

OPINION: Guest writer

OPINION | GUEST WRITERS: Shaping Schools

Use data literacy to foster growth

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by Sarah Morris and Sarah McKenzie Special to the Democrat-Gazette
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In today's data-driven world, the power of informed decision-making is undeniable. Yet, across the United States, many school districts--particularly those not classified as "huge"--are navigating this landscape without much help.

There is this buzzing enthusiasm for supporting schools by community members volunteering for tutoring. College students, retirees, and anyone eager to help could tutor! But what if tutoring isn't your jam? What if you want to help schools without offering tutoring services? Beyond the support for schools like tutoring, there's an often-overlooked avenue for making a difference--assisting districts with data analysis.

There are many academics, philanthropists, and business people--anyone fluent with numbers or an Excel spreadsheet--capable of crunching numbers from assessment results to make data more meaningful to schools. But data analysis in educational settings is often not just about crunching numbers; it's about uncovering stories that lead to actionable insights.

Many districts, constrained by budgetary and staffing limitations, struggle to make the most of the data. Despite having the same access to student data, some schools often lack the necessary training and expertise for practical data analysis. This gap represents an untapped opportunity for meaningful support for schools.

Consider our situation in Arkansas, where we've seen the challenges and opportunities in educational data analysis. In placing a graduate student at the local Northwest Arkansas Educational Services Co-Op to partner with districts for four hours a week, we've aimed to bridge the divide between academic research and practical application. Our initiative has focused on building relationships and trust, understanding local needs, and providing tailored support to enhance data literacy and application.

Anecdotally, many schools feel that external research has been conducted on them rather than for their benefit. Our collaboration aims to change this by aligning our efforts with their needs, decreasing the divide between the "doers" in education and researchers.

This idea is not new, but the "not huge" schools frequently remain overlooked. Prestigious institutions like Harvard can position strategic data fellows in schools, but such initiatives often require financial capabilities that many schools lack. Other Research-Practice Partnerships are placed in larger cities catering primarily to urban schools, leaving smaller districts behind. Limited data literacy in non-urban areas makes it hard for schools to pinpoint reasons for success or concern.

Echoing Rick Hess' call for a shift in education research, we advocate for a move from purely scholarly research to practical applied solutions for all schools that are meaningful to them. Collaborative partnerships involving academic institutions, businesses, and philanthropies are essential in supporting districts. Such alliances, grounded in mutual respect and understanding, pave the way for a resilient, data-literate, and equitable educational landscape.

It's time for those with the skills to step up and support our districts. Academics, it's time to move beyond theory and implement your expertise for positive change. By actively working with schools, understanding their unique challenges, and leveraging our collective skills and resources, we can form meaningful partnerships that extend beyond data analysis to address the specific needs of these communities.

While we understand research has a long-standing "publish or perish" mentality, our schools don't just need another journal manuscript; they need practical solutions. Our experience has shown that even modest investments of time and expertise can improve educators' decisions, improving student learning and outcomes.

Whether through tutoring, data analysis, or other forms of school engagement, everyone can play a role in shaping the future of education. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, we can all support school districts. This is a clear call to action for those able to come together and build a resilient, data-literate, and fair education system.

Our school districts, and more importantly, our students deserve nothing less.

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