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FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPALS & LEADERS IN THE K-12 EDUCATION SECTOR

Under the spotlight

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PROFILES WOMEN
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Our duty to be data-informed

Dr Selena Fisk would have never predicted that her webinar on student wellbeing earlier this year would have garnered so much interest online. But in a year like 2020, schools are increasingly seeking ways to track wellbeing data to help their students thrive. The school data coach and consultant from Aasha for Schools spoke to *LeadershipEd* about how schools can flourish under data-informed change.

BY DENIZ UZGUN

Hi Selena. How can data be used in schools to support learning?

There's a really good quote from W Edwards Deming that says without data we're just another person with an opinion. When we talk about using data in schools, it allows us to identify the kids that are flourishing, or to identify maybe the kids that we hadn't known were struggling, so that we can ideally put in some sort of intervention and step in to hopefully make their experience a little bit better and support them. It gives us the opportunity to identify kids that maybe would fly under the radar; maybe there's somebody who has experienced a lot of progress or growth in the year and looking at their data allows us to celebrate that, or they may be a student who's struggling with a particular element of writing, and by looking at their data, it allows us to think about what we can



do for that young person to help them improve. Historically schools might have done a social emotional survey or a bullying survey once a year, whereas regular wellbeing tracking allows schools to intervene at multiple points in the year.

How did you lead data-informed change as a learning analytics consultant at Brisbane Grammar School?

When COVID happened, the student wellbeing team at Brisbane Grammar identified that they needed a lot more information about how kids were travelling at home. There's 1700 boys in the school, so they were worried about kids kind of slipping through the cracks and struggling at home and the school not being able to find out. So we surveyed the kids on Microsoft Forms asking them questions like, 'How are you feeling? What's

the quality of your sleep like? How much exercise are you getting? How would you rate your productivity and learning?'

We put the survey out to kids on a Thursday morning, we would close the survey on a Friday afternoon and then by first thing Monday morning the heads of year levels would get a list of every student in their year level and a priority list. So we would rank them from the kids that have identified the 'most concerning' or the 'lowest responses', they were at the top of the list. Some year levels have 280 kids, so we needed a way of being able to say to a head of year, 'these are the students you need to contact first thing this morning'. So it was a quick turnaround, and we deliberately wanted to get that information back to heads of year as quickly as possible after the surveys closed.

Some kids at home were initially quite critical of some of the teaching methods and so the school adjusted the timetable. So the school was really conscious of wanting to know the level of engagement of the kids on their online platforms.

We then used a visualisation tool called Tableau to help provide an individualised response to the students who needed the most support.

Can the data be used to help shape the curriculum?

Yeah, absolutely. Some schools actually have a wellbeing curriculum that they're running, or student wellbeing lessons. And so the curriculum and the lessons that are delivered by teachers during those sessions can be tailored to what the data is telling you about how a particular cohort is going. There might be something that emerges from a Year 9 data set that teachers really need some quick intervention on, and so that data allows you to shape the lessons or the curriculum that's in place. But it also allows a regular maths teacher or English teacher to have a conversation and to check in with kids that are finding it tough or to talk about an issue.

Why is it important to report the findings back to students and parents?

I think it's really important for the community to know what the feedback is and how you intend to use the feedback. If we were asking kids to complete a survey every week, and they kind of just completed the survey and then it disappeared into the land of the internet and it was never to be seen again, I don't think they would have understood why we were doing it and they wouldn't have then been motivated to continue doing the surveys.

“We got into teaching to make a difference in the lives of young people, ... my work is helping people see that data can be used to support that.”

Some sceptics may argue that data ‘reduces students to numbers’. Do you agree?

It's a really common fear that I hear in schools by people who don't use a lot of quantitative data. When people talk about NAPLAN or PAP testing or anything like that, we need to know the limitations of that data, because that data doesn't assess a student's emotional intelligence, it doesn't assess their interpersonal skills or how well they collaborate with others or anything like that. So on one hand, I think there's an element of needing to know the limitations of the data and what it does and doesn't tell you, but on the other hand, I completely understand why people who maybe haven't had a lot of experience or training with data, or it's been framed to them in a really negative way, why they'd be fearful. Because nobody got into teaching to track kids and ‘reduce them to numbers’. We got into teaching to make a difference in the lives of young people, so I guess my work is helping people see that data can be used to support that. So I just think my approach to this is why not collect the information? If it means that we can potentially support one extra student or make a difference in one other kid's life then why would we not want to do that?



“Schools have to weigh up whether they want a pre-packaged product ... versus investing time and resources to build something that they do want.”

Which data visualisation tools should schools use?

There’s no one perfect solution. Everything that’s out there has pros and cons. Any of the packaged products that you buy, there are always going to be limitations to them; you won’t be able to necessarily build your own dashboard or you won’t be able to make modifications to it. Schools have to

weigh up whether they want a pre-packaged product that’s potentially a bit cheaper but will always have limitations and is maybe not changeable, versus investing time and resources to build something that they do want.

I guess my other main advice would be to build a visualisation dashboard into your school’s learning management system where you can view the wellbeing data in conjunction with the academic data. So if you want teachers to go and use the data, you want the access to the data to be as simple as possible.

DR SELENA FISK IS THE AUTHOR OF *LEADING DATA-INFORMED CHANGE IN SCHOOLS* WHICH OFFERS TEACHER TEAM LEADERS, PRINCIPALS AND ADMINISTRATORS A PRACTICAL GUIDE ON HOW TO COLLECT, ANALYSE AND USE DATA.