The TAP IT Approach
DATA—*Informed Decision Making*

BOUNDLESS LEARNING

The TAP IT Approach to Improving Results for Struggling Students

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Increasingly, educators are being offered data that go beyond student test scores. They are gaining access to other student data—such as attendance, disciplinary transgressions, academic variables, and school mobility, to name a few—that help inform their decisions about which students could benefit from additional support and what that support might look like. They also are gaining access to other types of data, such as teacher and financial information that can help inform their decisions about where to focus program improvement efforts. Many of these data are longitudinal, allowing educators to track progress and results over time.

When presented in a practical way, multiple types of longitudinal data enhance educators' ability not only to consider student achievement, or lack thereof, but also to look deeper into the possible causes of student problems. Longitudinal data can help educators identify which curricular and intervention programs are working for which students or groups of students and which ones are not.

However, while educators may be open to looking at multiple data sources, it is impractical to expect them to sort through massive amounts of data to identify pertinent information that can be analyzed and subsequently used to inform decision making. Data must be current, user friendly, and relevant to issues they believe are important.

Planned use of data is a characteristic of high-performing schools. Yet, educators often lament that they are on data overload—that they literally are swimming in too much data. What if there was a process to streamline data use? And, what if this process was easy to use and resulted in more efficient and effective approaches to helping struggling students?

The Boundless Learning program at Johns Hopkins University's Center for Technology in Education developed the **TAP IT** data-informed decision-making approach to address these needs and issues in the context of helping educators improve results for students, including students with disabilities, who are struggling academically and/or behaviorally.

The foundation for the **TAP IT** approach is built on a strong literature base that reflects effective elements and processes that can help guide educators in using longitudinal data to inform decision making (Mainzer & Stein, 2013). Read on to learn more about the **TAP IT** approach.

Planning for the Use of Data

Have a Process in Place

It goes without saying that most well-functioning teams have a process in place that members adhere to and follow. In general, group problem solving usually entails some variation of the following steps: organizing the team, identifying the problem, reviewing information about the problem, generating solutions to the problem, developing an implementation plan to put solutions into action, monitoring implementation, evaluating results, and planning next steps.
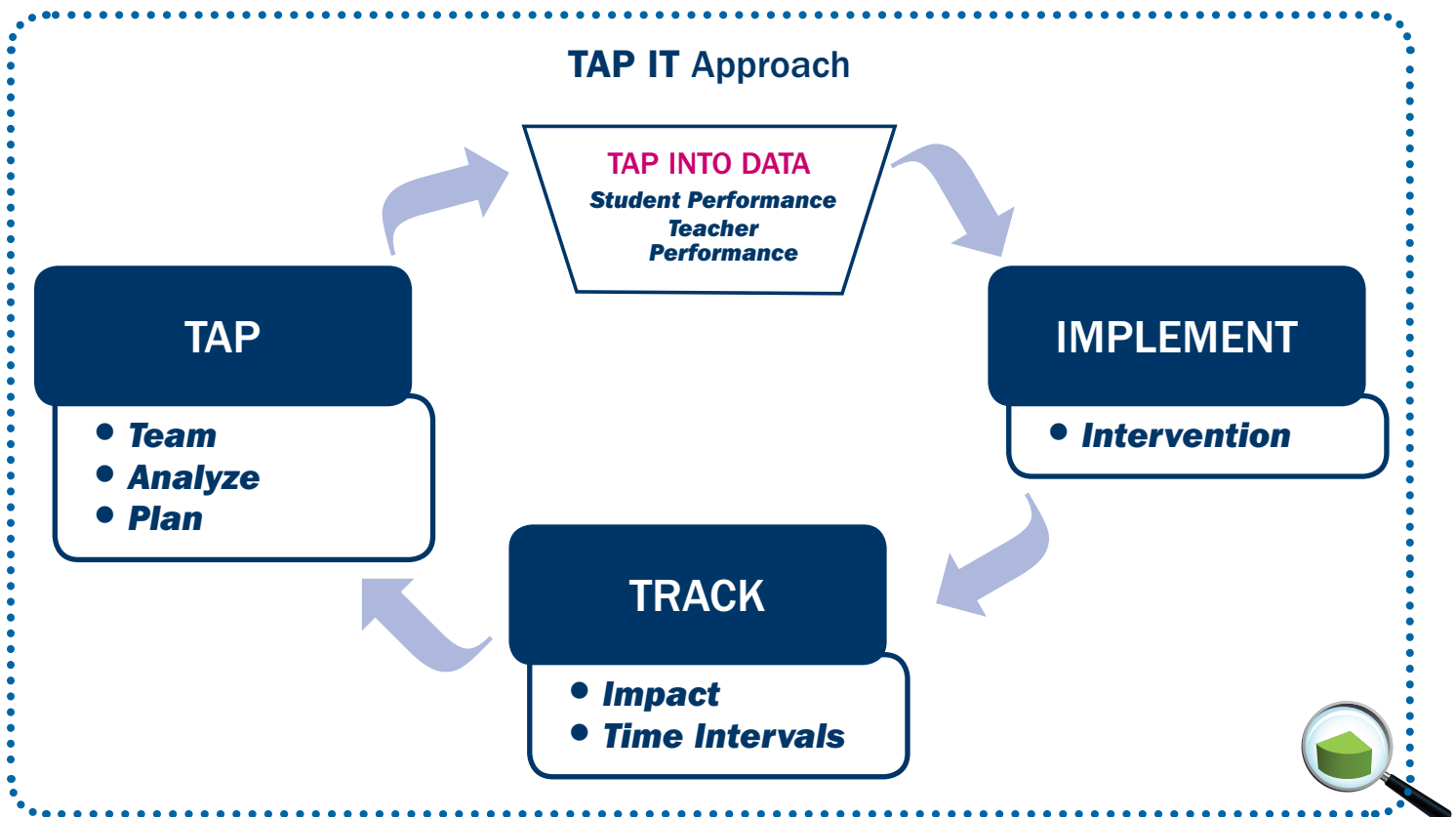
When problem solving about students, team members often will consider data at different steps. In some cases, they may plan explicitly to consider specific data; in other cases, data use may be less formal. For example, they may decide to look at student scores on a unit test to determine which students need assistance. After identifying those students, they may decide to review students' class assignments, behavioral self-monitoring charts, attendance records, grades, or other artifacts to help them understand the nature of the problem.

The literature suggests that, in addition to following a solid problem-solving model, certain process elements can be added that enhance a group's use of longitudinal data to inform their decisions.

Enhance Team Performance with Process Features

There are several elements or features that can enhance team members' use of data. Examples, which are not all inclusive, follow.

- Existence of an explicit agreement to look at individual student data and group data as appropriate to solve academic and/or behavioral problems. Team members believe that reviewing data can be a valuable process that contributes to student success. The planned use of data right from the start may help increase the team's potential for success by ensuring that the most relevant data are considered at appropriate times and used to further inform decision making.

- Use of a protocol for collaboration. The protocol has built-in steps that prompt team members to consider the data. Having a problem-solving process in place that intentionally prompts the use of data helps ensure that team members structure their time efficiently and focus on relevant aspects of the decisions that data can effectively inform.

- Identification of longitudinal data that are targeted to the specific issue under discussion. Team members know what data they will review and analyze, so they can familiarize themselves with how the data might help inform the pres-

TAP IT Approach

TAP INTO DATA
Student Performance
Teacher
Performance

TAP
- *Team*
- *Analyze*
- *Plan*

IMPLEMENT
- *Intervention*

TRACK
- *Impact*
- *Time Intervals*

ent decision. Looking at predetermined data also can help team members consider issues and solutions over time.

- Availability of multiple sources of data that are timely and relevant to the issue. Important decisions are rarely made based upon one data point.
- Presentation of data in formats that are easy to understand and use.
- Availability of effective strategies and/or evidence-based interventions that can address identified student needs and goals.

When integrated into a problem-solving approach, these features can enhance a team's use of data. These features are an integral part of the **TAP IT** approach.

Understanding the **TAP IT** Approach

One of the most common uses of data is to identify struggling students and to develop tailored interventions to improve their performance. The **TAP IT** approach was developed initially for use by educators at the school level and at the content area/grade level to do just that. It can be adapted for use in any team setting in which the focus is on improving student progress.

In the **TAP IT** approach, a team analyzes student and teacher data to plan an intervention for a student (i.e., they tap into data), implements the intervention, and then tracks its impact (for a visual model, see the text box, **TAP IT** Approach).

Here is how the **TAP IT** process might look when used by a school-based leadership team. The team focus is on identifying struggling students (i.e., those students who are at risk for not achieving benchmarks in reading and math), including students with disabilities.

Team. The school-based leadership team performs a number of actions related to the team's inner workings (e.g., select and confirm members; identify team purpose, goals, and operating standards; determine team roles; create a meeting schedule; identify sources of relevant data; etc.).

Analyze. The team studies the data—provided by the district's data warehouse—to better understand student needs and challenges. Team members examine summary reports that offer longitudinal information about each student (e.g., assessment scores, benchmark standings, grades, etc.). They also have access to early warning alert system reports that focus on the targeted areas for school improvement—mobility, attendance, discipline/suspension, and academics. These reports provide time-sensitive information about students who are at risk in one or more of these areas.

Plan. Based on their analysis, team members identify the individual students they will target for further study and inter-

> **"**Using a systematic process to examine data at several levels within a school results in more effective decision making. By using an approach that empowers all stakeholders to participate in identification of issues and the problem solving that follows as a result of pertinent findings, there is an increased efficiency in meeting student needs and improving instructional delivery.**"**
>
> —High School Principal

vention. They review a list of interventions that are available schoolwide. In addition, team members examine the Boundless Learning Student Compass: Procedural Facilitator tool that assists them in selecting accommodations and interventions for individual students. The final action involves designing the intervention and implementation plan.

Implement. Team members implement the plan. This includes designating school staff to carry out the intervention(s); making necessary adjustments to student schedules, staffing, and/or programs; establishing a monthly meeting schedule to discuss progress; and assigning a point person to monitor each alert area and the performance of targeted students.

Track. Team members meet monthly. They receive updates and status report alerts from the point person assigned to monitor each student and modify interventions as needed (e.g., based on fidelity of intervention implementation, student performance, etc.). Team members also provide grade/content teams with monthly intervention progress reports.

See the text box, **TAP IT**: A Grade Level/Content Team Vignette, for a look at how grade level/content teams might use the **TAP IT** process to examine student performance data and revise student plans, programs, staffing, and ongoing interventions as needed.

TAP IT—A Look to the Future

The **TAP IT** approach has been implemented successfully in districts, primarily at the building level. However, the approach can be tailored to districtwide initiatives whenever there is a need for teams of educators and stakeholders to use data to inform their decisions. Because the **TAP IT** approach is

grounded in the literature on best practice, it offers a viable option for supporting educators in improving results for struggling students.

In addition, the **TAP IT** approach embeds the use of early warning alert systems—a relatively new innovation that is made possible by state and district data warehouses (Stein & Mainzer, 2013). Early warning reports show promise in helping educators use data to identify struggling students and to provide alerts when any of those students show increased vulnerability.

TAP IT offers a decision-making process that streamlines the use of data.

References

Mainzer, K. L., & Stein, S. (2013). *Boundless Learning Foundations: A review of the literature on data-informed decision making*. Reston, VA: Exceptional Innovations, Inc.

Stein, S., & Mainzer, K. L. (2013). *Using early warning systems with the TAP IT approach*. Columbia, MD: Johns Hopkins University, Center for Technology in Education.

TAP IT: A Grade Level/Content Team Vignette

For students who have been identified as requiring additional support and/or interventions, the grade level/content team will review relevant data and make decisions about implementation. The following shows how the **TAP IT** process supports them in their work.

- **Team**. The grade level/content team performs a number of actions related to the team's inner workings (e.g., select and confirm members; identify team purpose, goals, and operating standards; determine team roles; create a routine meeting schedule (e.g., weekly); identify sources of relevant data; etc.).

- **Analyze**. The team examines and analyzes relevant data sets, including academic achievement (e.g., state assessments, district

benchmark data, Individualized Education Program goals and progress, etc.) performance (e.g., attendance, progress on functional behavioral plans, suspensions, etc.); and support services and accommodation plans. They also review any intervention progress reports provided by the school-based leadership team.

- **Plan**. Team members identify the data they will collect as indicators of progress. They review a list of interventions that are available schoolwide and examine the Boundless Learning Student Compass: Procedural Facilitator tool to determine the specific instructional and/or behavioral strategies that they will implement to support the student's identified needs and/

or assigned interventions. In addition, they determine which team members will implement the intervention or strategy. They also determine the protocol and tool that will be used to report progress and impact.

- **Implement**. Designated team members use the identified interventions and strategies with students. They collect and enter progress data into the data monitoring tool.

- **Track**. Team members review progress data reports. They determine the impact of the intervention and/or strategy on the student and adjust implementation plans as needed. The results of their work are shared with the school leadership team.

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