sanderson is also concerned with individual student success and, as the chief administrator overseeing 33 schools, he is interested in school-wide and district-wide performance as well. For a big picture overview, he uses NWEA normative data to ascertain if McKinney students are ahead of the national average, and whether they are growing at or above the pace of their national age cohort. He also looks at MAP reports related to building analysis and grade level analysis, with a focus on the percentage of students who meet or exceed their target RIT. In that way, he has been able to pinpoint what he calls "disconnects in the curriculum."

Whether or not the disconnect is a specific issue on a campus, or a district-wide issue, is determined with drill down analysis. For example, Wilhelm states, "If we identify low scoring in a certain goal performance area, such as Earth Science, and our MAP assessment data reflects that, then we go back to the drawing

board with our curriculum writers. We focus on the standards that are outlined in NWEA's DesCartes [learning statements] as well as our Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills [state standards], and make sure that we are designing lessons and designing work for kids that meet the performance standards."

Today McKinney ISD uses MAP assessment data for a wide range of decision-making, and always with the goal of promoting individual student growth—"moving every child," as Wilhelm says. "We may have started using MAP initially as an intervention/identification tool," she says, "but we've grown in that area. Now we use it to enrich the learning for all students."

Miniscalco explains, "The culture we have developed at McKinney is about using data to inform our instruction and enhance what we do in the classroom. We do not use data to separate or humiliate. It's not a two-by-four... it's a tool. We use MAP to inform us so that we can be better facilitators in the classroom. And that's the sign of a mature organization: We understand how to use that data." ■

HOW MCKINNEY ISD USES MAP DATA:

- **Assessing learning levels (universal screener)**
- **Detecting and adjusting for discrepancies in curriculum**
- **Projecting proficiency on state assessments**
- **Making comparisons against a national norm**
- **Informing professional development choices**
- **Guiding curriculum development**
- **Identifying students at risk**
- **Targeting flexible groupings**
- **Identifying talented and gifted students**
- **Guiding individual student goal setting**
- **Engaging parents in their child's learning**
- **Monitoring student growth trajectories**