



Dr. James Marín

Using Teacher Effectiveness Data to Identify and Develop Teachers' Talents

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# LEARNING FROM THE PRINCIPAL OF Ánimo Watts College Preparatory Academy

## INTRODUCTION

This case study is part of the *Supporting Principals to Use Teacher Effectiveness Measures for Talent Management Decisions* study, in which we interviewed principals and central/home office personnel in eight urban school systems to understand principals' use of teacher effectiveness measures for making talent management decisions. From our interviews, we identified four principals who stood out as visible and active users of multiple types of teacher effectiveness measures in multiple areas of talent management decisionmaking, including teacher hiring, course assignments, contract renewal/nonrenewal, and teacher support.

Two of these exceptional principals work in what we have identified as low-constraint systems—those that provide widely accessible data to principals, support and develop a culture of data use, and set clear data use expectations. One exceptional principal is from a high-constraint system, where substantial barriers to data use exist. The other exceptional principal was drawn from a medium-constraint system, which facilitates principals' data use in some ways but also includes some barriers to data use.

During November and December 2013, we made two-day visits to the schools of each of the four principals. We conducted detailed interviews with the principals about how they use data for teacher talent management decisions, how they learned to use data effectively, and their ideas for developing other principals' strategic data use skills. In addition, we conducted multiple interviews and focus groups with teachers in these principals' schools to understand their perceptions of how the principals use data for strategic talent management decisions. We also conducted interviews and focus groups with members of school leadership teams to further understand the use of and culture around data in these schools. We include links to video excerpts from these interviews throughout the case studies.

In each case study, we describe the data use and practices of one of these principals. Specifically, we aim to address four key questions:

1. Which types and sources of teacher effectiveness and other data do exceptional data users use, and how do they use these data to make decisions?
2. What types of decisions do exceptional data users make using teacher effectiveness data and other types of data?
3. What supports and barriers do they experience, and how do they overcome the barriers?
4. How did expert principals learn to use teacher effectiveness and other data effectively?

This case study examines the practices of Dr. James Marín, the principal at *Ánimo Watts College Preparatory Academy*, which is located in Watts, California, and is part of the Green Dot Public Schools charter management organization.<sup>1</sup>

## Context and Background

Green Dot Public Schools is strongly committed to ensuring that every student has an effective teacher. To this end, the organization has invested heavily in developing a multidimensional teacher evaluation system that includes classroom observation measures based on the College Ready Teaching Framework (CRTF), individual student and school-level growth percentiles measured from the state standardized test, a 360-degree stakeholder feedback survey, and student and family surveys.

*Ánimo Watts* is one of eight small schools that were created out of *Alain Leroy Locke High School* in 2008. The school is located in the city of Watts, where the median household income is \$25,000 and 40 percent of the population lives below the federal poverty line. In addition, only 20 percent of the area's residents have a high school diploma, and only 12 percent have some college experience. The school has a high percentage of African American and Hispanic students, with nearly every student eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. School demographic and achievement information are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: Ánimo Watts College Preparatory Academy, student characteristics, 2012–13**

Student demographics	
Total enrollment	525
Hispanic	72%
African American	22%
Other race	6%
Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	97%

  

Percent of students scoring proficient or advanced on California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) assessment	
Math (proficient or advanced)	41%
Algebra (proficient or advanced)	30%
English language arts (proficient or advanced)	34%

  

Four-year graduation rate	68%
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## Strategies for Success

Dr. Marín arrived at Ánimo Watts three years ago after serving for a number of years in various teaching and administrative roles in the Los Angeles Unified School District. He brought with him a strong vision for turning around the performance of the school and, as part of that vision, he routinely uses teacher effectiveness data to identify and develop the talents and capacities of his teachers. In implementing his vision and turning around his school, he has four exemplary strategies:

1. Start with the data.
2. Make reflection a tenet of school culture.
3. Empower teachers to become leaders.
4. Inspect what he expects.

## STRATEGY #1: Start With the Data

Dr. Marín was the third principal to arrive at Ánimo Watts in about as many years. Being unfamiliar with the students, teachers, and staff, he decided to start with the data. He comments:

“For me coming in as a new school leader and not knowing them, we really started with the data. We really started to look at, ‘Here’s where the school has been, this is why I think the school has been this way. Why do you think the school has been [this way]? How do you read this data? What story do you tell from this data?’ ... From that narrative we began to develop some thinking about what the data can look like in the near future. How can we grow kids? How can we grow your teaching? I’m not interested anymore about what was, what could have happened. I’m interested in what is possible now. I think teachers respected that and they began to see that I am not judging them for past performances, but we’re really building a story from this point now. Really being transparent with ourselves about where we’re at in the process—that was a big part of school transformation.”



[Click here to watch a video about starting with data.](#)

The idea of making data transparent was echoed throughout our interviews with teachers, school leaders, and home office staff. A school counselor notes, “Having been here at Ánimo Watts for the last couple of years, and seeing the transition of different principals, I would honestly say that he has been the most transparent principal, and his first go-to is always data. That’s where he starts. ... He takes his direction based on the data that is in front of us.” Throughout our interviews, Dr. Marín used phrases such as the following:

- “We’re doing this because the data ... .”
- “Our strategy for putting people in groups is \_\_\_\_\_ because the data ... .”
- “We are implementing \_\_\_\_\_ because the research says ... .”

## Spotlight on Acting on Data

While examining the results of a unit math assessment with a home office leader, Dr. Marín noticed that there were a large number of students who were not answering multiple-response problems (i.e., problems in which students must mark all the right answers). The next day, he met with the math department head and math coach to examine the results for each subject. Having done that, the group set a goal to reduce the number students who did not answer multiple-response problems on the next unit assessment. To achieve this goal, they settled on

two strategies. First, they would build multiple-response items into formative assessments to increase exposure to the question type. Second, they would observe classroom instruction to find additional opportunities to expose the students to these questions. A few days later, the math coach and department head spent time doing walkthroughs to determine how multiple-response categories might be appropriately incorporated into classroom instruction. As Dr. Marín notes, “All of this was in response to the data.”

Although Dr. Marín uses a wide array of data throughout the year, he views the CRTF observation data as the most important and examines them each day to see who has been observed and how many times a teacher has been observed. He also uses these data to target teacher, grade, and/or subject-specific supports as well as schoolwide professional development. In addition to the quantitative CRTF scores, Dr. Marín values the qualitative information that is gathered during the observation process. He says, “My assistant principals and I always debrief about what we’re seeing and feeling in the classroom, the anecdotal data that’s not really told by the numbers.”

Dr. Marín expects his department chairs to become familiar with and use the CRTF rubric in their own observations of teachers and provides them with training and opportunities to calibrate with his own observation scores. Later in this case study, we will provide a specific example of how his teacher leaders used a specific indicator from the observation rubric to drive professional development.

Importantly, Dr. Marín also expects others to start with the data. If, for example, a teacher or school leader has a new proposal or plan to change the current course of the school or teaching practice, he always asks them, “Where’s your data? Where is the evidence that supports the change?” He also provides them with the needed support to learn how to ask and answer questions with the data and research. A notable example of this is “the Principal’s Post”: his weekly Sunday night email to his staff in which he includes an article from the research literature and data that might be associated with upcoming professional development.

## STRATEGY #2: Make Reflection a Tenet of School Culture

The second strategy Dr. Marín uses is making reflection a tenet of school culture; teachers and school leaders continuously reflect upon their own practices by examining their own data, assessing their performance, and setting concrete objectives to improve. Dr. Marín and his administrative team have established specific routines and procedures for departments to undertake this type of data analysis and reflection. During biweekly department meetings, for example, the teachers look at each other’s student achievement data to see where they might be able to improve their practice, who is having success, and what to do to improve. Because many of these conversations happen at the departmental level, Dr. Marín and his administrative team are able to spend less time “looking at the data.”

In addition, the school’s Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) members describe how Dr. Marín’s clear vision of a reflective culture produced a change within the school, including an initial increase in the teacher turnover rate. One member describes the difficulty for some in making this cultural change:

“*[The school turnaround] needed to start with us turning the mirror around and really taking a very hard look at where we actually were in our teaching practice. [Taking] data that shows where we are strong, and where there are very real areas of growth, and we ... are asked inside of this own ILT group to reflect and be just as critical of one another as we are of our colleagues. And it’s those pieces that really drive, I think, the synergy that has become the community that you see here these days.*”

Another ILT member echoes this sentiment:

“*And it was hard for some people once [Dr. Marín was hired], because he has some really high expectations and a really clear vision. And if you weren't really doing that, we knew. I mean, everyone knew. It wasn't like he made it known; it was like we knew because we could see that person wasn't really meeting the vision.*”

With high rates of teacher turnover also came opportunities to hire new teachers who would thrive in the new reflective culture of the school. For example, during the candidate screening process, the home office evaluates the extent to which candidates demonstrate a growth or fixed mindset. Dr. Marín and his staff heavily consider this information when selecting candidates to bring in to perform demonstration lessons. In addition, Dr. Marín and the hiring committee use demonstration lessons with teacher candidates as an opportunity to provide feedback and gauge how open teacher candidates are to constructive feedback. Teachers who become defensive or try to explain away criticisms of practice are usually passed over for candidates who are able to receive feedback and who express a desire to improve.

## STRATEGY #3: Empower Teachers to Become Leaders

Dr. Marín has taken an intentional and distributive approach to empowering teachers to become leaders. First, he has found key instructional leaders who can be culture carriers and help lead the turnaround effort. He describes these leaders as “teachers who have a strong rapport with kids, who have a strong rapport with their colleagues, who have some sense of influence among both groups, and who carry some weight in what they say and what they do.” He has made these leaders members of his ILT.

During the summer, the ILT meets every day to read books on education and leadership, discuss teaching, clarify roles, and begin to describe ways in which they could improve. Dr. Marín describes his approach in his first year as follows:

“*The first year was really about me leading by example. It was really about me teaching them the knowledge and teaching them some of the skill sets to be a good leader. In year one it was really about me: me planning the professional developments, me facilitating the professional development, me planning the data talks and the data process that we were going to use. It was really about me bringing student work to the table and modeling all of that.*”

In his second year at *Ánimo Watts*, Dr. Marín began to transition from leading by example to co-planning and leading professional development with his ILT. That year, the expectation was that ILT members would bring in their own data—information they gathered from their departments—for the group to examine. Dr. Marín began instructing his leaders in use of the CRTF observation rubric, and the team spent portions of the ILT meetings calibrating their evaluations on particular indicators. He also encouraged them to bring their own professional readings to the group. Dr. Marín's role began to shift away from providing feedback directly to teachers and toward providing feedback to the ILT on their use of feedback.



[Click here to watch a video about the ILT's calibration process.](#)

In his third year as principal, Dr. Marín has empowered his teachers to lead professional development. He views his role now as facilitator and mentor, helping the ILT to reflect on their own work as leaders in the school. His department chairs are performing (non-evaluative) observations using the CRTF and calibrating their observation scores with curriculum specialists. Data drive the ILT's departmental meetings and instructional decisions. Another testament to the ILT's success is the fact that four of the five department heads at Ánimo Watts are professional development leads who provide subject-specific professional development to department chairs and teachers from across the Green Dot system.

As the ILT members grow in their professions, Dr. Marín is now working to ensure that the next generation of leaders is prepared to take over for those who may move into full-time system-level positions. Much of this work occurs through informal means, he explains:

“There are a couple teachers who I'm already tapping to possibly fill those shoes in the event that they leave. A lot of it is also me spending time with them. Whether that's sitting down, eating lunch with them, or inviting them just for some cup of coffee and to chat or something. Just to let them know, 'I see your work, you're doing great work, keep that up. You're growing a lot, you're growing really well. What opportunities do you see for yourself in the future here? I think that you have the potential to be a great teacher leader—what are your thoughts?' And then their future of doing that. Planting the seed is a big part.”

He is hoping that these efforts will create a sustainable system despite the high turnover rates among teachers and teacher leaders.

## STRATEGY #4: Inspect What You Expect

Another key strategy that Dr. Marín uses is holding teachers and teacher leaders accountable for meeting his expectations. Importantly, he is dedicated to providing the needed supports to help develop teachers and teacher leaders in meeting his expectations. One home office leader notes:

“[Dr. Marín has a] deep investment in ongoing professional development for himself and his team. ... He's someone who really leverages the supports that are available, so he really reaches out to ... other administrators, teams up with other people, gets them involved, pulls resources to his campus whenever he can. And we see the results. Teacher investment is very high, he has high expectations for his teachers and teacher leaders and really relies on his teacher leaders to push the message and help be cheerleaders together.”



[Click here to watch a video about investment in ongoing professional development.](#)

Throughout our interviews, Dr. Marín stressed the importance of supporting teachers to reach their own personal and professional goals. He also uses performance improvement plans as a way to develop and grow teachers, not dismiss them. He captures the process of holding teachers accountable in the phrase “inspect what you expect,” and he feels that the teacher evaluation system has provided him, his leadership team, and teachers with an important lever to do just that. Accordingly, as mentioned above, he expects his leadership team to use the observation rubric as a tool to improve practice within their respective departments, and he provides time during ILT meetings for members to calibrate on the tool and receive feedback from him.

He also expects other school committees to engage in the process of “inspecting what they expect.” For example, the Safe and Civil Committee sets a quantifiable goal each year to improve the overall behavior of students and teachers in the school. In the year prior to our study, this goal was to lower the number of behavioral referrals. Although the school met their goal, the committee was unsure whether the decrease was attributable to better behavior or to some other factor. During the summer, as they reflected on the previous year’s visits to the classrooms with the most referrals and greatest need, they noted that students were not being recognized for positive behaviors. In fact, in examining data from these visits and analyzing the ratio of positive to negative interactions, they found that teachers were having more negative than positive interactions.

With this information, they set a new goal: for there to be three positive interactions for each negative interaction in the school. Before the school year began, they reviewed the research on positive to negative interactions and described the goal. Throughout the school year, they observed every teacher in the school for ten minutes every month and scripted what they saw. They coded the scripts for positive and negative interactions and provided the teachers with feedback (both verbally and through email) from their observations. The ratio for each teacher then was added to a spreadsheet that tracked the entire school over the course of the school year and allowed them to quickly see which teachers were meeting the goal. Throughout the year, the group also provided professional development, including the use of providing specific positive feedback instead of more general positive praise, to support teachers in their efforts to meet the goal.

## Key Practices in Action

A typical schoolwide professional development session exemplifies how Dr. Marín brings together his four key strategies to use teacher effectiveness data for supporting teachers. The professional development session took place in early December 2013, but its context can be traced to the end of the prior school year, when Dr. Marín and his ILT were reviewing schoolwide data on teachers’ ratings on the CRTF. Since everything starts with the data (Strategy #1), the review of the prior year’s data identified the need to focus on one particular indicator on the CRTF—teacher questioning strategies. The ILT established improvement on this indicator as a dashboard goal—one of the overarching goals for the school during the coming school year.



[Click here to watch a video about setting dashboard goals.](#)

The importance of starting with data went beyond using data to identify the indicator of focus. The ILT (guided by Dr. Marín) also collected additional data on teacher questioning strategies, using the CRTF to observe and gauge how teachers were performing on this indicator. Prior to conducting the observations, the ILT spent several weeks calibrating their ratings on the questioning indicator on the CRTF. A summary of the data that the ILT collected was shared with the entire faculty at the start of the professional development session that we observed. In this way, the teacher professional development literally led with the data. The reliance on data and evidence continued as the session went on. After an initial presentation that included a reminder about the levels of performance on this indicator in the CRTF and a discussion of effective questioning strategies, each teacher was given the evidence that the ILT collected on his or her questioning strategies. With their own data in their hands, teachers had opportunities to reflect, brainstorm specific changes they could make, and discuss their ideas with a small group of their colleagues.

This professional development opportunity also exemplifies Strategy #3—to empower teacher leaders. Teacher leaders on the ILT designed and led the session; although Dr. Marín provided guidance and support in the planning phase, neither he nor his assistant principals had any direct role in the execution of the professional development session. The teacher leaders cite the critical role Dr. Marín plays in empowering teachers to display this leadership. After one ILT member said it was “mind-blowing” when Dr. Marín told the staff three years ago that he wanted them to be leading professional development, a newer teacher responded:

“ So this is interesting for me to hear, because this is my second year here, so I didn’t see what this would look like prior to Dr. Marín taking over or becoming principal of the school. And so it’s interesting to think that we’re already this organized, I should say, in three years. So the fact that three years ago this was mind-blowing like, ‘Wait, what do you mean? We’re supposed to be leading these [professional development sessions]?’ And now we’re being complimented on, ‘Look what an amazing job you did leading this [professional development].’ I think that to have done that in three years speaks a lot to the role of leadership at the school site. ”

Several features of the professional development session illustrate the culture of reflection that Dr. Marín has created in the school (Strategy #2). First, the session provided teachers time to examine and reflect on their own practice. This reflection time occurred both individually and in small groups. Second, teachers completed exit slips to provide the ILT with immediate feedback on the professional development session. These exit slips were reviewed by an ILT member who has been tasked with overseeing the collection of feedback data and summarizing the feedback at a team debriefing meeting immediately after the session. Finally, this debriefing meeting also exemplifies the importance the principal places on reflection. By scheduling a debriefing after each professional development, Dr. Marín encourages the ILT to reflect on the successes, challenges, and lessons for the next time. In fact, Dr. Marín insisted that the debriefing occur despite some unique scheduling difficulties present on this particular day. In this way, he emphasized the importance of reflective time even in the face of competing time demands.

Finally, the professional development session ended by notifying teachers about next steps in monitoring the questioning strategies dashboard goal. The ILT was developing a plan to repeat their observations of teachers to report on progress on this indicator over the year. Thus, the ILT, with the principal’s guidance, was demonstrating Strategy #4—inspect what you expect.

In sum, this single event at Ánimo Watts illustrates how Dr. Marín has infused his approach to data use throughout the school—into the ILT, the teaching staff, and the entire school culture—to enact his vision of school improvement and success.

For more information and additional reports from this study, please see [www.principaldatause.org](http://www.principaldatause.org) or contact [marisa.cannata@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:marisa.cannata@vanderbilt.edu).

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## Endnotes

1 Since the time of our study, Dr. Marín has left Ánimo Watts College Preparatory Academy.