

‘The Data Made Me Do It’

School leaders are taking a page from Billy Beane and ‘Moneyball’ by using data to identify their district’s greatest needs and targeting resources where they will have the most benefit

Last summer’s blockbuster film “Moneyball” accomplished the improbable: It filled movie theaters with famously math-phobic Americans who were nonetheless willing to spend two plus hours with statistics. OK, so the combination of Brad Pitt and a good baseball yarn didn’t hurt, either. But ultimately, this is a movie about using research and data to reach goals.

As such, “Moneyball” has attracted a lot of comparisons with how we should run various institutions, including our public schools. This in turn has unleashed the predictable “why public schools aren’t baseball” backlash. And as a former English major, I understand the dangers of metaphors that no longer make sense. But I still would argue the film offers

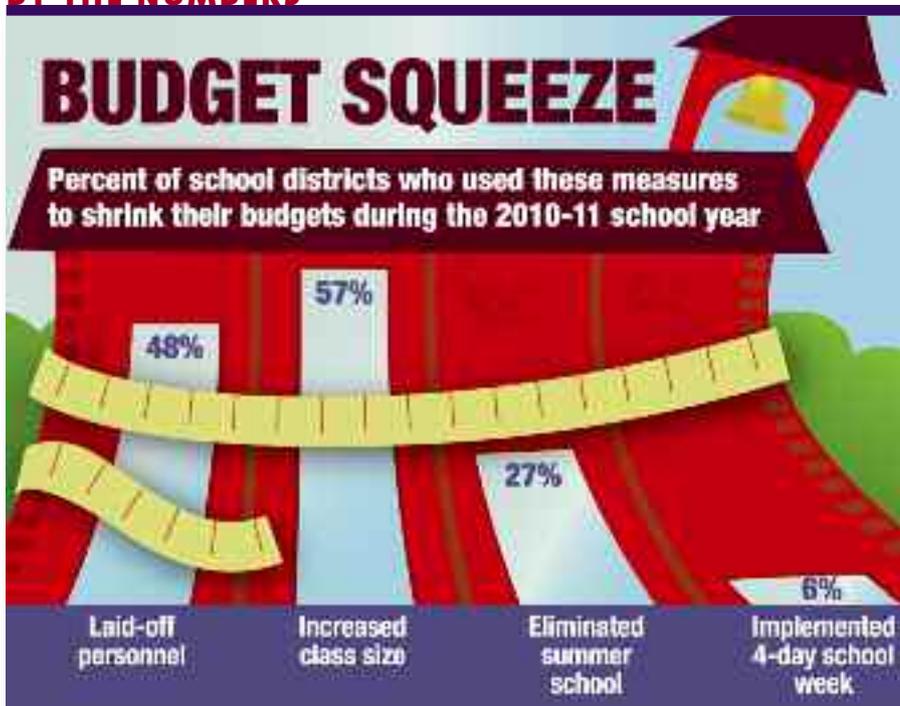
some hard lessons schools would do well to heed, especially as they are being called upon to do more with shrinking dollars.

For readers who may be unaware of the film’s premise, “Moneyball” follows general manager Billy Beane, who has the thankless task of fielding a major league team on a quarter of what the mega-funded Yankees spend on players. Beane defies his staff and throws out conventional baseball wisdom—one based on big bats and intuition—to instead take an analytical approach to recruiting unknown, inexpensive players who can get on base and thereby win games. I give nothing away to report that he succeeds.

School leaders are up against an even greater challenge. Never having been flush with cash to begin with, school districts have taken a brutal hit in the recession, and conservative projections don’t expect them to return to 2008 levels for at least five years. At the same time, a real urgency exists to educate all students to even higher standards so that they will be ready to succeed in college and good jobs, and so the nation can remain competitive.

Effective school leaders are taking a page from the Beane book of leading through analysis to closely examine how their resources are currently being used, identify where the need is greatest, and target those resources to where they will produce the greatest return on investment. Data can highlight the right questions to ask and lead schools to the right answers. But make no mistake: This does not mean the answers will necessarily be easy

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or popular. And the politics can get sticky.

Class size is one such issue. Teachers and parents really like the idea of smaller classes because they feel more personal and caring. Yet the price tag attached to reducing class size, even by just one seat, can be huge, especially in a large district. Conversely, increasing class size can produce tremendous savings. For this reason, school districts across the country have been looking at the number of seats allowed in their classrooms as one way to help balance the books.

Return on investment is not measured in dollars when you're talking about schools, but in student achievement. And here education research is clear: Small classes benefit certain populations of students in the early grades, specifically low-income and minority children. But lower class size for everyone else appears to have little or no effect on student learning.

Parents aren't easily persuaded, however. Recently the politics of small classrooms played out with a vengeance in Virginia's Fairfax County. There, the school leadership instituted a research-based policy that lowers class size in high-poverty schools to under 20 as one of its strategies to close the achievement gap between low- and higher-income students.

Because the Fairfax budget, like school budgets everywhere, is pinched, the move necessitated raising the classroom limit in low-poverty elementary schools. Let's just say that parents in the affluent neighborhoods did not universally embrace the policy, and it became a major issue in the most recent school board election.

Clearly, no one wants one group's progress to come at the expense of another's. Any new policy demands a close watch to make sure that it is in fact producing the intended results. In this case, the district will want to see the performance of students in high-

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poverty schools accelerate while their peers in other schools continue to progress as well.

The Fairfax data is encouraging. Achievement gaps between black and Hispanic students and their white and Asian peers have narrowed over the last few years, particularly in mathematics. Third-graders in the county—the grade level most likely to be affected by the class size policy—likewise posted gains. Since 2008-09, passing rates for black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged third-graders improved by an impressive 11 to 12 percentage points.

White and Asian students also improved their math pass rates by 3 and 4 points, respectively. In addition, the percentage of white and Asian third-graders performing at the “advanced” level increased in both math and reading, including those in the three elementary schools in affluent McLean, where class sizes were reported to have risen to the high 20s. “Advanced” rates in one McLean school went from 38 to 66 percent (with an overall pass rate of 99 percent).

One data snapshot, of course, is not enough to pronounce the class size policy an unqualified success for either the high- or low-poverty schools. That requires a deeper look

at every grade level, every group of students, and every affected school. It's also possible other factors are in play. But the data does suggest that concerns about the policy in Fairfax's affluent neighborhoods may be misplaced.

At one point in “Moneyball,” Billy Beane admits that his one big mistake was that he did not bring the A's manager into his new way of thinking at the beginning. Because of this failure, the manager initially fought Beane's data-driven approach, losing several early season games the team might have otherwise won.

School leaders have a tough job right now. Districts are broke. Many boards and superintendents are having to make decisions when there are no good choices, only “less bad” ones. And some of these decisions are likely to be unpopular. But making the hard choice is just the first step. School leaders also need to communicate these decisions to their communities and assure them that the learning of all students is their utmost priority.

We have a saying at the Center for Public Education: The data made me do it. It won't make decisions easier. But it does enable school leaders to justify them. Ideally, an informed public then will understand and be supportive. When everyone is committed to the game plan, the return is bound to be better outcomes for our students. Or so the data says. ■

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