

# INTRODUCTION



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Credit Paul Houston with the topic of this volume, *Data-Enhanced Leadership*. During the planning phase of this long-running series, Paul, one of the three editors (as well as the recently retired executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, and now president of the Center for Empowered Leadership) made the point that data have enormous power to improve the quality of decisions, but *leaders* are the ones who drive decision making in schools. Data are tools for leaders.

That point of view aligns perfectly with the intent of this entire series, *The Soul of Educational Leadership*. We three editors—Paul Houston, Alan Blankstein, and I—have from the beginning conceived of this undertaking as a toolbox for enriching and sustaining the work of leaders in education. The opening volumes dwelt on some of the larger themes that leaders must attend to. Volume 1, *Engaging Every Learner*, sounded the vitally important note that every student matters deeply, to all of us in and around schools and in our society. Volume 2, *Out-of-the-Box Leadership*, called for transformative leadership, which can come only by thinking differently about the problems and challenges we face.

Succeeding volumes began delving into issues that all leaders must face sooner or later, regardless of their level and type of practice. Volumes 3 and 5, *Sustaining Learning Communities* and

*Building Sustainable Leadership Capacity*, were closely related, acknowledging in their duality the daunting challenge of creating learning communities that have the power to support enduring change. Volume 3 addressed the difficult task of holding on to, and improving upon, valuable work once it has begun. Volume 5 recognized that developing leadership capacity that is to last requires a clarity of shared moral vision and urgency, leadership in community, and a recognition of the challenges posed by young people's lives outside of school.

Volumes 4 and 6 featured two larger roles of education leaders that are often obscured by the everyday demands that clamor for any leader's attention. In Volume 6, *Leaders as Communicators and Diplomats*, a bevy of superintendents and national leaders wrote with hard-earned understanding of the role of leaders as storytellers, persuaders, conveners, and reframers—people who are skilled at uniting disparate followers in common cause. And Volume 4, *Spirituality in Educational Leadership*, went straight to the heart of the whole enterprise of leadership, acknowledging, as Paul Houston put it, that “the work we do is really more of a calling and a mission than it is a job.”

Paul also observed in Volume 4 that “These jobs of ours as educational leaders are difficult and draining. They sap our physical and moral energy. We have to find ways of replenishing the supply.” The important work of replenishing our supply is an overriding purpose of this series. From the beginning, we have aimed to provide contributions from leading thinkers and practitioners on the soul-work of educational leadership.

Now comes Volume 7 on the nitty-gritty of using data, rather than allowing data to use you. This volume is akin to lifting the hood of your car to gain a more complete understanding of how it runs, and how it can be fine-tuned to run even better. Paul Houston, leading off with “Using What You Know to Be a More Effective Leader,” aptly reminds leaders that “your work with children is more than simply checking the test scores.” Not one to overlook the crucial importance of good data to leaders, however, he continues: “Letting *anything* that is mechanical and narrow drive your leadership is a mistake. However, it would be the height of stupidity not to use every tool available to you; the availability of data and the insights it can offer will make you a better leader—it should *enhance* your leadership.”

“Educational institutions are awash with data, and much of it is not used well,” lament Lorna M. Earl and Steven Katz of Aporia Consulting in “Creating a Culture of Inquiry: Harnessing Data for Professional Learning.” Earl, a researcher and research director in school districts for over 20 years, was the first director of assessment for the Ontario Education Quality and Accountability Office; Katz is a permanent faculty member in Human Development and Applied Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of the University of Toronto. Earl and Katz encourage the cultivation of “an inquiry habit of mind,” calling data “tools that teachers and educational leaders can use to focus and challenge their thinking in ways that result in the creation and sharing of new knowledge.”

In “Using Assessment Data to Lead Teaching and Learning,” Peter W. Hill affirms that “The future lies in adopting a tri-level approach to data use that explicitly recognizes the different data needs of the system, school leaders, and classroom teachers, and places a much greater emphasis at all levels on formative uses of assessment data.” A consultant and advisor who works in the United States, Australia, and Hong Kong, he warns leaders, “The trick lies in getting the right balance at each level and ensuring the alignment of purposes and processes.”

An assistant superintendent in Waukesha, Wisconsin, Eileen Depka calls for a systemwide focus on continuous improvement, with data as its foundation, as the key to institutionalizing a data-based decision-making system that will have the power to guide districts to increased success. In “Data: Institutionalizing the Use of a Four-Letter Word,” she concludes that “connecting the dots between data reviews and continuous improvement planning provides a clear guiding purpose for the consistent use of data.”

“Too many educators seem to rely on the data generated from high-stakes standardized tests,” warns Kay Burke in “Using Data to Drive Instruction and Assessment in the Standards-Based Classroom.” Burke, an award-winning teacher, school administrator, university instructor, and author, has written or edited 16 books on standards-based learning, performance assessment, classroom management, mentoring, and portfolios. She observes that “the data provided by formative and summative classroom assessments is even more valuable” to the intertwined processes of instruction and assessment.

Douglas Otto, superintendent of the Plano (Texas) Independent School District, describes his district’s journey toward the more efficient use of data. In “Data: One District’s Journey,” he observes that

the real challenge in data-enhanced decision making is “getting the right data, to the right person, at the right time, in the right format.” In this process, he emphasizes, “the questions regarding what kinds of data are needed” are just as important as the databases themselves.

If getting the right data into the right hands is important, it would not be possible without the use of technology. In “Information and Communications Technology in Education,” Jesse Rodriguez emphasizes the importance of technology for collecting and analyzing data and assisting in accomplishing the stated goals of school systems. Rodriguez also explains how the relationship between the district superintendent and the chief information officer (CIO) of a school district is central to the district’s effectiveness in implementing and using technology. In the 20 years since he managed all administrative and instructional education information systems for the Tucson Unified School District, Rodriguez has worked extensively in these areas all around the world. “One-to-one computing, regardless of the technology used, is a desired, and desirable, outcome,” he writes; the key is “implementing an information network capable of supporting this outcome.”

During his 50-year career, Roy Forbes has served as the director of both a rural and an urban education center, director of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), advisor to a governor, and the founding director of SERVE (the Southeast’s regional education research and development laboratory). He remains active as a consultant and currently serves as part-time interim director of the Evaluation Center, College of Education, University of West Georgia. In “Some Pitfalls in the Use of Data—and How to Avoid Them,” Forbes provides commonsense guidelines to the use of data. The moral he provides is this: “Data is your friend. It exists to assist you in making decisions. But approach it carefully! If not, it may turn around and bite you.”

As Alan Blankstein wrote in the first chapter of the first volume in this series, this work of education “is not easy or simple work, yet it can be done.” And the data with which we are armed—especially the data we have amassed that allow us to know what has worked most successfully to help teachers and students—assist us in that work. All along, that has been the guiding purpose of this series: to arm and strengthen you for the challenges you face.