VIII. USING THE HSSSE AND THE MGSSE TO DRIVE IMPROVEMENT

User's Guide and Toolkit for the Surveys of Student Engagement: The High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) and the Middle Grades Survey of Student Engagement (MGSSE)

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Do you use supply-side or demand-side assessment? There are two ways to think about using the HSSSE or the MGSSE in school improvement.

In one approach, *supply-side assessment*, users study the supplied HSSSE or MGSSE results and determine areas in which the school is seen to be somehow underperforming. They then set these supplied areas as targets for improving student learning and quality of life. Changes, sometimes called "interventions," are implemented, and HSSSE or MGSSE data are consulted every year or two to check for progress on the target. When the University of Puget Sound (Washington) studied its NSSE data and discovered lower than desired results for student perceptions of experiential learning opportunities, a task force was established. The university deployed new programs and new approaches to communicating opportunities and, later, noted progress. This may be the most common and simplest way to go about the work of using measurement tools for improvement.

In a second approach, *demand-side assessment*, the HSSSE, the MGSSE, and other measurement tools are used for analyzing and solution-seeking for overarching institutional goals and objectives. In this case, schools begin with identified problems. Maybe diversity directors are inquiring about achievement gaps; maybe board members are concerned about attrition in the high school. In these cases, administrators use the appropriate data from academic achievement or enrollment to unpack whether there is a problem and then pinpoint it as specifically as possible.

For example, imagine that a particularly problematic academic achievement gap (measured by GPA) is identified among Hispanic boys in grades 10 and 11, and a particularly problematic attrition rate is discerned for girls on financial aid in grades six and seven. It is at this juncture, where there's a demand to discover more about the problem and its resolution, when the HSSSE or the MGSSE should be consulted. Compare HSSSE stats for Hispanic boys in grades 10 and 11 with those for all boys in these grades, and MGSSE stats for girls who

receive financial aid in grades six and seven with the stats for all girls in those grades. Then identify key gaps. Perhaps for the boys there's a gap in relationships with teachers; for girls, perhaps the gap is around feeling safe and free from bullying. As you follow the data, surprises may emerge. Dig into the data more closely. Conduct focus groups with students to get more information for corroboration. The HSSSE and the MGSSE have informed you on potential strategies to address the larger problem, and these surveys can be used for monitoring whether those strategies are proving effective. But the HSSSE and the MGSSE by themselves aren't the only measurements of success for your initiative. That would only be found in the greater goals themselves — a narrowed achievement gap or a reduced attrition rate.

In this second approach, educators are more closely following the advice of Kuh and his colleagues in the argument for "consequential" assessment:

> Organize assessment work to respond to high priority questions. Too often the tendency is to release reports highlighting a particular set of data — the results of this survey or that focus group. A more consequential approach is to weave together evidence from different sources that speak to the same guiding questions…. In other words, emphasize the demand side of assessment — do not just supply evidence and hope that it will trickle down to good effect.[1]

Five Strategies for Effective Use of the HSSSE-MGSSE

1. ESTABLISH ROUTINES, CYCLES, ANNUAL PROCESSES.

Effective use of the HSSSE or MGSSE will be sharply limited if it is done as a one-off, out of context, or just-because. It is far more effective to insert it into an ongoing, structured, and systematized

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1 George D. Kuh et al., "Making Assessment Matter," in *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education*, ed. George D. Kuh et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 231.

school process. Using data intentionally as part of a curriculum review committee, strategic planning cycle, or other long-standing or newly developed activity is crucial to addressing important educational goals and outcomes. In the *Data Wise* books, from Harvard's Graduate School of Education, the authors developed an eight-step cyclical process for "using assessment results to improve teaching and learning, with the most important first step being 'prepare.'" Here, teams of educators "organize for ongoing collaborative work" into committees with critical resources provided.[2]

2. USE THE HSSSE AND MGSSE FOR ACCREDITATION.

The accreditation cycle offers regular systems of review, structure, self-analysis, goal-setting, and monitoring. The HSSSE and MGSSE could be valuably exploited here.

The NAIS Commission on Accreditation has established what it calls Criterion 13. "The standards require a school to provide evidence of a thoughtful process, respectful of its mission, for the informed decision-making that draws on data (both internal and external) about student learning."[3] HSSSE and MGSSE data are excellent ways to broaden the means by which data are collected and used for student learning.

At The Lovett School, Assistant Headmaster Marsha Little says that the HSSSE was instrumental to the school's self-study process:

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2 Kathryn Parker Boudett, Elizabeth A. City, and Richard J. Murnane, eds., *Data Wise, Revised and Expanded Edition: A Step-by-Step Guide to Using Assessment Results to Improve Teaching and Learning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2013).

3 National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), "Criteria for Effective Independent School Accreditation Practices"; online at http://www.nais.org/Articles/Pages/Criteria-for-Effective-Independent-School-Accreditation.aspx.

We used the data for our "where are we now" section of the accreditation. It was useful to show here's how we're doing. And then for each goal we have for the school in student character, we carefully went from the goal to HSSSE, looking carefully to map the items most closely aligned, and use these very specific items as benchmarking for our school improvement plan.

3. INVOLVE YOUR CONSTITUENCIES.

We've already seen how important it is to broaden participation in data analysis, but it is also critical to bring everyone into the work of setting goals and determining strategies. At The American School in London Upper School, Jack Phillips tackles the areas of social engagement that the survey has indicated deserve attention. He says that he will be including students in every step of planning and implementing new techniques. A year from now, after concerted and collaborative effort, he looks forward to getting the subsequent HSSSE data, sharing them at a school assembly, and celebrating success with a surprise student party.

At Marshall School (Minnesota), when new Head Kevin Breen took the reins, he used HSSSE to set goals for improvement. He assured colleagues that the survey was widely understood and appreciated and that it would be the benchmark for progress. But then he stepped back and said to the departments that it was their task, not his, to develop and implement at least two strategies for each targeted school-wide engagement goal.

4. KEEP EQUITY CONCERNS AT THE FOREFRONT.

Schools still looking for the right handle to use with the HSSSE and MGSSE should consider equity. Most schools in NAIS (or outside of it) still have important work to do to ensure a truly equitable learning environment for all students. The HSSSE and MGSSE can be very useful in advancing this issue. One of the seven key "calls" to education leaders in the Datnow-Park book, *Data-Driven Leadership*, is "#6: Keep Equity Concerns at the Forefront."

> The data-informed leader needs to keep equity concerns at the forefront of data use efforts to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students. ... The data-informed leader must be ever attentive in order to ensure that all students are provided with opportunities to achieve at high levels in rigorous and engaging instruction.[4]

For example, when the University of North Carolina Wilmington dug into the subgroup data of its NSSE results, the data showed that students of color in certain departments were less likely to consult professors and advisers about career planning. The university moved to recruit more career advisers of color and implemented a new mentoring program for students of color in those departments, thereby closing this gap.[5]

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4 Amanda Datnow and Vicki Park, *Data-Driven Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014).

5 National Survey of Student Engagement, *Using NSSE Data to Assess and Improve Undergraduate Education: Lessons from the Field. Volume 1* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2009), 20.

5. MONITOR IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES.

After you have developed and implemented initiatives, it is essential to monitor goals using an array of data sources. Be sure to check future HSSSE or MGSSE surveys to gauge growth and improvement. In the interim, consider how you can use "pulse" surveys, observational checklists, performance rubrics, and other easily applied tools to track whether the implementation efforts are being faithfully and effectively accomplished and whether the needle is moving the way you prefer.

CASE STUDY: MARSHALL SCHOOL (MINNESOTA)

Kevin Breen recalls his delight on arriving at Marshall School as its new head in 2013. The school, which has a lot to love, also has its challenges, one of which was distinguishing itself from its public and religious competitors as a high-quality independent school.

For this purpose, Breen says, the HSSSE has been extraordinarily valuable. "I didn't want to arrive and immediately impose my own particular view of what an independent school ought to be; I didn't want to come off sounding like the school had to change to become more like the schools I was coming from."

Instead, Breen turned people's attention to the HSSSE's NAIS norms, which became a neutral and universal arbiter or standard for independent school excellence, particularly in regard to creating a student-driven culture.

> What's great about HSSSE is how clearly it conveys the value of these engagement attributes; that these are things we all want in a school — it has that face validity. It became for me personally as head, and for all of us in the school, a guide as well as a measure, and a common language and common set of benchmarks for us. It wasn't me versus anyone else; it was all of us together for the HSSSE standards and the independent school norms.

In his first year as head, Breen carefully introduced the HSSSE to his faculty and his community. He cited then NAIS President John Chubb when explaining "meaningful engagement" as the single distinguishing feature of independent school excellence. Breen said:

> I have enrolled us in this low-cost, high-return study. For just a few hundred dollars, we can join a cohort of independent schools in a longitudinal study that will measure our students' engagement and benchmark us against our peers and against national norms. As we enter

into our self-study, it is vital that we know how well we are engaging students here at Marshall.

Upon receiving his report, Breen studied the HSSSE data, grouping the school's results into three categories:

- Things we do very well on
- Things we need improvement in
- Things we do better than other schools do, but which we need to do even better

As a still-new head, he recognized the importance of celebrating the school's strengths first, displaying his appreciation of them and putting a light on bright spots for positive reinforcement. For instance, he showed how students valued the school's English teachers for the way they facilitated active, inclusive class discussion.

He articulated this in a vivid PowerPoint presentation to his faculty during the school's opening days. After underscoring the evidence for student engagement as a vehicle for learning, he pointed out particular items in the HSSSE report that he wanted faculty to focus on, including "How much does your school emphasize analyzing ideas in depth for classes?" and "How much has your experience at this school contributed to thinking critically (reasoning, asking 'why?')?"

Moving from information to action, Breen asked department chairs to work with their colleagues to accomplish these tasks:

- Select a few ideas identified in the presentation as being best opportunities for improvement.
- Set a goal to come up to NAIS norms in two years.
- Determine one or two interventions — or changes in teaching methods and curriculum — designed to advance toward this goal.

As head of school, Breen could take a slightly more hands-off approach to management. He could trust teachers to review their own practice and

to develop their own improvements, knowing that they were all on the same page in terms of their goals and how progress would be measured.

Having this clarity and commitment helped him strengthen the school's culture of experimentation and risk-taking.

> When one teacher tried to flip her class, in order to have more engaging class activities, it wasn't an immediate success. In fact, it sort of flopped at first. But because she was determined to reach that engagement goal, she didn't give up right away. Instead, she kept at it until it did work; and because parents understood the broader goal, they too were more patient.

All along, Breen's mantra has been "Let's do what we do well even better." And for many teachers, "even better" has meant more frequently and with more confidence. Breen continued, "The HSSSE definitely helps many with teacher self-confidence. Previously, teachers were assigning a monolithic position to all parents, concluding that they will all complain if we spend time on projects; they want us to prep for standardized tests."

"The HSSSE data provides teachers with an empirical defense for the projects that they want to teach," Breen said. "When the head names engagement as a top priority, the teachers know they have institutional support. In that way, the HSSSE data gives teachers permission to do what works."

Now, two years later, the school is making great strides and has become a more data-savvy environment. Breen explains:

> In our self-study, identifying strengths, challenges, goals, we're using HSSSE for many of our goals; using HSSSE data and benchmarks for framing and measuring progress. Throughout Marshall, it has become more of an ongoing conversation, talking about engagement, and using HSSSE data to set goals for our improvement efforts.