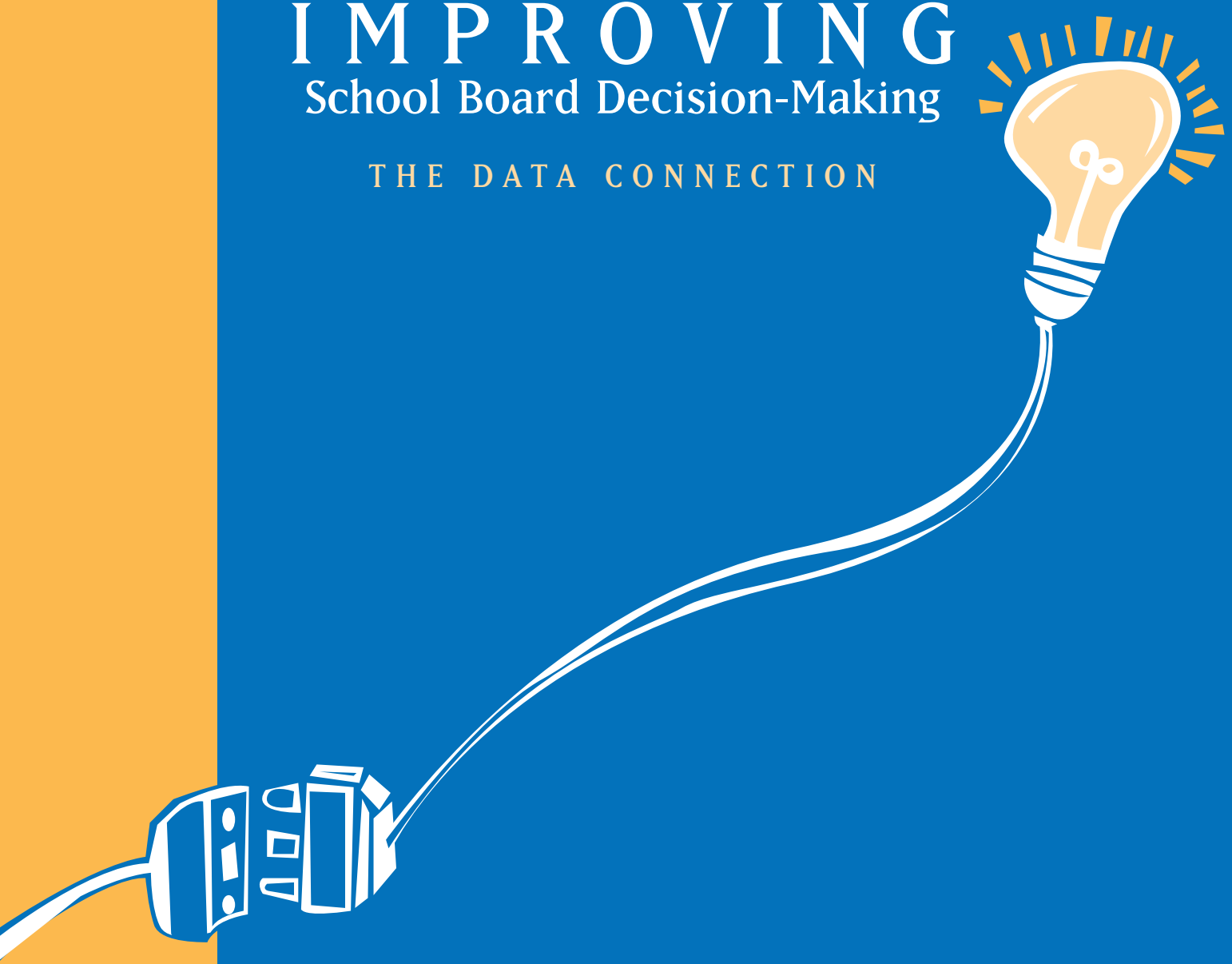
NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS FOUNDATION

IMPROVING
School Board Decision-Making

THE DATA CONNECTION



FOREWORD

"To foster excellence and equity in public education through innovation in school board leadership and community involvement."

A worthy mission statement for this foundation. But how do you strategically make it happen for your school district or for districts across your state? An essential step is to educate board members about the necessity of using good data to inform the decisions they make that affect districtwide goals for improving student achievement. These goals are established through linkages with your local community.

As boards seek to govern systems focused on improving student learning, they must understand how students currently are achieving on several levels: in comparison to the district's scores over a period of time; on nationally normed tests; on state-mandated, high-stakes, standards-based tests; and on an assessment battery that may include international tests.

Further complicating the picture is that each of these scores also should be analyzed from the perspectives of socio-economic status, race, culture, gender, disability and ethnicity. Are some groups doing better than others? Why? With this disaggregated data, the board can set goals, and the administration can develop strategic plans that truly make it possible for ALL students to achieve.

Now add another challenge! Most boards find that, as they work with their community to define districtwide goals, people value a lot more than test scores. Board members and citizens alike expect schools to produce knowledgeable citizens who contribute to the community, individuals with good character and healthy lifestyles, and workers with marketable skills. The data to measure whether schools are achieving these "softer" end results tend to be harder to gather, less quantitative and more qualitative. How can boards be sure that all the data are credible, valid and reliable?

This guidebook can help. Local school board members can use it to educate themselves. The National School Boards Association and state federation trainers can use it for training individuals and groups of boards at state and national conferences. Users will learn how to:

Understand what data are — the numbers, trends and observations;

Ask for the appropriate data to inform their decisions;

Work with the superintendent to understand what data reveal through analysis and interpretation;

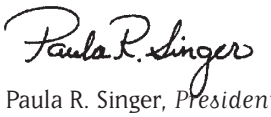
Use data to support board decisions on policy and budgets by removing guesswork, mitigating single-issue agendas, and lending credibility to tough fiscal judgments about where and for whom dollars should be spent; and

Inform and involve community members in understanding the strengths and gaps in student performance — and where their moral and fiscal support is needed most.

We hope you find the chapters easy to read, practical and provocative. The guide is written to be user-friendly and simple. Some of you may be able to skip through parts quickly. Others may need to start at the beginning to define a district mission and quantifiable districtwide goals.

Accompanying training materials have been developed and are available on the National School Boards Foundation Web site at www.schoolboarddata.org. A training video to accompany the book is in the works and will be available next year.

Let us know how this guide works for you. Let us know how else we can support your community-based leadership to raise the achievement of all students. That's the ultimate goal — better-educated students. Data, when used well by school boards, can help more students in your community get where they need to be.



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NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS FOUNDATION

ABOUT THE NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS FOUNDATION

The National School Boards Foundation is dedicated to preparing school board members to be catalysts for systemic reform in the public so that all students will be prepared to meet the challenges of tomorrow. Its innovative projects identify new solutions and approaches to the most pressing problems facing our nation's schools and their boards.

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PREFACE

For many of us, data conjure up images of indecipherable numbers, statistics and percentages better left to the experts. Percentiles. Disaggregated data. Student-performance indicators. Norm-referenced test scores. The list is dizzying. We fear being overloaded with information we don't understand or know how to use. The numbers alone can be confusing and hard to grasp — and often it is difficult to figure out how to use them to improve student achievement.

But it can be done. Increasingly, school board members across the country — from Palisades, Pa., to Fargo, N.D., to Kennewick, Wash. — are using data to help make good decisions about improving public education for all children. You'll read their stories inside.

The stakes are high. Increasingly, parents, the public, taxpayers and business leaders are calling for improved student achievement, and they are holding schools accountable for results. Some legislatures are even mandating state takeovers of failing districts or dismantling low-performing schools.

School board members interviewed for this guide say that data are helping them get results they never have been able to achieve before. They are making smarter decisions about what policies enhance student learning. They are responding with facts — not guesswork — to public school critics. They are working closely with their superintendent and district staff to replace lackluster programs with proven, research-based approaches. They know that data are powerful and can make a big difference in answering the call for accountability.

Much has been written about data and why they are an important tool to increase test scores, improve teaching and engage parents. But there has not been a useful, comprehensive publication that pulls all of these pieces together for school board members — until now.

Improving School Board Decision-Making: The Data Connection is a road map for school boards that are seeking a comprehensive overview of the subject in a thoughtful, engaging, easy-to-read format. If you are a school board member, manage a state school board association or train school board members, keep reading. Filled with valuable information, a detailed glossary, an annotated bibliography and a list of helpful Web sites, this guide is designed to help you — or help you help others — conquer fears about data.

After reading this guide, readers will

understand

Why using data is significant.

Different types of data and how to interpret them.

How to use data to improve student achievement.

The board's role and responsibilities in using data and how its role differs from that of superintendents and staff members.

How to involve and educate parents and community members in these efforts.

Ultimately, this guide encourages school boards to use data in their decision-making to help all students achieve at high levels academically and measure whether students show good citizenship, tolerance for others' ideas, and skills to navigate differences and build common ground.

Why Deal With Data?

INTRODUCTION

School leaders and policy-makers everywhere are talking about data and why they are important for improving our schools. It makes good sense. How can you measure whether the performance policies you approve as a school board member are effective if you don't look at the numbers?

Data matter. But why are the numbers significant? What do they tell us about our schools? In what ways have school boards used data successfully? What are the consequences of ignoring data?

Read on.

Readiness Checklist

Is your board ready to talk about using data?

Take a moment and find out.

We have a written vision that focuses on student achievement.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

We have a mission statement that reflects core values and beliefs.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

We have stated, measurable goals that are tied to our vision.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

Everything we do aligns with our vision.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

We have a general awareness about why data are significant.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

We agree that data show evidence of progress in achieving student goals.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

We are willing to explore ways to use data to measure progress.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

We know what our role as school board members is in using data to improve student achievement.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

If you answered "No" to three or more of these questions, talk with your fellow board members. Explore with them why your board may have come up short in one area or another before reading more. Your state association can help, too. You also may want to review *The Key Work of School Boards* published by the National School Boards Association (NSBA).

Why Pay Attention to Data?

As a school board member, you work hard to improve public schools. You participate in formal board meetings, visit classrooms, talk with parents and teachers, attend committee meetings, and approve policies designed to help all children excel.

You may give up time with your family to attend a community forum in the evening or visit schools in your district during your lunch break. There's no doubt you work hard. But do you work smart? At the end of the day, have you accomplished work that will further your board's goals? Or have you invested a lot of time in work that hasn't reaped results?

You want your service on the board to have an impact. Data can help you do your job more effectively. Using data allows you to base decisions on evidence, not speculation or guesswork. Making decisions without data is like navigating a ship without a rudder, driving a car without a steering wheel, flying a plane without instruments ... well, you get the idea.

Collecting, analyzing and evaluating data may seem like a lot of work, but the results are worth it.

All too often, school board members are like firefighters on the ground, battling the flames when they should be in a helicopter above the fire, able to see how extensive the blaze is, which way the wind is blowing and where the resources need to be deployed.

— Anonymous

Tip!

Collecting, analyzing and evaluating data may seem like a lot of work, but the results are worth it.

Reliable and up-to-date data help you:

Focus board policies on student achievement.

Measure whether the district is meeting goals to improve student achievement — academic as well as character, citizenship and values.

Deepen community understanding about shared responsibility for student achievement.

Set student achievement goals with your community.

Evaluate the effectiveness of policies and programs.

Identify new issues or challenges.

Diagnose problems and revisit solutions.

Identify new solutions to problems.

Anticipate future conditions.

Hold the superintendent, staff, students — and board — accountable for results.

Create shared accountability with your community.

Provide opportunities to celebrate success.

Depersonalize decisions.

Make smart, informed budget decisions.

Put Your Fears on the Table

Let's put your fears about data on the table. What concerns you most about using data to make school policy decisions? Put down this book and think about it for a few minutes.

Here's what some other board members said when asked the same question. Do these concerns sound familiar?

"I don't understand the data."

"My questions about data will sound silly."

"If people know the truth about how our district is doing, we'll get pummeled."

"Will we get sued if we look at student data? What about privacy issues?"

"Putting data on the table will damage union-management negotiations."

"People will take the data out of context to further their own agendas."

"Can we trust the data? What if the numbers are 'cooked'?"

Not to worry. This guide will help you work through every one of these issues. Set aside your fears, grab a new yellow highlighter and make lots of notes in this book. The materials in this guidebook will deepen your knowledge about how to use data, ask better-informed questions and become the data guru everyone turns to for help.

Data can help answer these questions

How are we doing?

This question focuses on the most important part of your work — creating high-quality public schools. It requires boards to examine student performance with the help of indicators such as test scores, the number of Advanced Placement students, attendance rates, dropout rates, student mobility and other measures. (More details on these indicators are in Chapters 3 and 4.)

Are we serving all students well?

Today's schools enroll students with very different learning needs: special education students, gifted and talented students, speakers of other languages. Schools are more racially and ethnically diverse than ever before. By looking at data that examine how subgroups of students are performing, you quickly learn who is excelling, who is falling behind and why. Armed with this information, school board members and staff can develop a plan to ensure that no student is left behind.

In what areas must we improve?

After examining data with administrators and staff, you may find gaps in learning that point to poor leadership, outdated curriculum, ineffective instructional practices, limited budgets or little parental involvement. Data can help you learn more about your district's strengths and weaknesses so you can address problems head-on.

Ask the Expert

Victoria L. Bernhardt

Author of Data Analysis for Comprehensive Schoolwide Improvement

What can board members learn from using data?

Data should help make their jobs a lot easier, especially as they make decisions about how money is spent. The purpose of our school systems is to make sure our students are learning. Data can help board members determine whether kids are learning and why or why not.

What are the consequences of not using data?

Well, the biggest consequence is that we keep doing the same things over and over and expect different results. I think school board members want their decisions to make a difference. There are ways of understanding how to meet students' needs that only data reveal.

For example?

A lot of businesses use data to predict different things. For example, I understand that in some states, prison industries look at the number of kids who are not reading at grade level in second grade to determine how many prisons cells to build 10 years later.

We, in schools, do not have our system set up so we can look at — for instance — student achievement in second grade and understand as we look at the data that some of those second graders are going to drop out in high school. We have the data, but we don't have the experience using data to draw conclusions.

Why do so few school board members use data now?

I think there are two issues. The first issue is that there are very few districts out there that have databases available that provide historical data and easy-to-use point-and-click technology that allows school board members to get the information quickly.

The second issue is that some districts try to keep boards focusing only on finances, safety issues and cafeteria food because they don't want board members involved in classroom achievement.

Also, many administrators don't understand how to use data. If we don't understand it, we don't want to talk about it.

There's so much data available. Why should school board members take the time to understand it? Isn't that a job better left to the district number-crunchers?

It is the number-crunchers who sometimes keep data from getting into the hands of school board members, teachers and administrators. They have all the power if they have the data. They are the ones I see as among the biggest barriers. I know because I was trained as one of them.

We also have this fear that anyone who doesn't have a Ph.D. in statistics will use the data incorrectly, and I have found that's simply not true. As teachers and administrators dig deeper into the data, they stop seeing the complexity of the numbers, and they begin to see the kids. School boards need someone to provide them the data.

How do you decide what data best inform your work as a school board member?

I think data are very logical, so it all depends on the question. One of the biggest questions I would have is: What are our kids doing, for example, in reading?

We would look at test scores. We would look at what we are doing to teach reading now, the results of that approach and what we have done in the past. Critical questions like this help us better understand what we have to improve.

In what ways can board members misuse data?

Data can be misused to find differences among groups of students to make a point not related to helping them learn — in other words, taking information out of context and finger-pointing.

What advice would you give to school board members who are using data for the first time?

I would try to make sure they have the big picture. For example, sometimes we see a really cool chart about, say, English language learners. Let's say the chart shows English language learners are improving over time. We say, "OK, let's make a decision today." But, there's no decision that can be made without looking at more data. For example, you need to know whether enrollment is changing over time. You need to know if evolving instructional practices have made any difference. My advice would be make sure you have enough information to understand the big picture.

Vision, Mission and End Results

Without a vision, a mission and end results (also known as goals), it's hard for school board members to know where they are headed and to gauge how they will get there. Board members who move forward without putting these three pieces in place will have a tough time determining what data they will need to measure their progress. Here are some more ideas about how you can develop your own vision statement, examples of mission statements and sample end results from one school district.

What is a vision?

Vision is not about what we are, but what we want to be. For school boards, it is about where we are going and what kind of school systems we are trying to create now and for the future. A positive vision is future-focused and seeks to shape events rather than simply let them happen.
— Adapted from *The Key Work of School Boards: A Guidebook,* NSBA

What is a mission statement?

Closely related to vision is mission. The mission of an organization is what it was created to do. In effective organizations, the mission statement also captures and reflects the core values and beliefs that guide the organization and its members in pursuit of stated goals.
— Adapted from *The Key Work of School Boards: A Guidebook,* NSBA

If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there.

— Anonymous

What is an end result?

End results — sometimes known as goals or objectives — show how you will put your vision for student achievement into action. End results are easy-to-understand, concrete goals. These goals focus on everything from student achievement to quality teaching to community engagement. They help ensure that board members, teachers, administrators, students and others know how they are being held accountable. Once you identify your end results, you can figure out how to measure progress. Your goals will help drive what data you collect.

Example

Vision

The board of education represents the owners of the Fargo Public Schools, N.D. — all the citizens of the district. The board has developed a vision of what it believes its owners should expect in return for funding public schools.

As a result of the Fargo Public School's efforts, we — the students — will:

Demonstrate **academic competency.**

Be **self-reliant** individuals.

Exhibit **essential life skills.**

Exhibit **citizenship.**

Demonstrate **communication skills.**

Exhibit **sound character.**

— Excerpted from the vision statement drafted by the Fargo Public Schools Board of Education, Fargo, N.D.

Mission statement

Example

Jefferson County Public Schools, Colo.
To provide a quality education that prepares all children for a successful future.

Cameron School District, Wis.
The school district of Cameron, in partnership with parents and community, ensures educational opportunities that give each student the knowledge, skills and attitudes essential to succeed in an ever-changing world, by providing a safe environment and a caring staff that is responsive to individual needs.

Boston Public Schools
We welcome the children of this city into the Boston Public Schools, where effective teaching and learning prepare all of our students to achieve at high levels, and where the entire community works together to focus on children.

Do we want schools to continue merely adopting innovations? Or do we want schools to improve? If we collectively focus on goals and regularly measure the impact of methods, then we will get results.

— Mike Schmoker,
Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement

You have to remove favoritism and politics from decision-making. The best way to do that is to give board members data and information. If you are not using data, move on because you are not making good decisions for children.

— Helen Smith, school board president,
Horry County Public Schools, S.C.

End results

Example

With the superintendent, the school board in Arlington, Va., has set goals for student achievement and uses data to measure progress.

Demonstrate rising student achievement as measured by:
an increase from 13 to 16 in the number of schools meeting accreditation standards based on the state's Standards of Learning (SOL) test results; and an increase in the passing rate on 17 of 28 SOL tests.

Reduce the gap in achievement between African American and white students and between Hispanic students and white students as measured by:
a decrease in the percentage-point difference between these groups of students on at least 20 of 28 SOL tests administered; and an average decrease in the gap across 28 SOL tests of at least five percentage points.

Profile

Getting Results

Palisades, Pa.

Before Francis Barnes took the job as Palisades School District's superintendent, the school board wanted his assurance that he would help them improve student performance. Any future bonuses and salary increases would ride on it.

"He was really one of the few people who jumped at the opportunity," recalls school board member Dave Oleksa.

Oleksa says pressure was mounting in the small, rural community to find out why students received good grades on report cards but performed poorly on standardized tests.

"Parents were concerned. Taxpayer groups were concerned. They said, 'Look, we don't mind paying these taxes for schools as long as we are getting something for our money. We'd like to see some better results.'"

The board charged the new superintendent with performing a "full-blown assessment" of student achievement. Barnes compares his sizeable task to a doctor performing a physical on a patient. He collects data, and lots of it, to diagnose problems. Board members hold Barnes accountable for results, and Barnes uses data to show the board progress on districtwide goals. Barnes says he would have it no other way because "not using data is like trying to be in a boat without a rudder. You don't know where the current will take you next."

Not using data is like trying to be in a boat without a rudder. You don't know where the current will take you next.

— Francis Barnes, superintendent, Palisades School District, Pa.

Barnes' keen interest in data has rubbed off on board members. Now they ask for data before making critical policy decisions rather than making assumptions or basing decisions on emotion.

"He keeps us on track," says Oleksa. "Before we make a decision, we gather data."

Early on, Oleksa says the board looked at annual test scores but never fully understood how to interpret them. Now they break down the test scores by gender, race, income level and other categories — powerful information that helps the board identify which students need the most help. The board also uses more than one set of test scores and indicators to make decisions about student performance.

Oleksa says data has helped the district identify ineffective programs and get rid of them. For example, the district scrapped an international baccalaureate program in a middle school because it was failing to improve student achievement.

Palisades School District is getting results. Students are garnering higher scores on standardized tests and entering more challenging universities. The community is showing more interest in what students are learning.

Oleksa, a six-year board veteran, says for as long as he can remember other districts used to look down their noses at Palisades. "We were the poor country cousin."

Not anymore.

Oleksa recalls a recent conversation with a colleague who provides technical assistance to area districts, including Palisades. "This person said to me, 'For a long time, your district was a diamond in the rough. There were good things happening out there. But no one knew about them.' Now we have a way of measuring these accomplishments using data, and people are starting to talk."

What Happens When You Don't Use Data?

How many times have you sat through a board meeting where people talked about what they think they know about your schools, rather than basing what they know on facts and figures? Their opinion is just that — an opinion. It's not based on hard numbers, only speculation, perception or limited observation. As a result, valuable time is wasted during the board meeting because board members are approving policies and goals based on information that is limited or simply wrong.

When board members ignore data, bad decisions can result that can harm children and public schools and waste taxpayer dollars. Board members, for example, might approve policies that don't match the actual needs of students. A policy may be designed to serve all students when, in reality, resources could be better allocated toward certain students — those the data identify as most underserved. This is one example of how data can make a big difference in using limited resources wisely.

Data also help school boards chart a course and stick with it over time. School personnel often are blindsided by conflicting agendas. One year the school board approves several student achievement goals. The following year, a new slate is elected, and the earlier goals are dumped in favor of new goals not based on the data. Another school year passes without sustaining earlier efforts to increase student achievement. Communities continue to loose faith in their public schools. No wonder some educators mumble to themselves, "Don't worry, this too shall pass." Data can help you move beyond basing important school reform efforts on the revolving door of leadership, personal interests, whims or speculation.

A number of school districts have sensed this waning community support and set out to change public perception of schools with stakeholders in their communities (more on that in Chapter 2).

The school board's role in student performance

Establish a vision of what students should achieve.

Ensure that a structure — e.g., policies and resources — is in place to support improvement.

Hold the staff, board members, students and community accountable for continuous improvements in achievement.

Advocate for students in the community.

THE BOARD'S ROLE

Set goals with stakeholders in your community:

Establish a clear vision with the help of your community. Talk in-depth about how you will measure progress. Your vision should reflect input you have gathered from your customers — students, parents, teachers, taxpayers, community members and business leaders. What does superb student achievement look like in your district? What should students know and be able to do?

Set priorities for your superintendent and staff:

Charge your district's superintendent and staff to develop action plans that achieve the goals set forth in the strategic plan. Do the administrative and instructional staff understand your vision and how you will measure progress from one year to the next? Do staff members know what data they need to collect to show evidence of how they have met the board's goals? Do they have the capacity to do the work?

Identify how you will evaluate progress:

Work with your community, fellow board members and district staff to determine what indicators you will use to evaluate whether the district is meeting student performance goals. Be sure to set high standards and identify time lines.

Evaluate progress using the data collected and presented by your staff:

Your superintendent should provide you with multiple measures. Did your superintendent provide you with soft and hard data? Has your superintendent demonstrated reasonable progress through the data provided? In what ways will board members hold the superintendent accountable for lack of progress? Have you made achieving these goals an explicit part of the superintendent's evaluation?

Review, re-evaluate and revise student achievement goals:

Decision-making driven by data is a nonending cycle. Have data helped you identify your priorities? After reviewing the data, what are the next steps? For example, is it time to update student achievement goals? Are your resources aligned to your goals?

Who Does What?

Remember, boards govern. Superintendents manage.

THE SUPERINTENDENT'S ROLE

Develop goals with the board using data:

After the board establishes a vision, it is the superintendent's job to make the goals a reality. The superintendent should help the board recognize that it will take extra time and effort to address this issue. Do you fully understand what you want students to achieve? Are the board's goals clear and reasonable?

Develop an action plan based on data:

An action plan should outline what data need to be assembled. Collect both hard and soft data. What kind of measures has the board requested? Student learning data, demographic data, perception data and school process data? What other information should the board receive? It is the superintendent's role, not the board's, to set educational programs and create an effective data analysis plan. Beware of board micromanaging.

Demonstrate reasonable progress to the board:

The superintendent is accountable to the board. Have you presented data that show clear progress? To what extent have the district's goals been reached? What will you recommend to the board to address shortcomings?

Revisit, review, revise:

Do you continually re-emphasize to staff and the community how essential data collection is to the district's governance process? How well do your board members know the data? How comfortable are they with this level of information? Are you devoting the resources necessary to data collection and evaluation?

What Do You Know?

ACTIVITIES GUIDE

Now it's time to put to the test what you learned in Chapter 1. How well do you know the materials you have just read? These activities will test your knowledge on the issues highlighted in this chapter. They also will give you an opportunity to discuss important issues with your fellow board members. We encourage you to jot answers, notes and thoughts in the margins.

Pop Quiz

Why deal with data?

	True	*False*
Bad decisions can result when school boards ignore data.	❑	❑
The school board's role is to set priorities with the superintendent and staff.	❑	❑
The superintendent's role is to demonstrate to the board reasonable progress toward goals.	❑	❑
Data can make a board member's job easier, especially when it comes to making tough decisions about resources.	❑	❑
Reliable, current data help you focus board policies on student achievement, set student achievement goals with your community, and evaluate the effectiveness of policies and programs.	❑	❑

If you answered "True" to all of these questions, you are on your way to becoming a data guru and a more effective board member. Keep reading! There's more good information ahead.

If you answered "False" to three or more of the questions above, flip back a few pages and reread Chapter 1. When you are done reading, retake this quiz. We won't count your score on the first pop quiz against your final grade.

What Would You Do?

Turning Back the Clock on High School Schedules, Part One *30 minutes*

To help demonstrate the suggestions made in this guidebook, we have created a hypothetical case study that examines how a typical school board might work with data to help resolve a complex and potentially controversial issue — in this case, a proposed change in start times for high school students. This case study will develop further in upcoming chapters.

Read the case study below and discuss the questions that follow.

The Lakewood School Board has made improved student performance its number-one priority. So when board members recently reviewed school and district data, they grew concerned. A discouraging trend showed that high school student performance had declined slightly over the past three years. The board asked district staff to investigate the reasons behind the decline.

Meanwhile, board member Rita Plattner attended a statewide education conference on the board's behalf. One speaker voiced strong support for starting high school classes no earlier than 9:30 a.m. as a way to improve scores. The speaker produced a study she authored to back up her findings. The study examined sleeping patterns of high school students and found that teenagers require nine hours of sleep a night to function well the next day. But teens interviewed for the report slept only five to six hours each night. After school, many teens participated in extracurricular activities, worked part-time jobs and hit the books late at night to study. Little time was left over for a full night's sleep, resulting in poor performance, tiredness and irritability in school. The study also showed that in high schools where classes started later in the morning, students were more alert and participated more frequently in class. Scores on quizzes, tests and homework assignments increased slightly after some high schools changed schedules.

Plattner, concerned about her district's sagging high school test scores, thought the late-start approach made sense, especially since Lakewood had moved high school start times from 8:30 to 7:10 a.m. four years earlier. At the time, the district had experienced rapid growth and had staggered start times for its elementary and secondary schools to allow multiple bus runs rather than purchase new buses. In hindsight, perhaps the decision to start high school classes earlier was contributing to poor student performance.

Plattner asked Sarah Nicklin, the board president, to put the late-start issue on the next board agenda for discussion and a vote. Nicklin listened closely to Plattner's recommendations but suggested that district staff report their own findings to the board before the board put a solution on the table.

The board agreed with Nicklin but also saw value in Plattner's proposal. The board asked the staff to gather more information about the late-start study. They also asked staff to conduct a comparative analysis of start times and student performance in Lakewood's high schools vs. high schools in similar districts.

Discussion

What information or data would you need to make a decision on the proposal to implement later start times for high schools?

What information or data would you like to know about the decline in high school student performance?

Discussion Guide

Putting Your Fears on the Table

Reflect on and discuss the following questions.

What is your greatest fear about using data and why?

In what ways can using data help you become a more effective board member?

What do you need to learn about data in order to use data more effectively?

CHAPTER TWO

How Do We Set Goals With Our Community?

INTRODUCTION

Remember the section in Chapter 1 focused on establishing a vision for your school system? How did your board develop the district's vision, mission statement and goals or end results? How public was the process? And how do you report progress against these goals to your community?

This chapter addresses these last two questions. It will provide practical advice for engaging your constituents in this work — both at the front end, when you're setting measurable goals, and at the back end, when you're sharing results. Along the way, we'll offer strategies, provide tips and hear from successful school leaders in communities like yours.

Readiness Checklist

Is your board ready to involve your community?

Take a moment and find out.

In developing your vision statement, priorities and goals, will you involve community members as equal partners?
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

Will you reach out to and involve single parents who don't usually attend school board meetings, retirees who haven't been inside schools for decades, teachers who aren't necessarily active in their local union and business leaders whose support is important?
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

After getting their input, will you explain to your constituents why you accepted some suggestions and not others?
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

Do you believe that your schools belong to everyone from the citizens who fund them to the students who learn in them to the teachers who teach in them?
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

Do you believe that telling the truth about school performance, even when the news is bad, is a wise strategy?
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

Do you believe that teachers and other staff members are more effective communicators than the media?
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

If you answered "No" to three or more of these questions, the following sections will offer you a different perspective about your role as a school board member in your community.

Why Involve the Community in Setting Goals?

The answer is simple. The public schools belong to the public — and to the students, staff and board members. Board members and educators might be the experts, but community members ultimately are both the owners (they pay the bills) and the consumers (school graduates end up working in their stores, serving on their civic boards, etc.). That's not to say that board members don't have a leadership role; they do. But in the end, the community decides — whether it's an up-and-down vote on a bond issue or a mill levy increase.

Schools don't operate in isolation. In his influential book, *Is There a Public for Public Schools?,* the Kettering Foundation's David Mathews observes, "What a school does makes little sense unless we know how its mission relates to the community's education goals and public purposes."

There also is a practical political imperative. Board members need the public's understanding and support to carry out their agendas. It's the rule of 50 percent plus one, which any elected board member knows all too well. The reality is that you're much more likely to win public support if people know what you're attempting and why. Remember the old adage: "Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand."

The best way to persuade people is with your ears — by listening to them.

— Dean Rusk, former U.S. secretary of state

You can be proactive with your community and involve them at the front end. Or you can go it alone, take your chances and be prepared to react in case there's community disagreement downstream. It's the difference between playing offense and defense.

School leadership is about building relationships — the community entrusting board members to serve as their leader representatives and, in turn, board members building the right relationships with their superintendent and staff to get the job done. Trust is built over time — by working together, face-to-face, on important issues. As a board member, you want your community to own its vision of great schools. The best place to start is at the beginning, when you're developing or refining your district's goals.

Benefits of public involvement

Improved teaching and learning

Greater community trust in schools

Deeper parent and community participation in the schools

Increased resources

More supportive legislation

Responsible media participation

— The Annenberg Institute, *Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change*

Communications that work

When was the last time you took a close look at how your board and district staff are communicating to parents, community members, business leaders and taxpayers? Effective communication requires constantly refining your messages and your approach. Here are some guiding questions to help get you started.

How much communication is one-way — you do all the talking and the community does all the listening?

How much is two-way — you listen to your community's concerns, integrate their ideas as appropriate and report back?

Is most of the communication with your community written (newsletters, fact sheets, etc.) or face-to-face with helpful materials as supplements?

How much education jargon are you using in community conversations and written materials?

How is new technology used (cable, Internet, community networks, hot lines, etc.)?

Are you listening strategically (polls, surveys, focus groups, community forums, etc.)?

In what ways are you substantively involving parents?

Are local site councils provided training in issues, decision-making and consensus-making?

Who serves on your site council? Teachers? Parents? Administrators? Students? Business partners? Community members?

Are you sharing decision-making with your community?

How many nonparents are involved as volunteers, mentors and key communicators?

In what ways will you grow the leadership capacity of community members, parents and others?

— Adapted from the Michigan Association of School Boards

Ask the Expert

Sherre Calouri

School Board Chair, Beaverton School District, Ore.

How did you engage the community in determining the district's vision?

Nine focus groups with business leaders, staff, student dropouts, minority community members, students, clergy, parents of gifted and at-risk students, and senior citizens met to surface the major education issues concerning the community. The issues were explored further using keypad technology during four large inquiry groups with parents, teachers, students and administrators. The information gathered from the initial meetings served as the foundation for a community forum that attracted more than 400 community members. They met for two days and identified beliefs, priorities and the vision. People got to really talk about what they wanted for their community.

How did you get 400 people to the forum, especially the disengaged parents and community members?

We had to work at it. Putting an ad in the paper is not enough. Attention was given to one-on-one personal contact. We sent invitations. We identified opinion leaders and cheerleaders in each constituency group, and we asked them to personally invite others. We told people face-to-face how important their attendance was, and we provided transportation, child care, meals and translators.

Why did you think it was important to involve all the voices in the community?

Well, I think they are the community's schools. The more the community is involved as a community in setting a vision, the stronger you are going to be in seeing that the vision is fulfilled. We have seen increased volunteerism, increased support for funding measures and increased grassroots legislative involvement.

You collected a lot of data as part of your planning process. How did you decide what to measure?

We certainly sought the counsel and guidance of our staff in looking at the data. The community set the vision and goals. They wanted safe schools, successful learners, students who were prepared for work and lifelong learning, and a high-quality committed staff. We asked, what does it mean if our students are successful? We discussed things like, how much do state test scores matter? What about grades? When we say that our goal is graduation from high school, is that success? If that's success then we can measure that.

I think there's a tendency to measure too many things. For example, you can easily have 100-plus indicators to measure student achievement. It can become unwieldy and impossible to get a handle on meeting the goals. It is important to prioritize what the board wants to measure.

How do you make sure that the district's vision, goals and priorities continue to reflect what the community wants?

We ask them. We regularly check with our local school committees, parent-teacher clubs and site councils. We conduct focus groups, inquiry meetings and dialogue sessions with the larger community.

Avoid the disconnect

Not listening to your community can lead to big problems. Surveys of board members and residents of major urban areas (100,000 residents or more) showed significant differences of opinion concerning major challenges facing school systems.

Board members tended to rate issues such as keeping violence and drugs out of schools, maintaining discipline, and preparing students for college as relatively low priorities. This is in large part because they felt their schools already have done a good job of addressing these issues. But residents in these cities said the opposite. These issues are high priorities precisely because they believe school systems have not fixed the perceived problems satisfactorily.

In response, Seattle school board member Michael Preston urged all communities to conduct similar gap analyses. "This isn't to say we need to march blindly in lock step behind public opinion ... . But if we don't even know what our community thinks — and if our agenda bears no relationship to their priorities — we're flying blind and asking for trouble."

— *Leadership Matters: Transforming Urban School Boards,* published by the National School Boards Foundation. Research conducted by the Council of Urban Boards of Education and the National School Boards Foundation in 1998.

Tip!

Survey your own community! See the sample questionnaire at the end of the chapter.

Getting Started: Asking "What Counts?"

What counts? This is the most powerful question school board members can ask themselves and their communities. What do good schools look like? What matters most — quality teaching, safe schools, dropout rates? What indicators should school boards use to measure success? How much progress should we expect at the end of one year, three years, five years? Answers to questions like these will provide a starting point for the district's strategic plan, the more detailed blueprint of how you'll get from here to there.

As legislators raise stakes, schools are under intense pressure to perform. For example, many states are using test scores as the primary way to determine whether a student graduates from high school. Does your community agree with this approach? Find out. Ask your constituents: "In addition to the state mandates for performance in reading, writing, science and social studies, what do we value in our community? What matters most? And how should we measure it?"

If we don't take every opportunity to hear what people think about the job that the schools are doing, how will we know that we have the support of the majority?

— National School Public Relations Association, *Building Confidence in Education*

Of course, boards and superintendents can develop these goals and specific benchmarks on their own. Many do. But consider how much more powerful it would be if there was community consensus around these goals. For one, your strategic priorities would be more stable, less subject to the vagaries of the ever-changing political winds. Plus, in helping to set these educational priorities, your community partners could make specific public commitments to help students and schools reach the goals. Isn't that the kind of tangible community support school officials are forever seeking?

Tip!

By listening to your community and then using the input to shape your accountability reports, you'll be communicating to your public on their terms, not yours. They'll appreciate it.

Profile

Securing Mutual Commitments

Rochester, N.Y.

Rochester school leaders have used very specific accountability indicators to engage their community around school improvement issues. Their efforts have resulted in getting input from their key stakeholders about what counts, and in having parents, business leaders and community members work cooperatively with school leaders to set measurable goals and make specific commitments to reach those goals. The benchmarking process of the mid-1990s ended with a broad-based coalition developing 40 specific indicators of progress, everything from percentage gains on state and national reading and math tests to more students taking Advanced Placement courses.

Performance targets and public commitments like these, which are established by public consensus, have a greater chance of gaining community support.

More powerfully, each stakeholder group made specific commitments to help students succeed. For example, the county government pledged to locate several new health clinics in schools, local businesses offered job guarantees to graduates who met the district's standards and local universities guaranteed admission. Each year, the coalition sponsored a major event to document progress, discussing indicators where the annual goal was met or exceeded and indicators where they fell short.

Performance targets and public commitments like these, which are established by public consensus, have a greater chance of gaining community support and of being met than goals announced from on high by a small group of insiders.

What parents and taxpayers want from their local schools

As part of a national research project with *Education Week* in 1999, A-Plus Communications asked parents, taxpayers and teachers across the country what indicators these stakeholders would use to hold their schools accountable. Scores on standardized state tests were important, but not the most important.

This chart shows how parents, taxpayers and educators rated 21 indicators that could be reported to hold schools accountable. They rated these on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 being most important.

Category	Parents	Taxpayers	Educators
School safety	9.6	9.4	9.3
Teacher qualifications	9.3	9.2	8.3
Class size	8.9	7.9	8.8
Graduation rates	8.7	8.2	8.3
Dropout rates	8.3	8.1	7.4
Statewide test scores	8.2	8.0	7.1
Parental satisfaction survey data	8.1	8.0	7.0
SAT/ACT scores	8.1	7.9	6.9
Percent of students promoted to next grade	8.0	8.1	7.0
Course offerings	7.8	7.9	7.3
Attendance rates	7.8	8.0	7.6
Per-pupil spending	7.6	7.6	8.0
Student satisfaction survey data	7.5	7.0	7.1
Teacher salaries	7.3	7.8	7.6
Hours of homework per week	7.2	7.3	6.3
Number of students	7.2	7.2	6.7
Percent of students who go on to a four-year college	7.0	6.9	6.8
Percent of students with an "A" or a "B" average	7.0	6.5	5.8
Number of students per computer	6.9	6.4	6.1
Percent of parents who attend parent-teacher conferences	6.4	6.6	6.3
Demographics of students	4.5	4.6	5.0

— *Reporting Results: What the Public Wants to Know,* A-Plus Communications and *Education Week,* 1999

How to Gather Community Input

There are multiple ways to connect with your community, ranging from paper-and-pencil surveys to face-to-face meetings and forums. Face-to-face is the most time-consuming, and the most effective. With that in mind, some of the best opportunities are:

Focus groups of 8–12 people (make sure to have a skilled, neutral moderator or a well-trained board member to lead these interview sessions);
Town hall meetings (make sure to have a skilled moderator or the necessary training to help keep these from degenerating into gripe sessions);
Study circles (usually with a specific agenda);
Parent-teacher organization meetings;
Open houses or back-to-school nights;
Report card nights;
Breakfast communications clubs;
Key communicators networks;
Brown-bag lunches;
Surveys (phone, fax, e-mail or mail);
Board inquiry meetings;
Community forums; and
Opportunities for dialogue at the school and district levels.

Don't limit your listening to school-sanctioned events. Some of the most effective information gathering is done by credible third parties, such as local education foundations, community foundations, churches, business and civic groups, and other respected local organizations. Often they have more credibility because of their arms-length relationship to the school district.

Tip!

Each community is unique, and there's no substitute for asking these questions in your community.

Use feedback loops

Don't forget to report back to your community about what you heard and how you plan to incorporate the advice into your plans. For example, Edmonds, a school district just north of Seattle, preaches the value of using feedback loops for communicating: Ask the community a question, receive an answer, make decisions or changes, and provide feedback and ongoing updates.

The district hosts community forums to answer the big questions, such as, what are the annual priorities? Using board meetings, the media, dedicated phone lines, Web site messaging and personal outreach, district staff provide information and opportunities for discussion, questions and answers; print the conclusions and findings; and keep reporting on progress.

Gathering data in your community

Be clear about what information you want to gather from your community, why you want this information and how it will be used.

Don't ask parents, community members and business leaders questions that you don't want answered or aren't going to do anything about.

Report back to your community on how you will use the information they have shared with you.

Distribute widely the results of your data-gathering efforts to your community.

Educate your community about why data matter and how data can be used to improve student performance.

Profile

Talking to Your Community

Jefferson County, Colo.

In Jefferson County, Colo., school board members regularly ask community members how to improve student performance, what issues matter most and how best to measure school improvement efforts.

"We are using data to measure whether we are meeting our end results and goals in our strategic plan," says School Board President Jon DeStefano. "Talking to our community is an important part of this work."

Twice a year, board members hold a series of community meetings with parents, community members, business leaders, law enforcement representatives, clergy, legislators and others in each region. These "School Talk" meetings, hosted by one member and attended by one other, ask community members to share concerns, make suggestions and ask questions around one board goal. The staff record the conversation on a flip chart. The conversation informs board decision-making and strategic planning.

Board members also participate in monthly public engagement meetings with teachers, parents, students, chamber of commerce leaders, senior citizens, realtors, clergy and service club representatives. Before each meeting, district staff and board members develop a set of key questions on a topic.

For example, board members asked secondary teachers how they should measure whether the district is meeting one of the board's end results for student achievement: "As result of our efforts, students will demonstrate responsible citizenship in their diverse communities." Questions to the group — as well as some of the teachers' responses — included:

How would the children and young adults in our community demonstrate responsible citizenship?

"I would like to see students be active participants in our democracy. I want them to vote and volunteer in their community."

What is the school district's role in students becoming responsible citizens?

"We need the district to support us and to say citizenship is just as important as reading, writing, math and science."

What are the risks of the district not providing leadership in this area?

"We might see voters who do not feel compelled to support their local schools [through bond elections]."

These efforts are getting results, including deeper conversations between the board and the community about children and learning.

"Your responsibility as a school board member is to your constituents," says Communications Services Manager Marilyn Saltzman. "Public engagement can help you ensure all voices are heard, rather than the voices of a few."

Executive Director of Public Engagement and Communication Services Rick Kaufman says that the more time board members invest in listening to their community, the more effective they will be.

"We live in an age when we have to work smarter. You don't want to clean up messes later because you didn't take the time to listen early on to your community, teachers and others."

Tip!

Interested in learning more about how other school boards and districts involve their communities in decision-making? More examples are available online at www.schoolboarddata.org.

Closing the Loop: Reporting Progress

An annual report to the community provides a golden opportunity to build public support and increase community confidence that the schools are being held accountable for results. Board members and educators often complain that the public doesn't understand how schools are doing. They say that parents and taxpayers get a distorted view from the media. Accountability reports on schools represent a significant opportunity for educators to communicate directly with their key constituents about how schools are performing.

One way that districts are reporting information to their communities is with the help of a school report card, which often serves as the district's annual report.

The board and superintendent will have to allocate resources to publish an annual report, decide who will crunch the data (someone in the central office, an outside vendor, etc.), and choose how much discretion to give each school to design its own report card and add additional information.

But the board's most important role is to impress upon staff that the report card is more than just another piece of paper mailed home to parents. Use the report card regularly as a topic for discussion at school forums and at parent, staff and board meetings. Otherwise, the report card will become one more bothersome mandate to check off the to-do list.

One way to avoid this is for the school board to finance staff development for teachers, principals and administrators on using data to improve performance. This training not only will help them communicate results to parents and the community, but it also will help them improve instruction to students in their classrooms.

Districts don't do a good enough job of distributing the data. You gather all this information and then don't use it or share it with the community. It's the biggest mistake you can make.

— Rick Kaufman, executive director of public engagement and communication services, Jefferson County Public Schools, Colo.

Good advice

In its 1999 research report, *Reporting Results: What the Public Wants to Know,* A-Plus Communications (with *Education Week*) offered several guidelines to ensure that these report cards are used:

Keep them short, such as a six-panel brochure.

Have a more detailed version available for people who want more data.

Add short narrative descriptions. School data are not self-explanatory to nonexperts.

Advise parents and others how they can use the data. It's not obvious to most.

Spend as much time working on distribution as on production. Research shows that even most teachers say they've never seen district report cards.

The best communicators

Several recent national surveys by groups such as the Education Writers Association, The Business Roundtable and Education Commission of the States suggest that the public considers teachers and parents to be by far the most credible sources of information about schools. The lesson: Use the insiders to communicate. The National School Public Relations Association says the most well-known school employees tend to be the following, in this order:

1. School secretary
2. Custodians
3. Bus drivers
4. School nurse
5. Teachers
6. Principal
7. Superintendent
8. School board members

Are you talking to the right people?

School board members and district leaders tend to spend most of their time communicating with their critics, when they should be focused on the large majority of people (the equivalent of "undecided voters" or "the silent majority") in the middle.

Audience	Typical	Preferred
Supporters	30% OF YOUR TIME	5–15% OF YOUR TIME
Silent Majority	5% OF YOUR TIME	70–90% OF YOUR TIME
Critics	65% OF YOUR TIME	5–15% OF YOUR TIME

— Michigan Association of School Boards

What Do You Know?

ACTIVITIES GUIDE

Now it's time to put to the test what you learned in Chapter 2. How well do you know the materials you have just read? These activities will test your knowledge on the issues highlighted in this chapter. They also will give you an opportunity to discuss important issues with your fellow board members. We encourage you to jot answers, notes and thoughts in the margins.

Pop Quiz

How do we set goals with our community?

	True	*False*
We listen to the concerns of community members — and not just when we need their "Yes" votes on the bond campaign.	❑	❑
If we let the community have a voice in setting district goals, we still can retain our leadership roles as board members.	❑	❑
We shouldn't forget to report back to community members about which recommendations we accepted and which we did not.	❑	❑
Parents are not the only constituency we should worry about.	❑	❑
We should use more formal listening mechanisms, like surveys and focus groups, to understand what our constituents want. Spending a lot of time in the community doesn't mean we have our fingers on the pulse.	❑	❑
We don't seek community input simply to ratify decisions we've already made.	❑	❑
Schools and district report cards should include both the good news and the bad.	❑	❑

If you answered "False" to three or more of these questions, it's time to review this chapter.

What Would You Do?

Turning Back the Clock on High School Schedules, Part Two *30 minutes*

Read the case study below and discuss the questions that follow. Make sure to read part one in the previous chapter.

At the next school board meeting, staff members were poised to share their findings and answer board questions, including whether a late-start schedule really improves high school test scores. What indicators were used to assess student performance? Would those indicators change with later starts? How would a later start affect bus schedules, as well as elementary and middle school start times? How much would it cost?

But before the staff could report to the board, Dakota Ridge High School basketball coach Adam Schlossman addressed the board during public comments. The coach said he represented a large group of parents and teachers who had read about the board's interest in late-start schedules in the newspaper. They were concerned about the proposal's impact on student learning and extracurricular activities. A friend who worked in another district with late-start schedules told Schlossman that teachers were upset because students left class early for practice. Schlossman had learned that fewer buses were available to take students to games. Schlossman also talked to several local employers who were angry because the proposal would cut into student employees' work hours.

The board turned to the staff for their report. Staff reported that six of the eight high schools in the study Plattner had heard about had indeed shown slight increases in student performance after implementing later start times. Two, however, showed no significant difference at all. Only 58 percent of the total students in the study showed any gain in standardized test scores. It was not clear whether later start times were the reason for increased performance.

Staff also analyzed Lakewood high school students' scores on state criterion-referenced tests and found they had declined between 5 percent and 12 percent in math and English in the past three years. Student grades in academic subjects showed no clear trend. The number of tardies had increased significantly, especially in first- and second-period classes. Absences and discipline incidents were up. Anecdotal information from teachers indicated that students were more tired and stressed in recent years.

After the presentation, the communications director recommended that the district collect more data about teacher, parent and student opinions on late-start schedules. She also suggested talking at length with the education reporter about the late-start debate. Her hope was that the reporter would write a more comprehensive article. The board agreed. They also asked the communications director to prepare a fact sheet about high school performance and a brief explanation of the late-start study. They suggested that staff use current vehicles for communicating with teachers, parents and students including key communicator breakfasts, faculty meetings and the district newsletter. The board wanted to learn how widespread the opposition to the late-start proposal really was, and why. Staff would report to the board at the next meeting.

Discussion

If you were designing the board's communication effort, what strategies would you suggest? Are there other groups that should be consulted?

Based on the data brought forward by staff, what additional data would you need to make a decision? Why?

Discussion Guide

What Worked? *15–30 minutes*

Reflect on previous and current efforts to inform and involve community stakeholders.

What worked best and why?

What didn't work and why?

What will you do differently?

What strategies will you try from this chapter?

Brainstorming Activity

Are We on the Same Page? *30–60 minutes*

It's time to design your school district's report card. As school board members, what do you believe is important when measuring school success? And how do your views compare to the priorities of key stakeholders? Here's one way to find out.

Step 1

Complete this survey, ranking each possible indicator in one of three ways:

- *Essential* for measuring the success of the community's schools
- *Important*
- *Not important*

Step 2

Discuss your responses, noting any differences among board members. Also, discuss how community members might rank these indicators. (If you're interested in seeing how your views compare to a national sample of parents, taxpayers and educators, see the chart on page 30.)

Step 3

Brainstorm other indicators that you might want to include on your local report card. How about civic values such as a commitment to community service? Or noncontroversial values such as honesty and punctuality? Are these important for schools to address? How do you know? Are they measurable?

Step 4

Who in your community should take this survey (teachers, parents, business and civic leaders, etc.)? And how should you get this input (phone, mail or e-mail surveys; back-to-school nights; parent-teacher conferences; chamber of commerce meetings; information booth at the local shopping mall; church events; etc.)?

Step 5

What will you do if your priorities as a board differ from the community's priorities? Here are some options to discuss with fellow board members:

- Try to explain and persuade the community to see it your way.
- Accept the community's indicators as the right ones for the report card.
- Meet with small groups of community members to discuss the differences of opinion — and perhaps find some middle ground.

What Counts?

What Counts?

	A-Essential	**B**-Important	**C**-Not important
Class size			
Statewide test scores			
SAT/ACT scores			
Percent of students with an "A" or a "B" average			
Percent of students who go on to a four-year college			
Percent of students promoted to next grade			
School safety			
Per-pupil spending			
Teacher qualifications			
Number of students per computer			
Student satisfaction survey data			
Parental satisfaction survey data			
Dropout rates			
Attendance rates			
Graduation rates			
Course offerings			
Number of students			
Number of computers per teacher			
Teachers' salaries			
Percent of parents who attend parent-teacher conferences			
Demographics of students			

— Adapted from *Reporting Results: What the Public Wants to Know*, A-Plus Communications and *Education Week*, 1999

Pop Quiz

Know Your Customers *15 minutes*

How well do you know your community and school district? Take this quiz and compare your answers to data in your district.

1. Nationally, 24 percent of the population has school-age children; in my town, it's _____ percent.

2. About 75 percent of school-age children will live a portion of their lives in single-parent homes; in my town, _____ percent of children live in single-parent homes.

3. _____ percent of my town's residents live at or below the poverty level.

4. _____ percent of my town's residents age 25 or older have not completed high school.

5. _____ percent of our children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

6. _____ percent of our students are white; _____ percent of our students are black; _____ percent of our students are Hispanic; _____ percent of our students are Asian.

7. The unemployment rate for my town is _____ percent.

8. My district employs _____ staff and _____ support staff.

9. Our largest corporate taxpayers are _____ and _____.

10. The district's largest employer is _____.

11. Last year, _____ percent of my district's students (ninth–12th grade) dropped out.

CHAPTER THREE

What Data Measure Whether We Have Reached Our Goals?

INTRODUCTION

Let's face it, we have so much data available to help drive board decision-making that figuring out where to start and knowing how to use data effectively is hard work. Understanding what data are available is the first step to understanding how powerful data can be in helping board members make better decisions for children.

What data are available to track student performance? How do you figure out what data are most relevant? How will you know whether data are valid and reliable? What's the difference between quantitative and qualitative data? The answers to these questions and more are coming up next, but first ...

Readiness Checklist

Is your board ready to talk about what data measure whether you have reached your goals?

Take a moment and find out.

We have data on student performance related to our goals.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

We examine our data by gender, race and socio-economics to measure success of all students.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

We expect our superintendent to use our student achievement data to plan staff development and to reward teacher and staff performance.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

We have an assessment program based on district standards.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

Our assessment program has multiple measures, not just a single high-stakes test.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

Assessment data are provided to teachers and principals in a format that can be used to make informed instructional decisions.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

If you answered "No" to three or more of these questions, keep reading. We will walk you through what data are available and what to look for in the numbers and research.

Thinking It Through

With so much data available, half the battle is figuring out what you want to measure to determine whether you are meeting your goals. These simple questions will help frame your thinking.

(It's important to think about these issues — and even discuss them with your fellow board members — before we talk more about different sources of data.)

What does our board want to find out?

Think about the goals or end results for student achievement you have set with your board, district staff and community. Are they easily measurable? Will some be more difficult to measure than others? Are they still worth pursuing? (See extended discussion in Chapters 1 and 2.)

What data have been gathered, and are they reliable?

Too often data are confused with opinions. The source of all data can be verified. Is your district providing your board with reliable data?

What data are available but have not been gathered?

If you know what data are available, you then can decide whether more need to be gathered and analyzed to make a decision or measure progress on goals.

What is the cost in time and resources to gather additional data?

Can we afford to gather additional information? If not, will we decide not to pursue it? Or will we find another source of funding to cover the cost? If there's a delay in collecting the data, what impact will it have on the decision that must be made?

Have all individuals who will be influenced by the specific board decision had an opportunity to provide input?

Understanding the impact that board decisions will have on students, teachers, principals and district staff is critical to gaining acceptance of the ultimate decision. (Check out Chapter 2 for ways to gather community feedback on the issues that matter most.)

Data to Track Student Performance

As board members, you deal with all kinds of data: budgeting, per capita spending, fluctuations in the number of qualified or certified teachers, growth in technology use, cost-saving improvements to facilities, rate at which employees are meeting or exceeding departmental goals, staff development initiatives, more efficient bus routes, and so forth.

This guidebook does not cover these kinds of data. Instead, it focuses on data related to student achievement, which is the district's top priority. Too often student performance is narrowly defined as academic achievement. In this book we define student performance more broadly. Not only is academic achievement critical, but job skills and preparation, citizenship, arts appreciation, and the development of character and values are also.

Most likely, your district already is collecting many of these data — sometimes at the request of state and federal governments. But maybe you and your community have determined that there are other things worth measuring (see Chapter 2). In that case, you will need to begin collecting additional data.

What's the difference between quantitative and qualitative data?

Quantitative data are hard numbers such as enrollment figures, dropout rates and test scores.

Qualitative data are based on information gathered from one-on-one interviews, focus groups or general observations over a period of time.

Make sure not to mistake either of these kinds of data with anecdotes. These often are misconstrued as data, but in reality anecdotes are nothing more than stories.

There are many different types of data you can use to track student performance:

- **Graduation rates**
- **Test scores** (local, state and national)
- **Achievement of students with special needs** (e.g., gifted, at-risk, disabled)
- **Graduates enrolled in college** or other higher education
- **Employment rates** of graduates
- **Salary level** of graduates' jobs
- **Awards and recognition** received by students and staff
- **Participation in advanced courses** (calculus, physics, etc.)
- **Scholarships** received by graduates

But other performance indicators might be equally important to your community. Examples include:

- **Safety indicators** (discipline, violence, etc.)
- **Participation in community service**
- **Participation in extracurricular activities**
- **Teen pregnancy rates**
- **Graduate satisfaction surveys**
- **Attendance rates**
- **Parent satisfaction with academic offerings**

Types of Tests and What They Measure

For many districts, student achievement is measured by standardized tests. Increasingly, state funding and district accreditation ride on how well students perform on these tests. We'll talk more about how to use tests to measure student achievement in Chapter 4. But before we move to more advanced topics about data in the next chapter, let's stick with the simple stuff, like learning more about different types of tests and what they measure. In this chapter, we also will take a look at the most commonly used statistical terms tied to testing.

Norm-referenced tests

These tests compare individual student performance with the performance of others in the same grade, usually a nationally representative sample of students who are the same age. To develop a norm-referenced test, the test publisher asks experts in curriculum areas to review the most common materials and textbooks used in the classroom. The experts then are asked to develop questions that reflect the content of those materials. These questions are administered to a representative sample of as many as 200,000 students across the country.

Student test scores tend to be reported by percentile: Students who do less well than the national norming group score below the 50th percentile; students who perform better than the norm score above the 50th percentile. For example, a student who scores at the 70th percentile has done as well as or better than 70 percent of other peer students taking the test.

These commercially developed, typically multiple-choice tests are the most commonly used in schools to measure student achievement. The only other tests used besides these commercially developed norm-referenced tests are tests created by teachers.

Examples of norm-referenced tests are Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, Stanford Achievement Test, Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills and the California Achievement Test.

Criterion-referenced tests

Criterion-referenced tests measure a student's performance against a set of standards (or performance criteria) — standards that explain what students should know and be able to do from one grade to the next. They often are called standards-referenced tests or proficiency tests. The term criterion-referenced typically refers to a test that comes with a "cut score." Students must attain the cut score to pass. So, instead of being graded on a curve, scores tend to be reported by the percentage of students who score at or above a specified level (such as below basic, basic, proficient or advanced). Because criterion-referenced tests measure a student's progress toward meeting standards, these test scores can give board members a better idea of how well students are mastering the district's or the state's standards. They also can help measure the strengths and weaknesses of programs, reforms and innovations. (Norm-referenced tests come off the shelf and, generally, are difficult to tailor to specific programs.)

There are all kinds of data in school districts, but very little is actually used to inform people and their decisions and actions.

— Edie Holcomb, *Getting Excited About Data: How to Combine People, Passion and Proof*

Examples of criterion-referenced tests are the Colorado Student Assessment Program, Kentucky's Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) exams, the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) and Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL).

Performance tests

Performance tests require students to demonstrate what they can do by writing essays, performing mathematical computations, conducting science experiments or providing portfolios of artistic work. Performance tests assess a student's competence in different subject areas, including math, writing, science and the arts. This test can more accurately assess a student's writing ability, for example, than can a multiple-choice test. These kinds of tests sometimes are referred to as "authentic assessments."

Let's say the student was asked to compose a persuasive essay as part of a performance test. A test reviewer, who later grades the student's essay, will use a guide — or rubric — that spells out what the student must include in the essay to receive an exceptional grade. The reviewer might look for proper punctuation, correct spelling, ability to construct a persuasive argument, logic, reasoning and factual information to support the student's position.

There presently is no national performance test administered to students. The Vermont Mathematics and Writing Portfolios are one way that teachers measure student progress against standards. Many state tests, such as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) achievement tests, use many performance items along with multiple-choice questions.

Achievement tests vs. aptitude tests

Achievement tests are designed to measure the student's attainment of knowledge, skills or abilities. The norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests described above are achievement tests. On the other hand, aptitude or ability tests are designed to measure the student's potential for achievement. Well-known examples include the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) for college entrance.

Tip!

Check out National School Boards Association's Raising the Bar: A School Board Primer on Student Achievement *for more in-depth information on testing. This section was adapted largely from* Raising the Bar.

Commonly used statistical terms

Let's take a look at some statistical terms commonly used in testing and what these terms tell you. To be a true data guru, it's good to keep these terms in your hip pocket. You are sure to impress people when you can rattle off the top of your head the difference between a mean and a median.

Mean

The sum of all test scores divided by the number of scores. Often called the average.

Example: Let's say you have recorded the heights of 13 of your best friends. You calculate the mean by adding all 13 heights together and then dividing the total by 13.

Median

The point above which half the test scores fall and the point below which the other half of the scores fall. Often called the midpoint.

Example: Since you already have recorded the heights of 13 of your friends, let's figure out the median next. To do so, arrange their heights in the ascending or descending order. The seventh person's height is the median. That's because six friends' heights will fall above it and six will fall below it.

Mode

The most commonly occurring score in a set of scores.

Example: Just for grins, you have documented the weights of your best friends — who, by now, are a little fed up with you prying into their personal business. After all, height is one thing — weight is another. OK, back to the subject at hand. Let's say three of your friends weigh 150 pounds, two weigh 180 pounds and one weighs 250 pounds. The mode is 150 pounds because that is the weight the greatest number of your friends share.

Ask the Expert

Sherre Calouri

School Board Chair, Beaverton School District, Ore.

Why are data important?

If you don't use data, you're making decisions in a fog. When I first got on the board our district pretty much said that we were perfect. Beaverton kids went to college, behaved well, received good grades and if they weren't going to college they got great jobs after graduation. All us board members had kids who were doing well in school, so we nodded.

I remember the turning point came when the board started to say, "Show me." An administrator brought us some data from the high schools that showed a significant number of our students were not passing their classes. We were shocked. We had no idea. We had not allocated any resources, nor directed the superintendent to solve the problem. We hadn't done anything because we didn't know.

One time a board member said we had a gang problem, and all the other board members argued that we didn't. We needed to see the data, not argue with the board member. I think that boards think that data gives magical answers but the fact is that you can't do anything magical unless you have the data.

What advice do you have for board members who are analyzing data for the first time?

Well, I think both superintendents and board members may fear that the data will tell you things that you don't want to hear. I would rather have the data tell me than learn it from someone outside. I want to know first. When the *A Nation At Risk* report claimed schools were failing, local schools didn't know whether they were or not. They really didn't. The media came at us, and school districts didn't have the data to say "Yes" or "No." When we can back up our decisions and claims with data we have much greater credibility.

If you don't use data, you're making decisions in a fog.

— Sherre Calouri, school board chair, Beaverton School District, Ore.

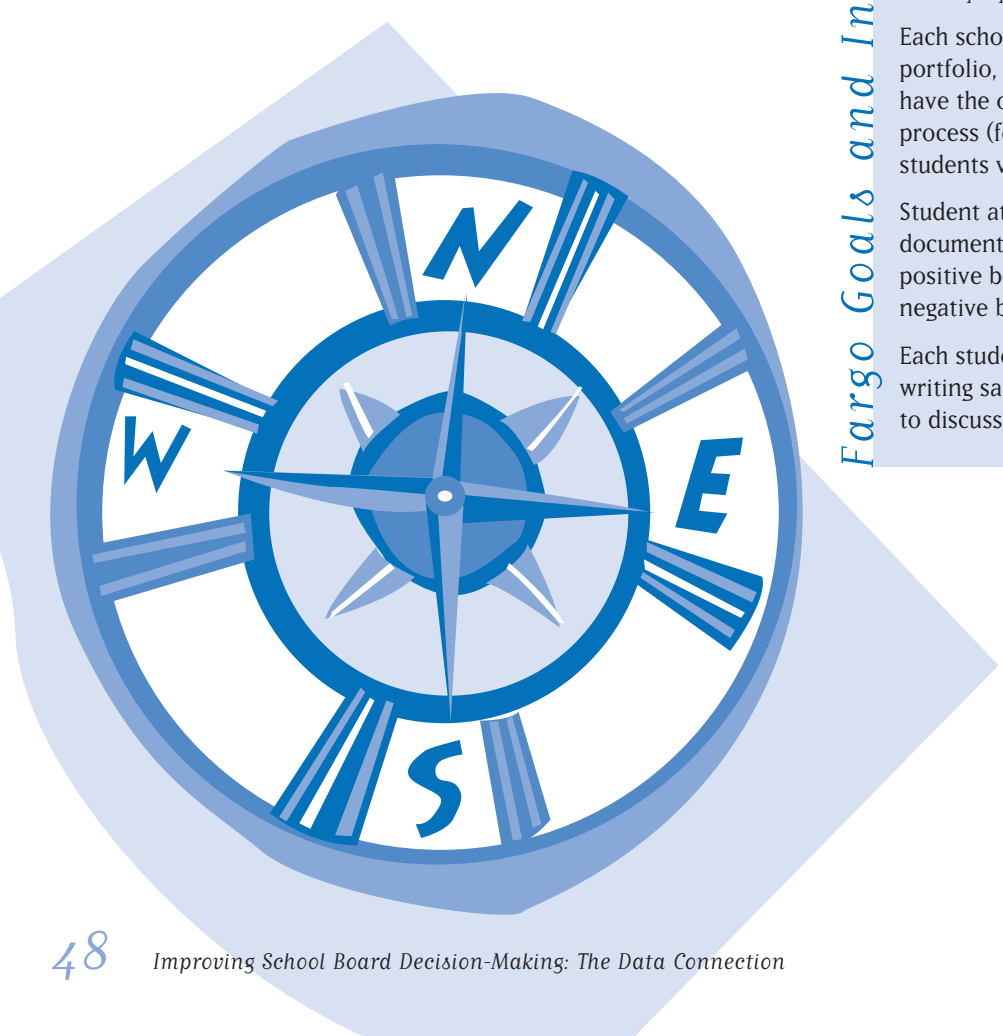
Using to Data to Measure the "Soft Stuff" — Student Citizenship, Character and Life Skills

Although many districts stress the importance of student citizenship, character and life skills — in addition to academic achievement — just as many struggle with how to measure these goals. It is understandable. Far less work has been done in this area. What indicators can boards use to measure these important characteristics and abilities?

In Fargo, N.D., the school board has given a lot of thought to this question. Board members, with the help of district staff, have identified how to measure whether the district is addressing these goals successfully. Here's how they have done it.

The evil is half-cured whose cause we know.

— William Shakespeare



Fargo Goals and Indicators

Student citizenship

Goals

Students will be citizens who participate in and contribute to the well being of their community.

Students will participate in their community's activities.

Students will demonstrate constructive behaviors.

Students will understand and participate in the democratic process.

Students will be conversant about societal issues.

Indicators

Over 90 percent of student portfolios will document involvement in some form of community service activity by 12th grade.

Each school will document, as a part of its building portfolio, ways in which students are engaged in and have the opportunity to practice in the democratic process (for example, what percentage of 18-year-old students vote?).

Student attendance and behavior indicators will document a high percentage of students engaged in positive behaviors and/or a decline each year in negative behaviors.

Each student's portfolio will contain at least one writing sample that documents the student's ability to discuss a significant societal issue.

Character

Goals

Students will possess sound character and self-esteem that allows them to accept and respect themselves and others.

Students will accept and respect the diversity of gender, cultural and age differences.

Students will cooperate and collaborate to achieve common goals.

Students will work independently and compete as necessary.

Indicators

Student behavior data (discipline referrals) and survey data (school improvement surveys) will demonstrate annual decline or absence of harassment, bullying or discriminatory behaviors.

Student portfolios will contain evidence of projects accomplished through collaborative efforts.

Opportunities for involvement in and evidence of engagement in extracurricular activities will increase annually with a goal of 90 percent or more of high school students engaged in activities.

The percentage of teachers trained in collaborative learning, diversity, expectations and character education will increase annually.

Life skills

Goals

Students will have the life skills necessary to meet the demands of everyday life effectively.

Students will be able to secure and maintain employment.

Students will make healthy lifestyle choices.

Students will avoid the use of restricted and illegal substances.

Students will maintain physical and mental health.

Students will demonstrate a strong work ethic.

Indicators

Percentage of students reporting alcohol and substance abuse will decline each year as measured by standardized surveys.

Surveys of local employers will indicate over 85 percent satisfaction with employability characteristics and work behaviors of Fargo students and graduates.

Annual improvement in health-related fitness performance on standardized and district measures (such as the President's Physical Fitness Program).

Improvement over time in healthy nutrition choices as measured by Nutrition Service's documentation.

How to Be a Savvy Data and Research Consumer — or How to Tap Into Your Inner Data Guru

When you work with data, you also will be working with research. There is a difference. Perhaps the easiest way to understand the distinction is to think of data in terms of system goals or end results (e.g., a 10 percent improvement in student test scores). Think of research in terms of programs (e.g., the ABC reading program helped us improve student literacy).

The superintendent and other staff likely will present you with research about the effectiveness of various programs. You may hear terms such as validity, reliability, researcher bias and population validity. Do not be afraid. By the time you finish reading this section you will be talking about validity and reliability with the best of them.

Often these data terms come up in conversation about studies or research about particular programs. How will you know whether the findings in a study are valid? How will you recognize biased research? The consequences of ignoring these questions are enormous. If you don't know how to separate good data from bad, how can you begin to make well-informed decisions that have major implications for hundreds or thousands of students?

Let's take a closer look at what these terms tell us about data.

Is the research reliable and valid? How do you know?

It's easy to confuse reliability and validity. Reliability is the degree to which the test yields similar results with the same subjects at different times under different conditions (a longitudinal verification). Validity is the degree to which a test or other measurement tool actually measures what it claims to measure. So, taking the case study we've been discussing at the end of each chapter, the data would be valid if they could show that the intervention of changing high school start times actually drove the student achievement gains. The data would be reliable if you could see similar results in other school districts.

Here's another way to think about it. Let's say you are an archer shooting arrows at a target. If all the arrows you have shot hit the same point, you have reliable aim. It doesn't matter whether you have hit the target or not — you hit the same spot again and again in rain, shine or sleet. That's reliability. However, most archers we know think it's a good idea to actually hit the bull's eye. To have validity among your fellow archers, the arrows you shoot actually must hit the bull's eye. That's validity.

The results of a research study hinge on whether the tests or other measurement tools truly measure what the research claims. This will tell you whether the research is valid. Here's the catch: Validity measures are hard to get your hands on. The good news is that the absence of extensive validity evidence does not mean the data lack validity, but you should know it does limit the interpretations you can draw from the data. Reliability measures, however, are easier to obtain. If reliability evidence is missing from the research, you usually can conclude that the study was not conducted carefully or that the researcher omitted reporting this evidence because the reliability was low.

Is the researcher biased?

Researcher bias is a problem if it creates distortions in the way research is conducted or reported. The best place to uncover researcher bias is in the introduction to a study or research report. The introduction typically discusses the researcher's affiliations, why the researcher conducted the survey, why the research is important and if the researcher is committed to a particular point of view.

Here's a checklist for how to recognize biased research:

Does the introduction suggest that the researcher is inclined to favor one side or one issue over another?

Is the wording objective and balanced, free of emotional or sensationalized language?

Does the researcher have a stake in a particular point of view?

Is the researcher a member of a group that would predispose him or her to a certain view on the subject of the research?

Who funded the research and does the funder have a major stake in the study's outcome one way or another?

— Adapted from *Keeping the Governance Team Focused on Accountability*, Texas Association of School Boards

Tip!

Do not be afraid. By the time you finish reading this section you will be talking about validity and reliability with the best of them.

Debbie Manns

School Board Member, Texas Association of School Boards

Ask the Expert

What advice would you give school board members about using data?

Don't assume the data are reliable. When you are just getting started sometimes you tend to look at data and automatically assume the data are reliable. This is a trap to be wary of and one that the staff and board need to pay attention to. You have to realize that some data are slanted to move forward a particular issue — or reported in a way that makes a particular issue look favorable.

Don't panic. As you look at your own board's data — like test scores — don't assume that if there is a big drop in a particular area it signifies crisis. There may be a "special circumstance." (However, also be mindful that there MAY be a crisis looming that the data have allowed you to catch and deal with it early on.)

It's also very important to understand the context. For instance, when Texas changed rules on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills' scores, special education students were included in the test results. This caused overall drops in scores. It didn't necessarily mean that those whose scores had been reported all along were doing worse because another population had become part of the test results. Those school districts in Texas that had large test exemption rates (that is, exempting special education students from taking the test) saw large spikes in test results while those, like Leander, which had historically included special education students, had much less to worry about.

How important is it to look at trends?

You want to examine data over time. Remember that one data point (one year's worth of test results) is not enough to serve as a base for a weighty decision — such as getting rid of a program or making a major change in operations. It takes several years of data before they actually can tell you something meaningful.

Who should be involved?

Train everyone. Everyone — staff, superintendent, department heads and especially the board — needs to be trained to understand how to read and use data. Otherwise you may end up in a situation where major changes in operations are being made every time a new test result becomes available. When new people join the board or staff, help them understand why and how data are used in your district. The reasons behind using data are just as important as the data themselves — everyone throughout the system wants to operate efficiently and effectively to provide students with the best education possible. Don't assume that only the top people in the system can use data to guide their operations effectively. Everyone can be involved.

Disaggregating data is not a problem-solving strategy. It is a problem-finding strategy.

— Victoria L. Bernhardt, *Data Analysis for Comprehensive Schoolwide Improvement*

What Are Disaggregated Data?

Even if you have served on the school board for less than a month, we would lay odds that you have heard the term disaggregated data. And for those of you who already are data gurus, you know how revealing it can be to break data down by different categories.

School board members who use data to drive decisions know that looking at the test scores is not enough. Typically, student achievement data are reported for whole populations, or as aggregate data. You can see patterns or trends from these kinds of data, but they may present a deceiving picture that hides problems with a particular group of students. When the data are disaggregated, more revealing patterns, trends and other important information can be uncovered. Disaggregated data simply means looking at test scores by specific subgroups of students.

Here's another way to think about it ...

Former U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich used to quip that he (5 feet) and Shaquille O'Neal (7 feet) had an average height of 6 feet, but that the coach would be well advised to consider more than their combined average before putting Reich on the basketball team.

These are some of the questions you can begin to answer when you disaggregate data:

1. Is there an achievement gap in reading, math or science among different groups of students? Is the gap growing larger, shrinking or staying the same?
2. Are male students performing better than female students in math? How will we increase the performance of female students?
3. Are there more poor or minority students in special education classes than there are in Advanced Placement classes? What are the reasons behind the difference, and what will we do about it?

Disaggregated data also can tell you whether student mobility, professional development for teachers or parental involvement is affecting student performance. How? You can look at the data by classrooms in a school, by grade levels within a school or district, by schools within a district, or by the amount of training a teacher has received. The task of retrieving this information is best left in the hands of your district staff. Once you have the disaggregated data, your role as a board member is to look for larger trends and patterns that may redefine your goals/end results.

Disaggregating the data is an essential tool for uncovering challenges facing your district, and in the long run, it helps you better serve all students.

Different ways to disaggregate student data:

- Gender
- Socio-economic status
- Mobility (students moving in and out of the district at any given time)
- Race and ethnicity
- Special education and disability
- English as a Second Language (ESL)
- Students enrolled in courses like physics or algebra
- Students completing specific course, such as Advanced Placement

Profile

How One School Board Is Using Data to Help Improve Third-Grade Reading

Kennewick, Wash.

Five years ago, the Kennewick School Board in Washington learned that 30 percent of incoming high school freshmen in the district were receiving "D"s and "F"s in English and science. The statistic was grim.

"I remember wondering, 'What is happening?'" says board member Lynn Fielding. The board started scrutinizing high school data — comparing grade point averages against grades and discipline and attendance records to find answers.

The disaggregated data revealed important patterns. Persistently low-achieving students almost always got poor grades in English. "If students got a 'D' in English, they were getting 'D's in their other classes," says Fielding. Discipline records showed that these students also were getting into the most trouble in school and they had a higher dropout rate than others.

Board members, convinced that the problems were taking root in the middle grades, discussed the findings with the superintendent. The superintendent had a different take on the data. "These are the kids we don't teach to read by second grade," says Superintendent Paul Rosier. "Look at these kids. They don't know how to read, and they are failing in other subjects because of it."

The data backed up the superintendent. The number of children in third grade who were reading at a first-grade level was "staggering." The data showed that a quarter of the students entering the third grade were reading at first- and second-grade levels. And the failure to help kids learn how to read was coming back to haunt them years later in high school.

The district and the board set out to tackle poor reading performance head-on. The board's goal: 90 percent of all third graders will read at a third-grade level. Together, they mapped out a plan to improve scores. They established assessments in kindergarten through third grade, set standards on the tests, created benchmarks and annually reported to the public the percentage of students reading at grade level.

"It was only when we took these steps that we could really see what was happening," says Fielding. "In the first year, we had a 15 percent jump in reading scores, and people were euphoric. During the second year, there was an actual decline in the numbers of students meeting the reading standards by the end of third grade. It was hard to look that data in the eyes and report it in our community."

Since 1995, board members and district staff have become more sophisticated in their use and collection of data. Data always are disaggregated — something that was not done earlier. And, they have learned a lot along the way. At-home reading is critical. Student mobility is a huge factor in learning. The ability of an elementary school staff to work as a team determined whether deep change occurred.

What are longitudinal data?

For many board members, it's also important to see longitudinal data — data about the same groups or subgroups of students over time. However, districts typically do not collect and report data this way, often because they don't code their data to follow the performance of individual students. Instead, board members usually look at — and newspapers report about — data that compare two different groups of students: reading test scores of this year's third-grade class compared to last year's third-grade class, etc. Longitudinal data, on the other hand, would allow the board to compare reading scores of the same group of students — as third graders last year, as fourth graders this year, as fifth graders next year and so on.

In spring 2000, data showed that eight of the district's 13 elementary schools had a majority of their third graders reading at grade level. The data have helped identify program effectiveness. Fielding says school staff no longer talk about school averages or classes so much as altering instructional approaches for specific students.

"We still have lots of work to do," says Kathy Daly, another board member. "But the data show us that we are affecting the lives of more children, more deeply, for a longer period of time, at less cost, by teaching them to read well by third grade, than by any other single thing we can do in our school system. Looking at the data is how we do it."

The data show us that we are affecting the lives of more children, more deeply, for a longer period of time, at less cost, by teaching them to read well by third grade.

— Kathy Daly, school board member, Kennewick, Wash.

Key lesson learned

Your assessment system is the backbone of student performance. You have to build a good assessment system first. Otherwise, you have an assessment system that delivers inadequate information. The data must be clear and understandable. Everyone must know how to interpret the numbers.

— Lynn Fielding, school board member, Kennewick, Wash.

The power of the question

How boards ask for data: board member responsibilities

Which subpopulations of students do you want data reported on?

Will district staff break out data in reports and presentations by these subgroups?

Do district staff have the tools and training to produce trend data?

Will staff produce reports that summarize important trends revealed by the data?

Will staff prepare comparative analysis reports — two or more groups of districts, schools, students or some other group that have similar characteristics and can be compared with each other?

What questions should your board ask when presented with research?

Who conducted the research?

Is this research valid and reliable? How do you know?

Is the research biased in any way? How do you know?

How up-to-date are the data?

What trends do the data show?

How can we use these data to inform board decision-making about end results, goals and policy?

What new questions do the data raise, and how will we address them?

Ways to analyze data

Does putting the data in graphs or charts allow us to spot patterns in student performance more easily?

Are the data disaggregated into different categories or subgroups to see who is achieving and who is not?

Are there trends in the same data from one year to the next to measure progress (or lack of it)?

Can we compare our district's data to those of other districts to gauge better how our students are performing?

What Do You Know?

ACTIVITIES GUIDE

It's time to put to the test what you learned in Chapter 3. How well do you know the materials you have just read? These activities will test your knowledge on the issues highlighted in this chapter. They also will give you an opportunity to discuss important issues with your fellow board members. We encourage you to jot answers, notes and thoughts in the margins.

Pop Quiz

Do you know your data?

1. For which of these categories could you find disaggregated data:

a) Graduation rates
b) Standardized test scores
c) Teen pregnancy rates
d) Salary level of graduates' jobs
e) All of the above

2. A "mean" is:

a) A grumpy person
b) The most commonly occurring score in a set of scores
c) The sum of all test scores divided by the number of scores
d) An end to a ways
e) None of the above

3. You can tell research might be biased if:

a) The introduction suggests the researcher is inclined to favor one side or one issue over another
b) The wording in the introduction is emotional or sensationalized
c) The researcher is a member of a group that would predispose him or her to a certain view on the research subject
d) The group that funded the research has a major stake in the study's outcome
e) All of the above

4. A "median" is:

a) The sum of all test scores divided by the number of scores
b) The most commonly occurring score in a set of scores
c) A person who can tell the future
d) The point above which half the test scores fall and below which half of the scores fall
e) None of the above

5. Examples of quantitative data include:

a) Enrollment figures, dropout rates and test scores
b) One-on-one interviews
c) General observations
d) Personal opinions
e) All of the above

And because we emphasized earlier the importance of using more than one measure to test knowledge and understanding, we have included two open-ended questions.

6. What's the difference between a norm-referenced test and a criterion-referenced test, and what can the results tell you?

BONUS:

7. Why is it important to know whether data are valid and reliable? What's the difference between the two?

Answers: 1. e; 2. c; 3. e; 4. d; 5. a; 6. see pages 44–45 for answer; 7. see pages 50–51 for answer

What Would You Do?

Turning Back the Clock on High School Schedules, Part Three *30 minutes*

Read the case study below and discuss the questions that follow. Make sure to read parts one and two in previous chapters.

The more the Lakewood School Board learned about late starts and the academic performance of its high school students, the more questions it had. How reliable was the research from the late-start study? Was it replicated at multiple schools? Was it valid? Did achievement increase because of later starts? Had other studies been conducted that included a larger sample? Were the students in the sample similar to Lakewood's demographics? Did surrounding districts show any correlation between student performance and start times? What were other similar districts doing to improve high school performance? How did some teachers come to the conclusion that students were more irritable and sleepy? Were there corroborating data? Had staff disaggregated student performance data to determine if the declines were isolated to a particular student ethnic group, gender, socio-economic group or geographic location? What did teachers, students and parents really think about the change in schedule? Staff got busy collecting more information.

Before the next board meeting, fact sheets were distributed to parents, teachers, students and community leaders. The communications director and superintendent talked to the education reporter about the district's process for reviewing student performance, updating district goals and revising strategies based on data. They noted that one of the district's goals was to prepare high school graduates for employment or college. High school principals discussed the fact sheet and answered questions at faculty, PTA and student council meetings. The communications director talked with drill-team parents and athletic and band boosters. The superintendent hosted a breakfast with key communicators such as the mayor, police chief, chamber of commerce president and the leader of the education foundation.

During the next school board meeting's public comment period, Linda Thomas, a highly influential business leader, spoke on behalf of a well-organized parent group, Parents Helping Sleep-Deprived Teens. She demanded the school board approve the late-start proposal without further consideration and threatened a recall if action was not taken. She said her group convinced a state representative to introduce a bill to give districts grants of $25,000 to help defray expenses associated with late-start high school schedules.

Next, the staff reported that after disaggregating data, they saw no significant difference in performance by gender or ethnicity, but performance for Lakewood students enrolled in the free and reduced-price lunch program showed slightly steeper declines since the district moved to an earlier start time. Staff also reported to the board the results of a survey distributed about the fact sheet. The results showed 15 percent of teachers (representing primarily coaches, band directors and extracurricular activity sponsors) opposed the change in schedule, 65 percent supported the change and 20 percent were undecided. Among parents, 20 percent opposed the change, 30 percent supported the change and 50 percent were undecided. Students were split evenly on the issue.

Data on 15 surrounding districts showed that student performance on state assessments varied widely. Only three of the 15 districts began school before 7:45 a.m. Five began between 8:35 a.m. and 9 a.m. The remaining seven began between 7:45 a.m. and 8:30 a.m. While there was no clear correlation between start times and performance on state tests, tardies were significantly higher for districts that began before 7:45 a.m. Discipline incidents were slightly higher for districts starting before 8:30 a.m. Anecdotally, district administrators contacted by Lakewood staff reported general satisfaction with start times in their high schools.

Staff also presented an in-depth study on late-start schedules conducted by a local university, which included surveys of teachers, coaches, students and parents. The data show the average number of student sick days decreased in late-start high schools; students reported less difficulty staying awake in class; grades improved slightly, although it was not clear why; and the number of student discipline reports remained the same. Teachers surveyed expressed concern about students who were

excused early from class to attend practice. About half of the coaches said fewer students were involved in school sports because of late-start schedules. Administrators generally supported late-start times but acknowledged that some buses were chronically late because the buses made two runs: an early bus run to elementary and middle schools, followed by the high school run. If buses were delayed during the first run, they were late for the second run. As a result, high school students showed up to classes tardy during first period. Staff reported that Lakewood would have to purchase several additional buses if the board approved later start times. Staff were exploring transportation costs.

Discussion

While the data show increased attendance and some other positive outcomes, there are challenges tied to busing and sports activities. How would you address these concerns? Is there additional information you would request at this point?

Does the board have enough information to make a decision now? Why or why not?

If you served on the Lakewood School Board, what would you do next?

Discussion Guide

Guiding Questions for Discussion

Discuss the following questions with your fellow board members.

What types of research and data are used in your district?

Which types of assessments does your district use?

What other data need to be gathered and why?

How are the assessment results and other measures of student achievement reported to the school board?

Have you and your fellow board members used research or data to make informed policy decisions about school improvement, teacher quality, student achievement and other issues? Why or why not?

What are you learning from this research and data?

CHAPTER FOUR

How Do Data Inform Board Decision-Making?

INTRODUCTION

Now that you understand what data are available to measure student performance, let's take a look at how you can use data to drive board decisions about student performance. How do you know what data to request when making decisions? What questions should you ask?

Readiness Checklist

Is your board ready to use data to drive decision-making?

Take a moment and find out.

We regularly review data to see whether we are achieving districtwide goals.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

We understand how to disaggregate data and why it's important to do so.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

We know the differences among different types of tests and how test scores can inform board decision-making.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

We look for trends in data over time.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

Our district staff collect and distribute the data to the board.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

District staff and board members discuss together what the data tell us.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

We use multiple indicators, not just one set of test scores, to analyze student performance.
❑ *Yes* ❑ *No* ❑ *Find Out*

If you answered "No" to three or more of these questions, flip back to Chapter 3 for a quick refresher course.

Continuous School Improvement Using Data

As you examine data, remember what is most important: raising student performance. Your primary goal is to have all students meeting or exceeding academic standards. Achieving this goal means looking for patterns or trends in the data over time, setting and reaching goals, and seeing annual gains in student performance.

Some of you are reading about using data to improve student achievement for the first time. Others already have used data to set policy, meet goals, inform your community or measure student achievement. No matter where you fit in, you can never ask too many questions. The more questions you ask, the more knowledgeable you become. Others will learn from your questions, too. The rewards for your persistence are high-performing students, a supportive community and a motivated staff.

Review board-approved districtwide goals/end results for student achievement

Getting started begins with reviewing goals for students in your district. (If you haven't set goals yet with your fellow board members, check out *Getting Results by Setting Goals* on p. 66.) These goals might include everything from raising third-grade reading scores to graduating students who volunteer in their communities to cutting the dropout rate in half.

Gather different types of data

The next step is to identify what data will tell you whether you are meeting your goals. No single piece of data tells the whole story. Instead, collect a variety of data that focus on what you are trying to measure. Do not make a decision based on one set of test scores. Instead, analyze different assessments to get a more complete picture.

Typically, data analysis begins with reviewing student assessment results. These data not only reveal strengths and weaknesses, but they also give you important clues about what other data to collect. Dropout and attendance rates, course-completion rates, and Advanced Placement course enrollment provide even more information.

Ask lots of questions

A big part of your job is to determine whether you are succeeding in helping all students learn at their highest level. To do that, you must ask the right questions. Even seasoned school board members who have analyzed data say that one of their biggest challenges is knowing what questions to ask. That's sometimes easier said than done. No one wants to appear uninformed, especially in a public meeting. But there's a good chance that the questions you have the courage to ask are the same ones on the minds of your fellow board members. If you lead the way, others will follow. Soon, more board members will chime in with their own questions.

Some questions to ask ...

Here are some questions to ask the district or school staff when they present student achievement data to your board:

When you examined reading data (math data, science data, etc.), what did you see as students' strengths and weaknesses?

What trends or patterns did the data reveal?

What were student performance goals for this year? Did the district meet or exceed them? Why or why not?

What different strategies will the district staff employ to increase student achievement with defined groups (i.e., will you implement new strategies or refine existing efforts)?

What new policies should the board consider to direct or support district staff in this effort?

How do you communicate the data results to parents and other members of the community?

Collect any additional data

After reviewing the first round of data, explore with your fellow board members and the superintendent whether you need more information to make a more well-informed decision. What else do you need to know? Why? Will collecting the data require more resources? How critical is the data?

Identify next steps — *and act*

You have reviewed your district goals. You have asked questions. You have collected and analyzed the data. You have gathered additional data. What happens next largely depends on what the data tell you. For example, the data may reveal gaps in learning between male and female students in math. It may show that some schools are performing well in reading, but others are falling behind. You may learn that science teachers need more targeted professional development to implement challenging standards. What do the data tell you? Based on the answers, you may need to direct the superintendent and staff to develop action plans to intervene in the problem area. Or you may decide that you need to revise board priorities and policies.

There are a lot of sacred cows in our district, but if we have the data and are well informed, we can start making important and needed changes.

— Rhea Zaks, school board member,
Benicia United School District, Calif.

Using data to inform board decision-making

1. Review board-approved districtwide goals/end results for student achievement.
2. Gather different types of data.
3. Ask lots of questions.
4. Collect any additional data.
5. Identify next steps — *and act.*

Look for Patterns and Ask the Right Questions

As you review data, you may uncover inconsistencies in student performance. For example, girls may lag behind boys in math or science. There may be wide gaps in achievement among Hispanic, Asian, white and African-American students. You may find that reading scores are better across the board than math scores. Maybe some schools are achieving district goals faster than others. Perhaps high school sophomores are dropping out at higher rates than they did three years ago.

No single piece of information tells the whole story, but analysis across different assessments can point out areas of needed improvement.

— Vermont Education Department, *Using Data for Action Planning to Improve Student Performance*

Once you have identified patterns, get to the bottom of what the data reveal. Some factors that could contribute to the gap in performance, as well as questions to help identify strengths and weaknesses in curriculum instruction and other areas, are:

Curriculum alignment

Is the curriculum aligned with the standards? Are there different curricula for different groups of students? Are the low-scoring schools teaching the same curriculum as the higher-scoring schools? Why or why not? Is the curriculum outdated?

Test alignment

Are the tests aligned with the district's standards? Are the tests testing what teachers are teaching? If not, is this a problem the state needs to fix, or is it within the district's control?

Teaching practices

What assistance do teachers need? Are standards-based teaching practices implemented uniformly throughout the schools? Have teachers received professional development so they can use the best teaching practices to help all children excel? Do elementary school teachers require more targeted and intensive training in math? Do middle school teachers need additional professional development in improving reading skills?

Resource reallocation

Is there sufficient time for planning and professional development? Do teachers have appropriate materials to teach a standards-based curriculum? Is technology available and being used properly? Do disadvantaged students require additional resources, such as after-school and weekend programs? Should the district create incentives to encourage the most experienced teachers and principals to work in schools where the needs are greatest?

Attendance rates

Are there differences in attendance patterns at different grade levels? If so, why? Are attendance patterns different for boys and girls? Or for different ethnic groups?

Dropout rates

How many students drop out as freshmen, sophomores, etc.? Why? Is there a relationship between dropping out and test scores? Grades? Attendance? Socio-economic status? Student mobility?

Grades

What is the relationship between test scores (norm-referenced and criterion-referenced) and classroom grades? What is the grade distribution for freshmen, sophomores, etc.? Are students, teachers and parents all clear on what constitutes "A" work?

Migration/mobility

What is the rate of students migrating in and out of the district — or between schools inside the district? Does this rate change at different grade levels? Why? In what ways is mobility affecting performance?

What can you find out from asking these questions? Here's just one example:

You may learn that curricula in schools where a large percentage of students score below proficiency in math or reading are not aligned to the standards. In some cases, the program may be aligned but not implemented consistently in all classrooms. You also may find that teachers need more professional development to help them implement the program more effectively.

Tip!

Adapt these questions to your own needs. They are meant only as a guide. The best questions are the ones you create.

What patterns do you see in the data for schools in your district?

Getting Results by Setting Goals

Remember back in Chapters 1 and 2 how you developed goals — specific end results — with your community? Now it's time to measure actual performance against those goals. What measures will you use for each desired outcome? The following section describes some typical school system goals, along with the kind of data you can use to help measure whether you are meeting the goals.

Academic achievement

Students will demonstrate a high level of individual success in all required and elective academic/curricular areas, using multiple measures of performance. Students will score proficient or advanced on state and district assessments in math, science, social studies, reading and writing.

How do you know? Take a look at state and district test scores, grades in core subjects, and daily attendance records.

Independent thinking

Students will demonstrate the ability to think independently. Students will cooperate and compete appropriately; apply their learning experiences to real-life situations; and demonstrate critical thinking using research, creativity, analysis and synthesis of information.

How do you know? Teachers can review grades on persuasive speeches, the depth of class discussion, and students' research abilities and skills.

Communication

Students will be effective communicators, able to write, speak, listen and respond for mutual understanding.

How do you know? Take a look at district and state test scores in English language arts.

Citizenship

Students will be citizens who participate in and contribute to the well-being of their community. Students will participate in their community's activities; demonstrate constructive behaviors (such as helping neighbors or becoming a community volunteer); participate in the democratic process; and converse about important social issues.

How do you know? Take a look at disciplinary records, the percentage of students serving as community volunteers and the number of 18-year-old students voting.

Life skills

Students will have the life skills necessary to meet the demands of everyday life. Students will be able to secure and maintain employment, make healthy lifestyle choices, avoid excessive use of alcohol and drugs, maintain personal health, and demonstrate strong work ethics.

How do you know? Take a look at work-readiness assessments, employer evaluations, postgraduate student surveys, percentage of students employed after high school, and reported incidences of drug and alcohol abuse.

What goals — or end results — has your board approved? How are you measuring whether you are meeting these goals successfully? What data or information are you using to find out?

Dos and don'ts for reviewing standards-based assessment results

Do

Track data over time and look for trends.

Look at scores across all performance levels and subject areas.

Disaggregate by different groups of students whenever possible.

Identify gaps in curriculum or instructional practices.

Test hypotheses with other data, such as a curriculum gap analysis, disaggregation of data and surveys on instructional practice.

Compare data from pretests and posttests.

Don't

Make high-stakes decisions (such as whether to promote or graduate students or intervene in a school) based on a single assessment or with a small sample size.

Average percentages (see Chapter 3).

Combine the percentages across reporting categories (see Chapter 3).

Make a final decision before analyzing other sources of data.

Use data as the only tool for teacher evaluation.

— Adapted from the Vermont Education Department's *Using Data for Action Planning to Improve Student Performance*

What Does a Gap in Student Performance Tell You?

Gaps in student performance point to areas of need, as well as to areas where the district has met or is close to meeting its goal. As a district, you want to close gaps between current student achievement rates and the performance target. Typically, gaps exist among different groups of students based on income, gender or race.

It is possible — though not desirable — for overall performance to increase while gaps widen among different groups of students. You won't know if gaps exist until you disaggregate the data. Then you can take a closer look at which groups of students are performing at high levels and which are falling behind. This often is called a "gap analysis."

Why tracking data over time matters

Tracking data over time gives you a more complete picture of whether student performance is improving from one year to the next.

Make sure you are comparing the same testing data from year to year. For example, let's say your district puts a new test in place that measures whether students are meeting standards in math, reading and other subjects. When first-year scores are published, you now have baseline data. In years two and three, you will see whether test scores are increasing, decreasing or remaining the same when compared to year-one data of the same students.

Let's say that in year four the state mandates that the district administer a new test. You'll have to start over again with new baseline data. In other words, be sure you are comparing apples to apples (as you were in years one through three), not apples to oranges.

Data don't hide anything. If you use data the way data are supposed to be used, you can't put up excuses anymore.

— Helen Smith, school board president,
Horry County Public School District, S.C.

Tip!

Check out Chapter 3 for different ways to disaggregate data.

Profile

How Does Your District Use Data to Measure Student Achievement?

Horry County, S.C.

Superintendent Gerrita Postlewait heads the Horry County Public School District in South Carolina. She told us:

"Student achievement data is how we know whether we are getting results from the instructional programs in our classrooms. Without student achievement data, we run the risk of confusing activity with progress. It's sort of like an octopus on roller skates. There's a whole lot of motion, but no guarantee that you're moving in any particular direction.

"Individual student achievement data are used as guidelines to determine how far a student has progressed to date, which informs teachers as they plan instruction for the student. At the school and district level, data provide information about the effectiveness of curriculum/instructional approaches and are critical in analyzing the cost-benefit ratio of various initiatives in place.

"Simply put, if a particular program is not resulting in improved student achievement, why in the world would we continue to fund the program in its present form?"

Tip!

To learn more about how to ensure that everyone is focused on data and improved student achievement, take a look at how other boards have done it online at www.schoolboarddata.org.

How to analyze student performance data

Use data from the same measures year to year whenever possible.

Collect and analyze appropriate data. Use multiple measures, such as state proficiency tests, national standardized tests, teacher evaluations and grades.

Be sure you know what student skills the data measure.

Consider the characteristics of the group being tested (e.g., race, gender, income).

Compare performance from different groups of students (disaggregated data). The goal is to close performance gaps among different groups of students and increase achievement for all.

— Adapted from the Vermont Education Department's *Using Data for Action Planning to Improve Student Performance*

Allan Olson

Executive Director, Northwest Evaluation Association, Portland, Ore.

Ask the Expert

In what ways can school board members use assessment data to improve student performance for all children?

Whenever school board members are reviewing the data, they always should have their mission for schools in front of them. That mission should be to improve learning for all children. If we do that, we focus on evidence that schools are becoming more effective with each passing year.

As school board members review testing data, what should they look for?

They should look for evidence that students are growing academically, and that implies that they are looking at an improvement in scale scores for children between two points in time, in the fall and in the spring or from fifth to sixth grade.

What's a scale score?

The scale score identifies where the child is on an academic measurement scale. It's a little like a yardstick. A yardstick allows us to measure a child's height from year to year, reported in inches. An academic measurement scale allows us to measure the unit of growth on that "yardstick." The state or district identifies how "tall" the child should be in math, for example. That way we know whether the child has met the standards or not.

One of the traps that school board members fall into is that they count the number of kids above the line. So, the teachers are inclined to work with students who are just below the line because the incentive is immediate. But this approach fails students who are far below the standard and need help. Credit should be given to students who move from, say, below basic to basic — even if they haven't yet met the standard.

What questions should board members ask as they examine testing data?

Are the children who are at risk showing more than normal growth? Can we accelerate their growth over time? Are the low-performing schools showing more growth than average? Are high-performing schools showing average growth or more? Are boys and girls achieving similar results across all subjects? Are all ethnic groups demonstrating achievement in the same subjects? If some ethnic groups are not achieving as well as others, how will we accelerate their achievement?

There are general questions, too, like: Where is the greatest growth occurring? In which subjects, at what grade levels, in which programs and schools? What can we learn from that? Where is the least growth, and what can we learn?

The board should always talk about improving student learning rather than improving test scores. If you focus on the academic growth of children, test scores will take care of themselves.

— Allan Olson, executive director, Northwest Evaluation Association

What are the biggest mistakes school board members make when analyzing test data?

It's common for board members to make judgments as a result of the data but then not follow through and ask the school improvement team about its perceptions of the data. I also would like to see board members press the team for added investigation, a plan for addressing the problems that exist and evidence months later to learn whether the plan made a difference.

The biggest mistake is to allow the dialogue to focus on test scores rather than academic growth. If we want to know whether the school is effective, then we need to look at growth from year to year for all students, not just the percentages of kids exceeding the standards.

What can school board members learn from reviewing test data?

The school board should be able to learn about the effectiveness of school programs and new initiatives. It should be able to answer the question: What would it cost for us to help this student, or this group of students, accelerate their academic growth to meet the state's high exit standards?

Are test scores the only measurement schools board members should use when measuring student achievement? What other indicators are important?

You want multiple indicators. We know that students who have a positive attitude toward learning are more effective learners. We know that when a child's attendance drops too far, it interferes with learning. Data about attendance rates are important, especially among high-risk children. We know that when a student experiences a crisis of some kind — a serious illness, a divorce in the family, substance abuse — it interferes with learning. All of these things affect students' learning patterns.

Profile

Making Good on a Promise

Jefferson County, Colo.

In 1999, voters in Jefferson County, Colo., approved the first mill levy override in nearly 20 years, resulting in $25 million for improvements in instruction.

"Just a year earlier, 58 percent voted against a similar mill levy increase," recalls Superintendent Jane Hammond. But 1999 was different because of something the district calls the Performance Promise. To receive another $20 million, the district had to increase by 25 percent the number of students scoring proficient or advanced on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) over three years.

Voters agreed to the plan, and the district got to work.

"We analyze data regularly to see where we are and where we are heading next," says Hammond. "I visit schools regularly and gather data. Data help me understand whether I'm focusing on the right things day to day."

To make good on the Performance Promise, the 27th largest district in the country has decreased class size in some grades, increased staff development, extended tutoring and put in place a new curriculum to help students meet state standards. Data helped drive those decisions.

Each school has its own performance goals based on student performance on the CSAP. The district reports progress on CSAP test scores in its annual report to the community. During the 1999–2000 school year, for example, the district reported exceeding its targets in third-, fourth- and seventh-grade reading. The district fell short of meeting its goal in fourth-grade writing.

School Board President Jon DeStefano credits Hammond for pushing the district and the board to use data to improve student achievement. "What Jane helped us do was tie it to the district's strategic plan. We're using data to measure whether we have met our strategic goals and determine whether our strategies are still on track. We're also using data to drive instruction."

Hammond says it's a win-win situation. "If I'm going to move forward on an initiative, I want the board to understand the issue before they make a decision. If I want their support, I must present the data. These are hard decisions they are making."

We analyze data regularly to see where we are and where we are heading next.

— Jane Hammond, superintendent, Jefferson County, Colo.

How Can Board Members Help Administrators Do a Better Job?

Monta Akin is the assistant superintendent of instructional services in the Leander Independent School District in Texas, a district dedicated to using data to improve instruction. We asked Akin how board members can help administrators do a better job. She identified several ways her school board has helped her.

Ask the right questions

School board members must remember that it is not their responsibility to collect the data. Let the staff do that. Board members need to ask staff good questions and ask those same questions over time.

See data as a continuing process and not a one-time event

For instance, if a board member runs into a friend in the grocery store who tells him about something that happened to her son Johnny at school, that board member needs to view that as a "special circumstance." One cannot make sweeping changes based on a "special circumstance" because it will hurt the system as a whole. However, if you look at the data it will let you know if what happened to Johnny happened to other students — making it a "common circumstance" that can be corrected by a global change.

Clarify expectations

Board members can do this by providing clear goals that they expect all students to achieve.

Create a culture based on trust, not fear

Such an environment will allow everyone the opportunity to express what's going well, what's wrong and what kind of help is needed.

Are you managing your school environment? Or are you improving it?

A recent study published by the Iowa Association of School Boards shows that board members in high-performing school districts had a better understanding of school improvement initiatives than those in low-performing districts. They also were better at linking the student achievement goals of each of their schools with those of the board and the district. By contrast, boards in low-performing districts focused on managing the school environment rather than changing or improving it.

— Iowa Association of School Boards, *The Lighthouse Study of School Boards and Student Achievement*, September 2000

School board members must remember that it is not their responsibility to collect the data.

Profile

Using Data to Help Improve Student Discipline

Beaverton, Ore.

Alarmed by a trend of increased suspensions, expulsions and dropout rates, the Beaverton School District, Ore., created the Think Den in 1994 to focus on the issue of juvenile violence and bad behavior. The Think Den, made up of district and community leaders, identified eight issues to study and created individual task forces to address each one. Those eight task forces comprised the Beaverton Schools Against Fearful Environments (B-SAFE) Tiger Teams.

The Think Den trained all Tiger Team members in research methods, including narrowing the scope of data, collecting and interpreting data, and creating recommendations. Nearly every constituency in the community was represented among the 120 B-SAFE Tiger Team members. The Tiger Teams used various types of data collection methods, such as surveys, interviews and focus groups. Ultimately, the groups synthesized their findings into 10 major recommendations with 52 supporting suggestions about how to improve safety for students.

The B-SAFE Tiger Teams' recommendations continue to inform safety issues in Beaverton today. Hundreds of staff, parents, students and community members are trained in data collection and analysis and serve on Tiger Teams in schools across the district.

Using Data Software to Make the Grade

Rochester, N.H.

Superintendent Ray Yeagley knew his district needed to use data more effectively. Test scores told only part of his district's story, and what he really wanted to know was what was behind the scores. He just didn't know how to find out. As superintendent of schools in the small urban school district of Rochester, N.H., lack of funds and information technology personnel limited Yeagley's options.

Serendipitously, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) asked if Rochester would be a pilot district for its new Quality School Portfolio (QSP) data-gathering system, a computer software system that disaggregates student achievement data. As Yeagley recalls, "The board came with a positive feeling because the QSP was more or less a plum. And since it was free, you couldn't beat the price."

In its first year, Rochester's increased data collection is proving beneficial. Yeagley's district already has begun to re-examine what has been a controversial attendance policy after looking at the attendance data and student learning.

Yeagley has discovered that data collection is a slow but ultimately rewarding process. Most importantly, he warns against "snooping" — coming up with an answer first and then finding the data to support it. The most useful data are discovered when you ask the right questions.

What questions should a district begin asking? "Collecting data," Yeagley explains, "is like going to a new supermarket. At first, you don't quite know your way around. There are a lot of choices. But think about it. After awhile, you know what you are looking for and can navigate your way around. The same is true with data. When you begin the process of data collection, the number of items may seem overwhelming, and you easily can get bogged down in it. To avoid that, you must start by asking fairly simple questions and then, once you understand the results you are getting, move on to the more sophisticated questions."

Start by asking fairly simple questions and then, once you understand the results you are getting, move on to the more sophisticated questions.

— Ray Yeagley, superintendent, Rochester School District, N.H.

What Do You Know?

ACTIVITIES GUIDE

Now it's time to put to the test what you learned in Chapter 4. How well do you know the materials you have just read? These activities will test your knowledge on the issues highlighted in this chapter. They also will give you an opportunity to discuss important issues with your fellow board members. We encourage you to jot answers, notes and thoughts in the margins.

Pop Quiz

How do data inform board decision-making?

	True	*False*
It is possible — though not desirable — for overall performance to appear to increase while gaps widen among different groups of students.	❑	❑
Using data to inform board policy-making begins with reviewing goals for students in your district.	❑	❑
A recent study published by the Iowa School Board Association shows that board members in high-performing school districts have a better understanding of school improvement initiatives than those in low-performing districts.	❑	❑
Do not make high-stakes decisions based on a single assessment.	❑	❑
Track data over time and look for trends.	❑	❑

If you answered "False" to more than one of these questions, it's time to review this chapter.

What Would You Do?

Turning Back the Clock on High School Schedules, Part Four *30 minutes*

Read the case study below and discuss the questions that follow. Make sure to read parts one, two and three in the previous chapters.

Once again, the board had additional questions centered on two issues: student participation in extracurricular activities and alternative solutions to the student performance problem. Since participation in extracurricular activities had been a priority to the board, they wanted to be sure that a program to improve one area didn't harm another. They also asked staff to explore what other districts were doing to address tiredness and tardiness in early-start high schools. The board asked what other districts were doing to improve high school performance. They directed staff to develop an action plan based on their findings. They instructed staff to include high school site councils in reviewing and weighing options, as well as parents, teachers and coaches who participated in earlier meetings. Thomas and Schlossman also were invited.

At the next board meeting, staff concluded there was not enough evidence that later start times would improve student performance to justify major schedule changes and increased transportation costs. However, staff reported that the study group representing high school councils, parents, teachers and others learned other high schools tackled tiredness and tardiness by implementing communitywide curfews for teens and asking local businesses to restrict work hours for students. Staff recommended that the study groups continue to explore these alternatives to see which, if any, had a direct impact on student achievement. The board agreed to review the findings next year when it set goals.

Although staff said it was unclear whether a later start would hurt participation in extracurricular activities, an informal survey of students indicated that a few might have to drop out of activities to keep their part-time jobs.

The staff recommended an action plan to the board for the current year. The plan included a new program targeting the lower socio-economic students whose scores had declined more than any other group. Data backed up the program's success with similar demographic populations. The plan also included more targeted staff development focused on improving teaching strategies for advanced math and writing skills. Analysis of state assessments showed that these areas exhibited the greatest declines. Staff attributed the drop to more rigorous state tests implemented about the same time as test scores began to decrease. The superintendent added that the curriculum department would review the curriculum in those two areas to ensure that it reflected the more rigorous standards now being tested.

Discussion

Does the board now have enough information to make a decision about implementing late-start schedules at the high schools?

What decision would you make based on the data?

How would you share your reasons for your decision with members of the community who initially opposed the direction you have concluded is the best?

How would you monitor the situation to evaluate the effectiveness of current plans toward accomplishing the district goal?

Discussion Guide

Student Performance Gaps

You just received scores showing that male students outperformed female students on the College Board Mathematics SAT by 36 points. The data also revealed females were taking higher-level math courses than male students.

Does the same performance gap exist in your district's high schools?

What other questions come to mind that you might want to pursue?

Where are the greatest gaps in student performance in your district? Why?

What can you do — or have you done — to address gaps in student performance?

Step-by-Step Calendar

This calendar walks board members through a year-long planning process to collect and analyze data based on information in this guidebook. Consider using this calendar or developing your own with other board members, community members and district staff. You set the pace. Think about how you would revise this calendar to meet your district's needs.

Month	Activity	Description	Time
JULY	Introduce *Improving School Board Decision-Making: The Data Connection*	Ask board members to read Chapters 1–4. Schedule orientation meeting for October.	3 hours
AUGUST	Get Started	Hold an orientation meeting for school board members and central staff to map out next steps and work assignments.	2 hours
SEPTEMBER	Identify Goals With Your Community	Hold focus groups with parents, business leaders, senior citizens, taxpayers, teachers, students, etc. to set districtwide student achievement goals.	1-1/2 hours each
OCTOBER	Set Goals	Board members and central staff review community input and draft goals.	8 hours
NOVEMBER	Publicize Goals	Board members and district staff share the goals publicly, starting with staff; plan follow-up meetings or media release.	
DECEMBER	Determine Data Sources	District staff determine which data sources best measure goals, present information to board for agreement and begin to collect.	Develop: 8 hours Present: 4 hours
JANUARY	Collect Data	District staff gather data and identify gaps in data; benchmark.	6 weeks
FEBRUARY	Present Data to Board	Board reviews data. District points out trends, strengths and weaknesses.	2 meetings, 4 hours each
MARCH	Set Performance Targets	Board determines student performance targets for next year.	2 meetings, 4 hours each
APRIL	Identify Strategic Efforts	District staff present improvement strategies to increase targeted student performance.	2 meetings, 4 hours each
MAY	Policy Support Work	Board reviews/adopts district budget to support goals, staff development, and ability to collect and report data.	2 meetings, 4 hours each
JUNE	Board Plans Next Calendar Year	Board plans for next year to include community engagement on goals and district reporting on achievement.	2 hours

GLOSSARY

Accountability
State or district policies that hold districts, schools and students responsible for performance.

Achievement tests
Designed to measure a student's attainment of knowledge, skills or abilities (e.g., norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests).

Administrative staff
District administrators, supervisors of special education, directors of human relations, directors of special education, central office administration and pupil services, library supervisors, etc.

Aptitude tests
Designed to measure a student's potential for achievement (e.g., IQ and SAT tests).

Baseline data
Collected information used as a reference for later information collected to interpret change over time.

Benchmark
Something that serves as a standard by which others may be measured or judged.

Comparative analysis report
Reports that compare two or more districts, students, or other groups that have similar characteristics and can be compared to each other.

Criterion-referenced tests
Tests that measure a student's performance against a set of standards that explain what students should know and be able to do at each grade level.

Cut score
The score students must attain to pass a criterion-referenced test.

Data element
A specific bit of data that can be defined and measured.

Disaggregated data
Data broken down by specific student subgroups like race, gender, socio-economic status, etc.

End policies
Quantifiable goals school boards set for their districts to achieve.

Gap analysis
The process of disaggregating data to find specific differences in performance among groups of students.

Micromanagement
To direct or control operational means in a detailed, often meddlesome manner because roles are not clearly delineated.

Mill levy
An increase in the amount of mills (one-tenth of a cent), which are assessed against the value of property. The revenue produced is typically collected by the county assessor to pay for public schools, the fire department and other county services.

Mission
A statement that defines what a district exists to do, reflects its core values and beliefs, and guides all decision-making.

Norm-referenced tests
Tests that compare an individual student's performance against the performance of others (usually a national sample) in the same grade.

Percentile rank
The percentage of students in the norm-referenced group falling below a certain point (for example, if a student scores in the 65th percentile, it means he or she has performed better than 65 percent of the students who took the test).

Performance tests
Tests that require students to demonstrate what they can do by writing essays, performing mathematical computations, conducting science experiments or providing portfolios of artistic work.

Public engagement
The involvement of parents, taxpayers and the community in school improvement and reform (also a specific method of conducting a public discussion as advocated by Public Agenda).

Qualitative data
Based on information gathered from one-on-one interviews, focus groups or general observations over a period of time.

Quantitative data
Hard numbers such as enrollment figures, dropout rates and test scores.

Reliability
The degree to which a test yields similar results with the same subjects at different times under different conditions.

Research bias
The overinvolvement of a researcher in a study or test that distorts the way the research is conducted or reported.

Special circumstances
Those circumstances that are not part of the process (or system) all the time or do not affect everyone but arise because of specific circumstances.

Stakeholders
The students, parents, taxpayers, community members, business leaders and all others who have a share or interest in the school district.

Standards
Usually refers to academic standards, which explain what students should know and be able to do from one grade to the next in subject areas such as reading, writing, math, science, history and the arts.

Strategic planning
The process school boards use to envision and foster an atmosphere that establishes the school district's growth toward a desirable future, often developed with broad-based community involvement.

Validity
The degree to which a test or other measurement tool actually measures what it claims to measure.

Vision
A future-focused statement about what a school board wants to be, where it wants to go and what kind of school system it wants to create.

GOOD READS

Accountability in Action: A Blueprint for Learning Organizations

Douglas B. Reeves. Advanced Learning Press, 2001.

This very thorough, 300-page manual includes a detailed framework for an effective accountability system, with numerous examples, templates and tools for designing a comprehensive accountability system of your own to improve teaching, learning and leadership.

At Your Fingertips — Using Everyday Data to Improve Schools

Karen Levesque, Denise Bradby, Kristi Rossi and Peter Teitelbaum. MPR Associates, 1998.

This handbook examines new and productive ways of using data. Through step-by-step instruction, this book focuses on analyzing available data to improve teaching and learning.

Boards That Make a Difference: A New Design for Leadership in Non-Profit and Public Organizations and Reinventing Your Board: A Step-by-Step Guide to Implementing Policy Governance

John and Miriam Carver. Jossey Bass, 1997.

These two books address what governance means for all boards, with special attention given to school boards. The books specifically address the model of Policy Governance® and how boards can achieve role clarity, self-discipline and a focus on student achievement while developing ongoing community linkages.

The Community Connection: Case Studies in Public Engagement

Overview by Anne Wright, Case Studies by Judith Brody Saks. National School Boards Association, 2000.

This publication focuses on the need for communities to be involved in determining the quality of their schools and setting their future direction. The report is in two parts. The first is an analysis and discussion of the issues, trends and frameworks that emerged from examining district practices. The second part consists of district profiles, creative ideas and practical solutions.

Data Analysis for Comprehensive Schoolwide Improvement

Victoria L. Bernhardt. Eye on Education, Larchmont, N.Y., 1998.

This book teaches the layperson how to gather, interpret and use data to improve schools. Educators are given practical tools so they can make better data-based decisions.

Effective School Boards: Strategies for Improving Board Performance

Eugene R. Smoley Jr. Jossey Bass, San Francisco, 1999.

This book offers school board members successful strategies for making them more effective in their jobs. The author spells out the roles and responsibilities of board members and includes the six common mistakes school boards make, a board self-assessment questionnaire and the elements of effective decision-making.

Getting Excited About Data: How to Combine People, Passion and Proof

Edie Holcomb. Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1999.

This book outlines a process for showing how well your school or district meets its primary goal: sustained student learning. The author helps you find the answers to questions about data, such as: What data do we need, and how do we collect it?

Is There a Public for Public Schools?

David Mathews. Kettering Foundation Press, Dayton, Ohio, 1996.

This brief book starts from the premise that Americans are becoming too individualized, letting our private concerns overwhelm our sense of community and the public life. It then moves forward to suggest a variety of ways that an "engaged citizenry" can work with the public schools to strengthen a process of continuous improvement rather than any particular reform.

The Key Work of School Boards: A Guidebook

Kathryn W. Gemberling, Carl W. Smith and Joseph S. Villani. National School Boards Association, 2000.

This user-friendly guidebook focuses on improving student achievement through community engagement. It offers definitions, self-assessment tools and discussion questions, and it outlines the specifics that differentiate board and superintendent roles.

Leadership Matters: Transforming Urban School Boards

National School Boards Foundation and the Council of Urban Boards of Education, 1998.

The report, which resulted from the National School Boards Foundation's year-long Urban School Boards Initiative that included a national roundtable with education experts from around the country, calls for a focused agenda in four areas: higher academic expectations, active parent and public involvement, quality teachers, and safe learning environments.

The Lighthouse Study of School Boards and Student Achievement Iowa School Board

Iowa Association of School Boards, COMPASS: A Guide for Those Who Lead, Fall 2000.

Do some school boards create higher student achievement than others? The results of a groundbreaking research study by the Iowa Association of School Boards indicate that school boards in high-achieving districts are significantly in their knowledge and beliefs than school boards in low-achieving districts. And, this difference appears to carry through among administrators and teachers throughout the district.

Raising the Bar: A School Board Primer on Student Achievement

Gerald W. Bracey and Michael A. Resnick. National School Boards Association, 1997.

This guide links the leadership role of the school board to the concept of student achievement. This primer is a great reference tool for local school board members.

Reaching for Excellence: What Local School Districts Are Doing To Raise Student Achievement

Tibbett L. Speer. National School Boards Association, 1998.

This survey reports on student achievement based on a stratified random sample of urban, suburban and rural school districts from across the nation. The report discusses critical student achievement issues, translates them into practice and presents programs that districts have reported as successful.

Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change: A Reportof the Annenberg Institute on Public Engagement for Public Education

The Annenberg Institute, 2000.

This first-of-its-kind report offers a comprehensive look at the kinds of public engagement initiatives that have begun springing up around the country and what they are doing to build citizen involvement and support for school change. Available online at www.aisr.brown.edu/publications/pubreports.html.

Reporting Results: What the Public Wants to Know

A-Plus Communications, 1999.

Highlights from a major research project, conducted by KSA-Plus Communications and *Education Week* with funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts, on exactly what information parents and taxpayers want to know about school performance — and the best ways to communicate this information. Available online at www.ksaplus.com/ksa/EdWeek%20Results.pdf.

Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement

Mike Schmoker. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996.

This book asserts that tangible, measurable results are the key to school improvement. Under the right conditions, schools can bring about incremental, even dramatic results. Author Mike Schmoker examines these conditions and the theories behind them, using examples from schools to show that virtually any school can begin to successfully replicate the conditions. As the many schools described in this book demonstrate, educators can immediately provide a better education for all students by focusing unwaveringly on better results and the conditions that promote them.

The School Portfolio: A Comprehensive Framework For School Improvement, Second Edition

Victoria L. Bernhardt. Education for the Future Initiative, 1999.

This book shows you how to develop a school portfolio tailored to your particular school and vision. A school portfolio is the most effective way to ensure your school's success at systemic reform. Extensively tested, it is a nonthreatening self-assessment tool that exhibits a school's goals, achievements and vision for improvement.

Student Data Handbook for Elementary, Secondary, and Early Childhood Education

National Center for Education Statistics, 2000.

This handbook provides guidance for maintaining student data as well as standard data elements with definitions, recommendations, record applications and references to other documents. Available online at www.nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000343.pdf.

Thinking About Tests and Testing: A Short Primer in "Assessment Literacy"

Gerald Bracey. American Youth Policy Forum, Washington, D.C.

This book discusses the arguments now raging about "high-stakes tests" and their consequences. The book is simple and straightforward. Available online at www.aypf.org/BraceyRep.pdf.

Using Data for School Improvement: Report on the Second Practitioners' Conference for Annenberg Challenge Sites

Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998.

This report provides real-life examples of schools using data to improve student achievement. The report offers examples of data collection, a new way of thinking about accountability, helpful resources and an overview of the conference. Available online at www.annenberginstitute.org/images/using_data4.pdf.

SMART WEB SITES

NATIONAL NONPROFITS

Center for Accountability Solutions
www.aasa.org/cas

This site, created by American Association of School Administrators, helps school leaders gather, use and report meaningful data on student, school and district performance.

National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST)
www.cse.ucla.edu

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, CRESST conducts research on important topics related to K–12 educational testing.

National School Boards Association (NSBA)
www.nsba.org

NSBA's Web site offers a wide variety of publications, resources and education links, as well as information about advocacy, meetings, membership and the NSBA Federation.

National School Boards Foundation (NSBF)
www.nsbf.org

NSBF is dedicated to preparing school board members to be catalysts for systemic reform in the public schools. NSBF's Web site offers a listing of useful publications and programs.

National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA)
www.nspra.org

NSPRA's Web site offers information on community engagement and public relations and numerous publications and services.

REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORIES

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)
www.mcrel.org

McREL's Web site offers a vast array of resources to educators seeking updated information; products and services; hot links by subject for lesson plans, activities and educational resources; and links to education publishers and state service providers.

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL)
www.ncrel.org

NCREL provides tools and proven practices to improve schools, as well as information on how to use data to make better-informed decisions about student learning.

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL)
www.sedl.org

SEDL's Web site offers resources in the following areas: connecting schools with their communities, improving classroom instruction, organizing for school improvement, and supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL)
www.nwrel.org

The NWREL Web site provides research and development assistance to help improve schools, including extensive information about their programs and services, as well as NWREL products, publications, magazines, events and promising practices in the Northwest.

Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA)
www.nwea.org

The NWEA Web site helps school board members better know how to use test results to determine how to improve student achievement.

WestEd
www.wested.org

WestEd's Web site offers an extensive resource catalog searchable by author, title or keyword. It also contains information about their numerous projects, services and products.

OTHER USEFUL SITES

Education Commission of the States (ECS)
www.ecs.org

ECS is a national, nonprofit organization that helps governors, legislators, state education officials and others identify, develop and implement policies to improve student learning at all levels. The Web site is a rich resource of information on all education issues from accountability to teacher quality to school vouchers.

Greatschools.net
www.greatschools.net

This free online guide to K–12 schools provides profiles for all public, private and charter K–12 schools and districts nationwide and offers advice and information about how schools work.

Just for the Kids
www.just4kids.org

This Web site offers an easy-to-understand picture of the strengths, weaknesses and progress of each Texas public school. Just for the Kids' purpose is to encourage parents and teachers to take action — for teachers to improve instruction in the school's weaker areas and for parents to focus on their children's learning in those areas.

National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE)
www.nsse.org

This nonprofit educational research and development organization, founded in 1933 by the regional school accreditation commissions, offers a comprehensive series of publications and services to support data-driven and research-based school improvement planning.

School Improvement in Maryland
www.mdk12.org

The School Improvement in Maryland Web site helps schools analyze their state assessment data and guides them in making data-based decisions that support instructional decisions to improve performance for all students. An excellent Web-based reporting model.

U.S. Department of Education
www.ed.gov

This Web site offers a vast array of information including student financial assistance, funding opportunities, research and statistics, publications and products, and useful educational links.

National School Boards Foundation
talking points

NSBF held its board meeting in January 2001 in Charleston, S.C. In conjunction with the meeting it also held a strategic planning session. Some of the outcomes of this day-long working session are:

New mission statement

To foster excellence and equity in public education through innovation in school board leadership and community involvement.

Revised goals

To integrate technology into school board leadership and community involvement.

To ensure continuity of effective leadership at the school board and superintendent levels.

To speed and broaden dissemination of information on best practices.

Revised project criteria

Challenges the status quo.

Includes research that changes behavior of the traditional school and community relationship.

Is applicable across all districts.

Engages the community.

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