



FOREWORD

There is a question I get asked often when I speak with educators about collective teacher efficacy: How do we make it real?

The research is compelling. When educators share the belief that, together, they can positively influence student outcomes, remarkable things happen. But knowing that collective efficacy matters and knowing how to cultivate it are two very different challenges. The gap between research and practice remains one of the most persistent struggles in education.

Jessica Lane's book helps close that gap.

What struck me most as I read this manuscript is how deeply Jessica understands that collective efficacy cannot be mandated or installed. It must be experienced. Teachers don't come to believe in their collective impact because someone told them to. They come to believe it because they've lived it, because they've seen their shared efforts lead to real results for the students in front of them.

This is precisely where data enters the conversation, and where so many schools have gone wrong.

For too many educators, data has become synonymous with judgment, surveillance, and compliance (these are the enemies of efficacy that Tommy

Thompson, Glenn Forbes, and I discuss). It arrives too late, sits in binders untouched, or gets wielded as a weapon in evaluation meetings. Under those conditions, data doesn't build efficacy—it erodes it. Teachers retreat into isolation. Trust fractures. The shared belief that “we can make a difference together” never has a chance to take root.

Jessica offers a different path. She shows what happens when schools shift from data-driven to data-informed, people-centered practice. The distinction matters enormously. Data-driven systems often position numbers as the authority, with people expected to follow wherever the metrics lead. Data-informed practice, by contrast, treats data as one input among many—valuable for sparking questions and revealing patterns, but always interpreted through the professional judgment of the educators who know their students best.

Throughout this book, you'll find a consistent thread: culture comes first. Before the dashboards, before the protocols, before any cycle of inquiry, there must be trust. There must be psychological safety. There must be a shared commitment to using information in the service of growth rather than blame. Jessica doesn't just assert this—she shows how it plays out in real schools, with real teachers, navigating real complexity.

I was particularly struck by her attention to what she calls “tiny data”—the small, immediate signals that teachers can act on right now. Exit tickets sorted into three piles. Quick checks for understanding that reshape tomorrow's lesson. These don't require expensive platforms or elaborate training. But they create rapid feedback loops where teachers can see the connection between their actions and student progress. And that visibility is exactly what builds efficacy. When educators experience success, when they see evidence that what they're doing is working, confidence grows. Curiosity replaces fear, and the cycle gains momentum.

This book arrives at an important moment. Schools are still recovering from years of disruption. Teachers are exhausted. Many have left the profession entirely, and those who remain are shouldering heavier loads than ever before. The last thing educators need is another initiative that adds to their plates without lightening their burden.

What they need, what Jessica provides, is a way to make the work they're already doing more visible, more connected, and more effective. Not more. Better.

The schools that will thrive in the years ahead are the ones that figure out how to rebuild trust, strengthen collaboration, and help educators believe again in their collective capacity to make a difference. That belief isn't wishful thinking. It's the most powerful force we have for improving student outcomes. And it grows when people experience success together.

Jessica Lane has written a practical, human-centered guide for making that happen. I'm grateful she asked me to introduce it to you.

—Dr. Jenni Donohoo

Educational Consultant, Best-Selling Author, and Researcher



INTRODUCTION

SETTING THE STAGE FOR CHANGE

Let's start with the truth. Teachers don't need more data. They need clarity and support. What matters is making tomorrow easier without adding another thing to their already ridiculous mental load.

A lot of my passion for data-informed change comes from moments that felt ordinary at the time but later became hard-to-ignore signs about where my work was heading. One of the earliest was a data meeting where we sat around a table with diagnostic packets that looked way too official. We highlighted our top seven and circled our bottom seven. We nodded like responsible adults and then returned to our classrooms with absolutely no plan for what to do next. The nodding was very convincing, though.

I placed that packet neatly on my desk, convinced I would make sense of it soon. Instead, it gathered a thin, judgmental layer of dust while I taught, coached, and kept up with the year's pace. Finding it months later told me everything I needed to know. I hadn't lacked effort. I'd lacked a reason to use it. The dust had more answers than the packet did.

A couple of years later, I stumbled into a moment that reshaped how I viewed data entirely. My most valuable insights came not from a dashboard

but from a stack of exit tickets and a finger-sorting routine powered by habit and caffeine (mostly caffeine, if we're being honest). Students handed me half-sheet snapshots of learning, and I sorted them into three piles between my fingers without much ceremony. One pile meant understanding, one meant a quick check-in, and one meant a full reteach. By the time the stack disappeared, I had small groups ready for the next day and a spark of clarity that no platform had ever given me.

Exit tickets fit into the rhythm of teaching because they didn't ask for anything extra, and they worked almost immediately. The routine worked because it was simple and honest. As those tiny routines grew, so did my role, and at a small legal-themed charter school in Chicago, I was still in the classroom while also coaching and helping colleagues make sense of data in ways that actually fit the chaos of real instruction. That was the first place where I saw how small, human-centered habits create clarity long before any system does.

Stepping into an instructional coaching role in a large district made the contrast from my classroom experience impossible to miss. Teachers practically recoiled at the word "data," reacting the same way I do to crosswords. A very firm, very honest nope. Years of overload and judgment had created a collective flinch. Scattered tools made it worse, and brilliant educators pushed back because the process never cared about them.

Even then, I was supporting teachers with data, but North College Hill was where I stepped into my first true data-coaching role. That change required a completely different kind of clarity. The data made sense, but the experiences teachers carried into those rooms, what they feared, what they were tired of, what they hoped for, required a level of trust and simplicity that no dashboard alone could create. A spreadsheet has never once made someone feel seen. Worth remembering. I kept thinking about those tiny routines that once gave me clarity in seconds and how badly teachers needed something that felt just as human and just as manageable.

Everything I saw, the overwhelm, the silence in meetings, the tiny wins hidden in stacks of paper, pushed me toward the same truth. Educators don't need more data. They need the same thing I said at the start: clarity and support. That was the headspace I was in when NCH became a defining chapter of my work.

NCH is a small, urban neighborhood walking district with just over 1,300 students and a mobility rate of 16.6 percent. The report card had

shown little growth for several years, and the district felt that reality in an honest, human way. I started as the data coach for the secondary schools, armed with a love for clarity and a growing belief that data didn't have to feel like a monster hiding under the bed. Later, as district data coordinator, I had a front-row seat to the systems and habits of a community working hard to support its students. The hopes they carried into that work were just as present.

My mission sharpened quickly. I wanted to make data easier because the people doing the work deserved tools that matched their commitment without draining their energy. That felt obvious to me. It turned out to be less obvious to the systems around them. My time at NCH, and in every school before it, revealed a pattern too familiar to ignore. Educators who were piecing together student stories from scattered platforms and wishing the process felt more human. Those experiences shaped my belief that data should guide without overwhelming and clarify without creating chaos. Data empowers people when it supports them rather than exposing them. I wrote this book because the field keeps repeating patterns that leave teachers tired and confused. And because someone had to say it out loud.

Support changes everything, making it feel safe to ask questions out loud and not risky. Connection grows alongside support, pulling teams out of isolation and helping people see the whole student, not just the version that appears in a single class period or a single column of a spreadsheet. Clarity removes the guesswork, and a clean visual or a simple routine lets people stop overthinking and start deciding. Compassion shows up when we remember that every number belongs to a real student we actually know.

Progress shows up when small wins start stacking. A team that sees results that feel real and grounded in actual classrooms, and not the polished version of school that only appears in brochures, builds trust and confidence right along with it. The culture moves forward.

Finishing this book should leave you with a sense of clarity and confidence that feels grounding. You'll learn to focus on the right data and build routines that fit naturally into the chaos of a school day. You'll gain a shared language for collaboration and a clear understanding of how data culture shapes the way a building functions.

My hope is that this book eases you in by starting with realities you already know well. The story of NCH Elementary School, a school that climbed out of improvement status by leaning on steady, human-centered

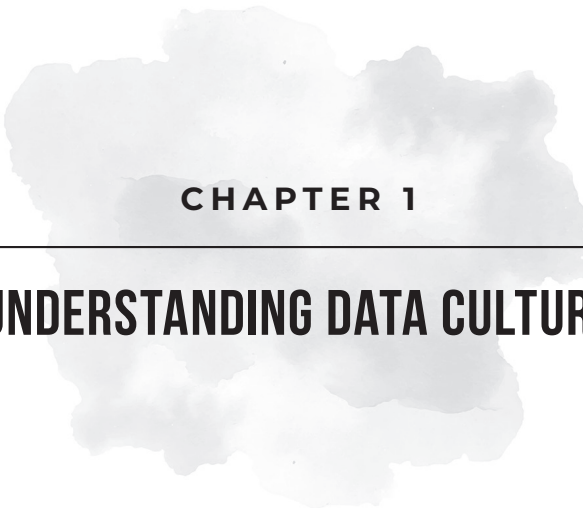
practices, runs through these pages as a reminder that the people doing the work matter most. Personal connection comes first because transformation fizzles quickly when people do not see themselves in the process. Small wins in individual classrooms spark a natural spread across a building. Confidence grows as teachers feel supported and free from the pressure to perform miracles before lunch.

Pause and reflect on your own experiences as you begin. Think about what feels heavy, where tiny wins have appeared, or what assumptions you carry after years of mixed messages about data. You probably have more of those than you realize. Consider what you need to feel supported and ready to try something new.

The data here supports you, and it has no interest in adding to the long list of things already stealing your planning time. Small, clear routines help you see your students more fully and make decisions that matter within the reality of a busy classroom.

Clarity comes from noticing the small things and deciding they matter, and that is exactly what this book will help you do.

Take one small step: choose a tiny piece of data and use it to shape tomorrow's instruction. A simple move like that builds confidence and creates traction that feels natural instead of forced. Walking alongside you in this work is an honor, and the ideas ahead are meant to bring clarity back to classrooms without adding extra stress or extra coffee-fueled hours. Although if you do have coffee, that's completely fine too.



CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING DATA CULTURE

The word “data” doesn’t typically spark joy in a room full of teachers, and that reaction says a ton about how data has shown up in schools over the years. Teachers have learned to associate it with clunky spreadsheets, awkward meetings, and that one administrator who really loved a pie chart, and they know the sinking feeling of explaining numbers that only tell half the story. More often than not, data feels like something done to them instead of something built for them. Frustration builds, people stop engaging, and suddenly everyone’s very interested in checking their phone.

Weak data cultures hide in noise. Strong ones create clarity. The difference shows up fast once you know what to look for.

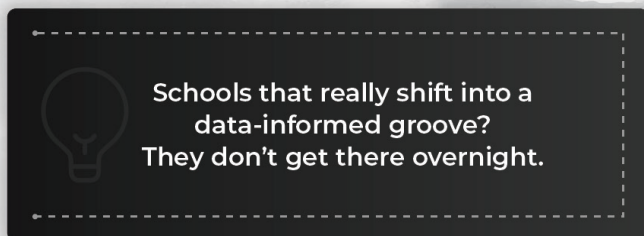
Table 1.1 captures the key differences between a weak and a strong data culture at a glance.

When data culture is <i>weak</i>	When data culture is <i>strong</i>
Teachers work in isolation	Teams talk openly about student progress
Data is used to evaluate	Data is used to support + clarify
Tools feel confusing	Tools feel intuitive and useful
Staff avoids data meetings	Staff leads the conversations

Table 1.1. Characteristics of Weak vs. Strong Data Cultures

The resistance you sometimes feel around data doesn't come from laziness. It comes from years of seeing data used in ways that feel disconnected, cold, or just plain unfair.

Data culture builds on trust and collaboration, on the use of data in ways that support teaching and learning. Compliance, pressure, and paperwork can ruin it all.



They start small, build only after trust is in place, and stall every time they skip that step. In a school with a strong data culture, teachers want to use data because it helps them do their job better. Leaders see the full picture of teaching and learning, and they treat data like just one of many tools in the toolbox.

Once schools understand data culture, the way data shows up day to day starts to change. Teachers use information to make real decisions. Done right, data helps teachers make stronger choices for their students without piling on more stress.

Things get messy when schools skip culture and jump straight into systems. Teachers get frustrated, and kids miss out. Without clear, trust-based routines, schools misread the data and damage morale with one-size-fits-all plans.

Building a strong data culture has to be intentional. Leaders need to create spaces where teachers feel supported in using data. Get the culture right, and data becomes one of the most useful tools your school has.

Defining Data Culture: Breaking Down the Concept and Its Significance

A data-informed school is shaped by how educators use the information at their disposal. Do they roll up their sleeves, look at what's working, ask the messy questions, and adjust in real time to support their students?

Part of that is building a healthy data culture where the whole school shares responsibility for the work. That means working together to notice what's going on and decide what to try next. Everyone shares the workload. Everyone grows.

Clarifying Accountability

In this kind of environment, accountability shouldn't feel like finger pointing. Deep trust and clear expectations push people to own the work together. They see what needs to happen and move on it. They know what they want, and they believe in each other.

Accountability evolves into shared responsibility when trust holds it up. Bring data into the rhythm of the work. Let it point the way, and keep the team moving together.

Table 1.2 illustrates what each element of a strong data culture looks like in everyday practice.

Element	What It Looks Like in <i>Practice</i>
Mindset	Data is used to learn, not to prove
Conversation	Numbers + stories + experience coexist
Ownership	Responsibility is shared, not assigned
Action	Teams adjust in real time
Purpose	Data serves students, not systems

Table 1.2. *Elements of a Strong Data Culture in Practice*

The Role of Data: More Than Numbers

Hans Rosling nailed it in *Factfulness* when he said, “The world cannot be understood without numbers and cannot be understood with numbers alone.¹ Love numbers for what they tell you about real lives.” That line sticks with me because that’s the whole point. Numbers can flag trends and surface strengths. Numbers also point to what needs attention. The real power comes when teachers add the context that only they can bring.

They know the vibe in the room. They remember that one lesson where the wheels came off. They’ve got a front-row seat to what students understand, what confuses them, and what lights them up. No spreadsheet captures that kind of insight. In a strong data culture, teachers use numbers to reflect and make smart pivots. Teachers work with their teams to figure out the next move. Data shows up as a resource. Teachers use it without having to defend themselves.

¹ Hans Rosling, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Rönnlund, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World—and Why Things Are Better Than You Think* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2018), 160.

Characteristics of a Strong Data Culture

A lasting data culture comes back to the same six ingredients:

1. **Trust:** Teams use data to hold each other up. They lean into conversations to help students and grow as professionals.
2. **Psychological Safety:** Teachers speak up. They bring the tough stuff to the table. They explore mistakes and struggles without fear because the culture treats those moments as fuel for growth.
3. **Collaboration:** Teams analyze data together. They ask questions, swap stories, and make smart plans that work better because everyone has a voice in shaping them.
4. **Protected Time:** Leaders make space. They prioritize time for deep conversations. They protect the minutes that allow people to think and reflect. They adjust from there.
5. **Building Capacity:** Everyone talks data. Teachers understand what the numbers mean and how to use them. Confidence grows because they see how the data fits into their day-to-day work.
6. **Leadership:** Leaders show up. They ask questions and model curiosity. They shape routines that keep the work grounded. They move the needle by working right alongside their teams.

Table 1.3 outlines the six characteristics of a strong data culture and what each one makes possible.

Characteristic	What It <i>Enables</i>
Trust	Honest, productive conversations
Psychological Safety	Risk-taking without fear
Collaboration	Better decisions through shared insight
Protected Time	Reflection that leads to action
Capacity Building	Confidence using data
Leadership	Curiosity modeled, not mandated

Table 1.3. Characteristics of a Strong Data Culture and What They Enable