



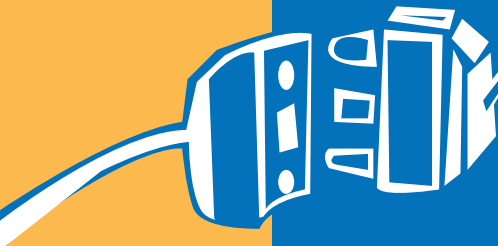
NATIONAL
SCHOOL BOARDS
FOUNDATION

Excerpts from:

IMPROVING

School Board Decision-Making

THE DATA CONNECTION



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.



Victoria L. Bernhardt

Author of Data Analysis for Comprehensive Schoolwide Improvement

Ask the Expert

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.

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 lose 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).

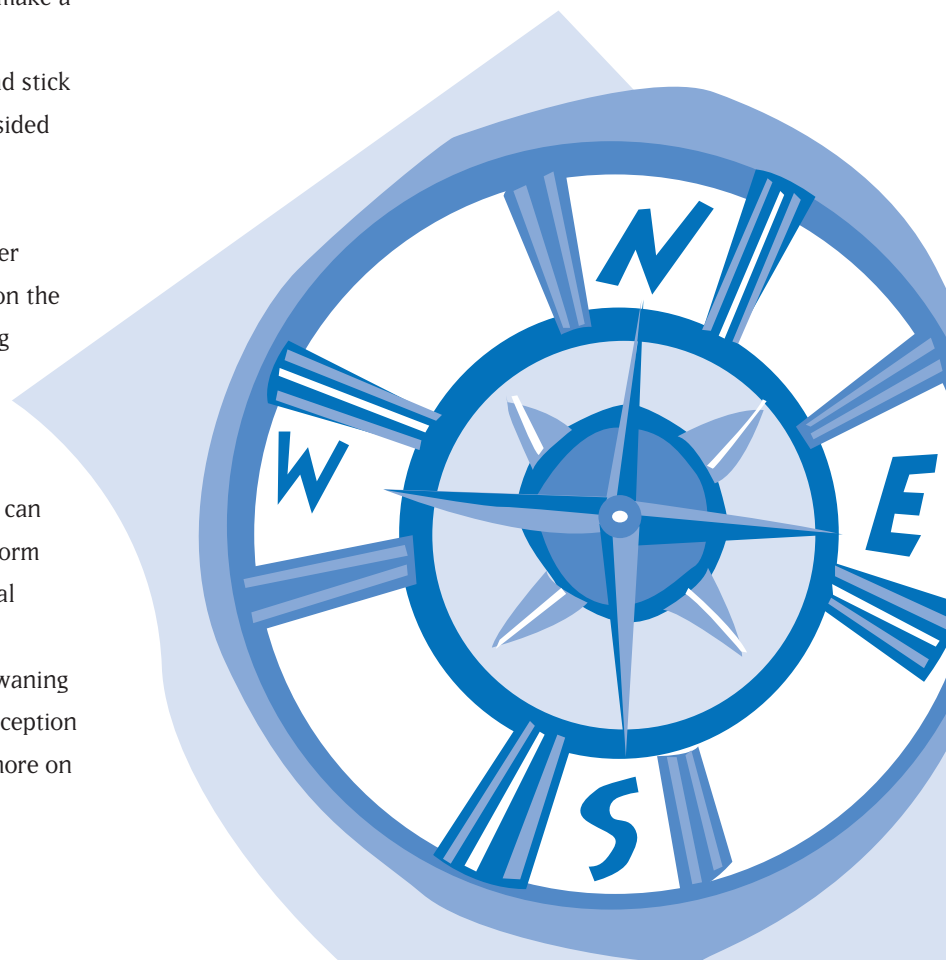
The school board's role in student performance

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?

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.



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.

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

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.

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?

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.

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*.

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.

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*

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.