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## Data-driven decisions would be better than intuition for schools, government services

A fire department wants more men and equipment, competing medical directors insist their approach is better.

Poor children struggle in school.

Donald Trump's comments ignite a controversy.

What do all of these situations have in common?

All could be clarified by the study of data.

The phrase "data-driven decision making" appeared often in the inboxes of Collier County's



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OPINION

leaders this summer. It was put there most often by Marvin Easton, a retired IBM executive who took an interest in the Naples Fire Department and its requests for more men

and equipment.

Easton in May helped organize and relentlessly promote a forum on data-driven decision making as it pertains to the fire service, bringing in consultants from the International City/County Management Association.

They advocated an approach that examines the work of the fire department, then structuring the department to fit.

For example, a fire department receives few

calls for help at 3 a.m. But under the prevailing 24-hour shift schedule, there are as many firefighters on duty at 3 a.m. as there are at 3 p.m.

"Why would you want to have the same amount of people when there's one-fifth the work? That would never happen in private industry," Easton said.

His advocacy hasn't always been well-received. Representatives of a firefighters union tried to have the event canceled and ac-

cused Easton of racism in the process.

Easton has been involved with data-driven decision making most of his career. As an executive, it's how he tried to run things. And the very mission of IBM was to make computers that helped businesses use data.

The potential is growing every day, he said.

"Data-driven decision has been around for a long, long time. Now that computers are so prevalent, it's

a lot easier. You can collect it (data) a lot easier. Analyze it. Store it a lot easier."

Could better data analysis be applied to government operations?

Certainly, Easton said. Fire department staffing is just one example.

The county's EMS ambulance service and the North Collier Fire and Rescue Department are locked in a never-ending battle over how best to

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provide emergency care.

North Collier advocates cite heart-wrenching anecdotes about patients who died because their firefighters weren't allowed to administer advanced care. But anecdotal evidence isn't data-driven.

How many times was a patient saved because a firefighter focused on basic care and waited for a more experienced EMS medic to show up to do the advanced procedures? Anecdotes can't answer the question.

The study of data might. As the two systems operate, their performances can be tracked through a new battery of EMS measurements being developed by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration or through other relative metrics.

Ultimately, data, not intuition,

could show an advantage to one system over the other.

Test scores have long shown children in Immokalee lag behind their Naples peers in scholastic achievement.

Early childhood education programs by charitable groups such as the Guadalupe Center and Redlands Christian Migrant Association seek to close the gap.

Do they work?

The Naples Children and Education Foundation, which raises millions of dollars annually, wants to know. Data could determine where best to invest those dollars and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the various programs.

This year, the NCEF for the first time is tracking the progress of Immokalee children who have attended preschool at centers supported by NCEF.

It hasn't been easy. Getting access to test score data involves

getting the school district to cooperate and parents to waive certain privacy restrictions. Someone has to physically compile the data, matching student ID numbers up with test results.

About 50 students are being tracked so far, according to Maria Jimenez-Lara, executive director of the NCEF. She hopes that number grows to 100 by the end of the school year.

Eventually, NCEF hopes to apply the same analysis to early education programs it funds throughout the county, not just in Immokalee.

The ultimate goal will be for the group to look at results of the pre-K graduates as they advance through the grades. Do the young alumni of one program fare better than others?

Overcoming the legal and manpower issues took effort, but Jimenez-Lara said it's proving worthwhile.

"The door has been opened at the school district and at the providers. Moving forward, we can have a healthy dialogue," she said.

Donald Trump's comments in June on the nature of the immigrants coming in from Mexico simultaneously raised the profile of his campaign and created a backlash among critics. In one example, he said, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. ... They're bringing crime."

As evidence, he cited high-profile cases such as the woman shot by an often deported undocumented immigrant in San Francisco, anecdotes that don't necessarily tell the whole story.

Data would fill the gaps, but as The Washington Post found when fact-checking Trump's re-

marks, "Data on immigrants and crime are incomplete."

Years ago, more data were available. The immigration status of an arrested person was part of the booking record filled out at the county jail. Changes to federal law have taken that information out of the public realm.

Complete data, readily available to the public, would offer a clearer picture and help inform a sensible immigration policy.

Keeping and analyzing data would involve some expense, but in Collier County alone, taxpayers spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year on emergency services, education, and services for immigrants. Data-driven decision making should guide as many of those dollars as possible.

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