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Prioritizing Information Use

NCS D Initial Reaction to

“The Data-Informed District: A District-Wide Evaluation of Data Use in the Natrona County School District”

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Natrona County School District #1, in Casper, Wyoming has gathered more and more data—like too many other school districts in the country, this work is rapidly growing, erratically coordinated and consists of systems of information that are systematically inaccessible. Unlike other districts, NCS D has commissioned an evaluation and recommendations for improved information use. Through an RFQ/RFP process, researchers from the University of Texas at Austin, led by Dr. Jeff Wayman, were selected to conduct a study and generate recommendations. This team studied the culture, expectations and use of data in NCS D in April and May 2007. The team finalized and submitted a report of findings and recommendations for system improvement on August 20, 2007.

Initial review of the report highlighted four key findings of importance to NCS D.

- The conditions of culture and climate in the NCS D will facilitate and support a systemic data initiative
- There is a need for clarification of focus about how data informs learning, teaching, and general district operations

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- Current infrastructure and tools are perceived as ineffective and inaccurate sources of data due to isolation, difficulty of use, lack of use and lack of access as a system
- More focused professional development around data use and access is needed for all district staff

The report also offered the following recommendations based on the findings, the existing limited research on data use in schools and expert opinion.

- Creating a district wide focus and priority on becoming a “Data-Informed District” and committing to the growth process this entails
- Purchasing and developing comprehensive, integrated systems of information management
- Initiation of a data focused district transformation built on an inclusive process of establishing data use standards and practices
- Support the ongoing district data initiative with continuous improvement planning and accountability.

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Formal response from the district as a whole was muted at first. One of the discoveries made about the district is the absence of a mechanism or resource to manage the results of external review. No formal structure or team is currently in place to receive, review, react and advise response to external recommendations like those contained in the report. This was compounded by the fact that this is not seen as a high priority by many. Having or not having such data management is not on the checklist for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), school safety, or directly connected to areas of public interest.

Very soon after the final version of the report was received, copies were sent electronically to cabinet members representing all the divisions for their review. Electronic copies were also sent to members of the working group responsible for developing the RFP for the report. A follow up session with the cabinet was scheduled shortly after to discuss the findings and request direction for next steps. This first meeting of the cabinet resulted in positive response and direction to make the report available to those initially involved in requesting the report.

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The RFP team met twice to discuss plans to disseminate the report more fully and to gather input from a group representing the classroom perspective. The report was circulated to the wider district leadership electronically. An informal focus group of teachers, tutors and instructional coaches met to brainstorm around some desired functionality of an eventual information system tool.

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The board of trustees heard a summary of the findings at a work session prior to one of their regularly scheduled meetings. Their response was largely positive. They requested the recommendations of the report begin to be implemented with the first step being a facilitated discussion regarding establishing district information standards and policy. The board plans to react to the suggestions generated by the facilitated discussion and then make a formal statement of intent regarding becoming a data-informed district.

Preliminary planning is underway to arrange a representative group facilitated discussion during the first week of December 2007. The charge for this group will be to establish a framework of information standards and outline a practical structure for implementing the initiative.

Conclusions

All response to the evaluation report has been positive. No group or individual has questioned either the need for improved information systems or the methodology and value of the report itself. It must be noted that in the larger universe of issues jockeying for priority in any school district a comprehensive information management policy, practice and system may not match the priority of AYP determination, community relationships, or budget concerns. Major external pressures are not in place demanding better information handling and use by school districts.

The district has experience with external review by state and federal agencies. While the state and federal agencies request data, evaluate progress and audit systems occasionally, these groups do not often holistically recommend initiatives or describe paths to new practice. NCSD, like many districts, does not have a specific resource tasked with managing external review and initiating and sustaining change beyond those required by statute or rule.

In conclusion, NCSD has had the detailed report on data use from Wayman et. al. for 90 days at this writing. The recommendations made in the report have now been heard by most with the authority to effect change in the system. Concrete planning to begin to enact the major recommendations is now underway. NCSD's reaction to the report, though perhaps not immediate, is now growing in scope and priority. While it is likely too soon for the effects of the recommendations to be felt, the underlying concerns for more efficient data tools remain as intense as ever. While no part of the organization is in the purchasing process, there is a high level of urgency from many quarters to make such decisions in the very near future. Yet, largely, this remains a call from individuals or small groups for a "program" or "tool" that addresses their unique needs rather than a system for management of information. Developing such a system will prove difficult and will call for collaboration in a time of increasing anxiety.

For those individuals most closely involved with the request and production of the report inside the district, guarded optimism about the potential for positive change is present. Future changes made because of the expressed internal need, the external evaluation and the report are likely to dramatically alter the way the staff, students and community of the NCSD view information use in all aspects of district practice.