

Assignment #2: Data and Information

Introduction

Peter Drucker, the well-known organizational management theorist (who is sometimes referred to as the “father of systems management”), stated that “Data endowed with relevance is information”.

We will begin Assignment #2: Data and Information by examining a small but powerful database constructed by me called the School District Almanac. To use data effectively as a school administrator, there needs to be a separation between significant and insignificant data.

This can be an overwhelming task when presented with reams of school related data. These data can include test scores, demographic data, school financing, and many other seemingly unrelated factors. The real art form of school data analysis is to ability to dig below the plethora of facts and figures and “mine” the nuggets of information. The difficulty lies in getting the right information, and getting it into the right hands. In *Vital Signs* (Hughes, 2004), the question is raised, “What administration behaviors, at the district and school levels, will be necessary to create and to sustain a data-focused, data-driven decision-making climate at the classroom and school levels?” In other words; What makes a good school? What numbers do you crunch? What data gets the most press?

The School District Almanac

For the remainder of this course, we will link with an actual school district database. This statewide database, called the *School District Almanac* has received widespread recognition across New York State.

Your job is to become familiar with this database for future data analysis assignments. Review the entire website, but focus on SUFFOLK COUNTY or NASSAU COUNTY, as that will be the base for future assignments. ALL of the data in the Almanac is in ADOBE .pdf format, so you will need an Adobe reader to see and print these data. One is provided on the website, but you may go to <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html> to download a free copy for your own computer.

Examine either the SUFFOLK COUNTY or NASSAU COUNTY version of the Almanac (It is a book which has a summary of over 250 “indicators”) and then visit the specific areas where you can examine individual districts in these counties with the .pdf files you have received.

Getting Started

Action Assignment #2 has three main parts: choosing “indicators”; finding actual school district data using the Almanac; and, targeting a specific district and mining its data.

For Parts 1 AND 2 of this assignment, you need to determine what factors are important for a school district to know about their data. Good student information systems cross the line between "administrative" and "classroom." Both sides need the data collected and disseminated. This is one area of the school environment that, when done properly, forms a symbiotic relationship between administration and classrooms, where everyone learns from each other.

Students might not directly use the data as a learning tool, but a good student information system with features like websites with interactive homework assignments or an online grade book can improve student learning. Since a students' education takes place over a number of years, the range of data must also allow for longitudinal presentation over all periods of available data. Longitudinal access helps the user examine trends of schools, classrooms, and students over time.

Data (the word “data” is plural) come in many shapes and sizes. For this class we will be working through a series of action assignments, which outline a series of steps involved in building a case for a school district improvement plan. An effective way of doing this is to compare how well a district is doing in comparison to other schools. The question, again, is what do you compare yourself to? Is it a single factor that can be isolated, or is it something that needs to be looked at as a composite of many factors working together? Most importantly, has the matter changed significantly over time?

For our purposes these are the types of areas that, taken in total, give a good picture of what goes into answering the questions posed above:

- Achievement Indicators
- Budget Expenditure Indicators
- Census Indicators
- Fiscal Wealth Indicators
- Instructional Indicators
- Personnel and staffing Indicators
- Pupils with Disability Indicators
- Student Indicators

Part 1: Choose Your Indicators

I want you to begin to familiarize yourself with the *School District Almanac* and its sister reports that are in .pdf format.

Use the *School District Almanac (SDA)*, the .PDF's that accompany Action Assignment #2 (or any other web resources from the class list you developed in Assignment #1) to choose at least two kinds of data (we will begin by calling them “indicators”) within each of the areas listed below. You just need to list the actual indicators without any data at this time.

Chart 1- Determine two indicators for each area that you consider important.

	Indicator 1	Indicator 2
For Example: Achievement	ELA G4 Passing Rate	Math A Regents>65%
Achievement		
Budget		
Census Trends		
Fiscal Spending		
Instructional Support		
Personnel		
Special Needs		
Student Indicators		

Four Questions: What makes a good “indicator”? Would these “indicators” form a good report card for the district? Are there others you would have liked to add to the two indicators in each area? Are there redundancies among the areas?

Post your “Matrix” or “Table” of choices and your answers to the four questions in these 8 areas so that others may review them. Compare your choice of indicators with at least five other students and discuss why you chose these particular indicators.

Part 2: Mine Your data

Step 1: School District Almanac (SDA): Your Target District

I know that you may not be familiar with New York State, Long Island, or even Suffolk County and Nassau County. Don't worry! The data you will be looking at is much the same as data around the nation.

Once you have chosen **Data Indicators** you feel are important, look at the School District Almanac. Pick a **Target District** that does not appear to be the best in all categories. Choose a district with at least 500 students. Later you will be comparing your district to similar districts to look for similarities, and exemplars. Eventually you will be choosing a similar district that appears to be outperforming your target district. This will be referred to as you **Aspiration District**. We will look at this performance over time and in different forms. A district chosen is said to appear to be good or great, but how the data is aggregated or disaggregated can create very different opinions about how well the district is really doing.

My Target District is _____

Ok. Now that you have chosen a target district, go back to the indicators you chose for each area (chart 1) and find a similar indicator in the spreadsheets or in the School District Almanac (SDA) and fill in the charts below. **NOTE: The SDA has far more data than the spreadsheets that are provided. Use the SDA to fill in any holes in your data!**

Step 2:

Transfer the category titles then add data for your **Target District**

Chart 2

Target District	Indicator 1	Data for Target District	Indicator 2	Data for Target District
Achievement				
Budget				
Census Trends				
Enrollment				
Fiscal Spending				
Instructional Support				
Personnel				
Special Needs				
Student Indicators				

Step 3:

Write up a small, **one page profile** of your district using the descriptive data you found from the spreadsheets or the SDA. (You may want to search for additional information from both the SDA and any other Internet resources to round out your **Target District Profile.**)