

White Paper

Strategic Dashboards

How strategic dashboards can shape powerful narratives that redefine student success, engage stakeholders, and support strategic leadership

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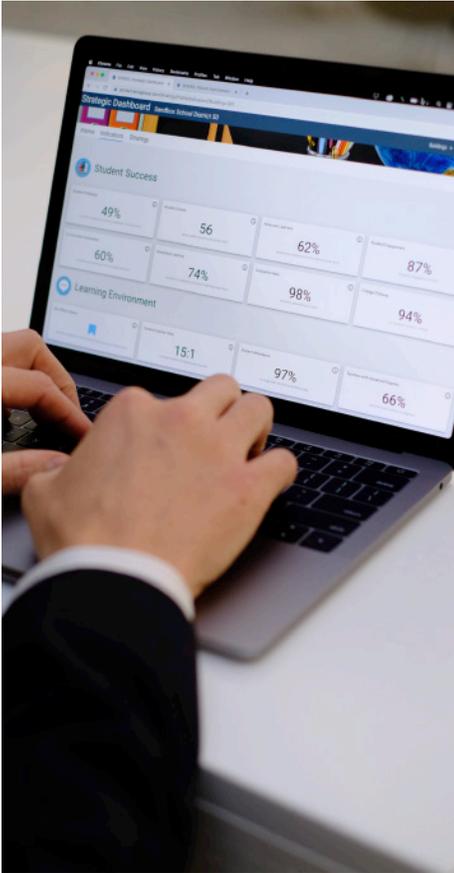
Introduction

The ECRA Strategic Dashboard is a tool that encourages district leaders to think differently about student success and school quality. Strategic dashboards enable superintendents to focus on a manageable number of strategic indicators that redefine student success, align superintendents and boards of education, and shape powerful narratives that drive evidence-based culture and brand equity.

This document discusses strategies that district leaders can use to reshape the narrative surrounding their schools. Insights regarding strategic leadership and its relationship to evidence-based practice are addressed and practical approaches are offered to help superintendents effectively tell a more compelling story of student success and school quality. Strategic

dashboards allow school districts to be more creative and scientific with regards to indicators. Schools are no longer confined to metrics that derive from state-mandated data. Schools can now leverage any local data available to define more meaningful metrics that best measure the outcomes that are most important to their communities.

The guidance offered in this text will help district leaders understand the value and role of data as they strategically lead the district toward the values of the communities they serve. Strategic dashboards provide the mechanism and infrastructure to align community values, board policy, and administrative priorities to maximize return on investment and, most importantly, to ensure all students reach their full potential.



Know Your Numbers

Marcus Lemonis, well-known business executive and venture capitalist, often speaks of the importance of knowing your organization's numbers.

The idea that "If you don't know your numbers, you don't know your business," is as important to school districts as it is to businesses. Strategic dashboards provide a manageable set of metrics that the Superintendent of schools should know and speak of regularly. Repeatedly focusing on communicating strategic indicators reinforces organizational values and provides ongoing accountability that will move the needle in the direction of the district's vision.

Addressing measurement from the perspective of the chief executive and

governing board is important because evidence-based culture starts at the top. Pick your cliché: "You are what you measure," "What is measured is what gets done." The data and information leaders share and talk about has a profound impact on what employees and communities deem important. How we internalize information shapes our thinking and ultimately our futures.

The first step toward telling your district's story is committing to measuring what matters and to knowing your numbers. Measuring what matters is about measuring progress toward the future you are trying to create by focusing on outcomes that align to your vision of student success and reinforce organizational values and culture.

Marcus
Lemonis

"If you don't know your numbers, you don't know your business."

Define Success

School quality and student success are a matter of definition.

For years, federal policy has defined student success and school quality exclusively in terms of student performance on assessments.

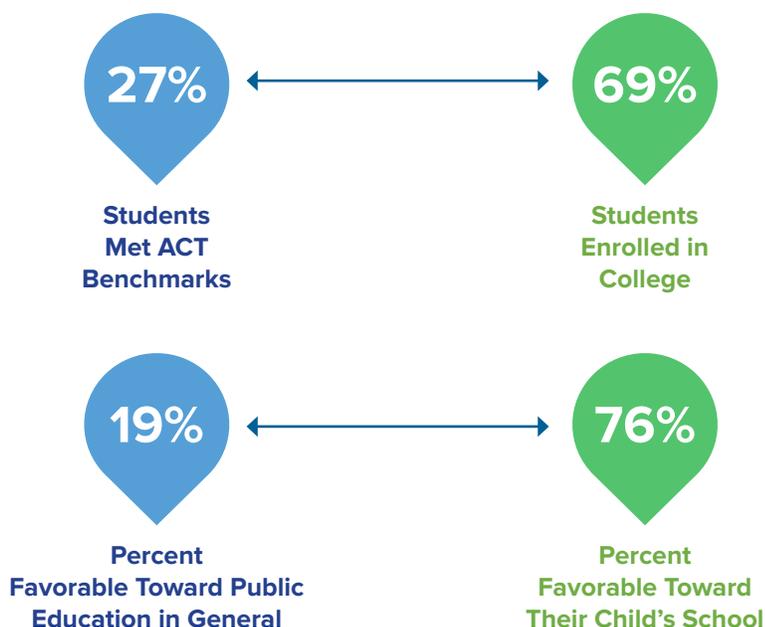
The national environment is changing to reflect "whole-child" narratives that insist students are more than test scores. The Every Student Succeeds ACT (ESSA) is shaping a broader definition of student success and providing more flexibility to states. As a result, school systems are reframing their criteria for success to align closer to values of the communities they serve.

The narratives related to expanded definitions of student success and local autonomy are fueled by national statistics. For example, there is a vast disconnect between the rates at which students are deemed college

ready through assessments versus the rates at which students are actually attending college and being successful. This readiness gap creates an opportunity to tell a different and more local story.

National statistics also support the "keep it local" argument. National research from Gallup has documented the disconnect between attitudes toward public education nationally versus attitudes locally. For example, if one were to ask a community member to comment on the quality of public education in general, one will likely receive an unfavorable sentiment. However, if one were to ask the same person about the quality of their local school district, one is likely to receive much more positive sentiments.

The takeaway is superintendents need to keep the narrative local by measuring and communicating what matters to their communities. Strategic dashboards help school districts tell their story in a way that resonates with their communities.



ACT (2018). The Condition of College and Career Readiness. National Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016). BLS College Enrollment and Work Activity of Recent High School and College Graduates Summary (2019). IES Fast Facts. Gallup PDK Poll (2018)

Tell Your Story

Great stories masterfully share details, and for school districts, the details are in the data.

Successfully implementing evidence-based practices requires a focused approach to measurement. School districts capture large quantities of data, so finding the story between the lines will help shape a more meaningful narrative.

Great marketing leverages storytelling as a message delivery strategy. Storytelling is a fundamental human experience that reveals emotions and unites people, establishing stronger and deeper connections. The ability to articulate and substantiate a compelling vision ultimately speaks to the return on investment that local schools provide to the communities they serve.

So how do you tell your school district's story? Start by thinking about what your schools and communities value. Review your strategic plans to uncover the single overriding message that it sends. Then create a clear and compelling vision for student success that aligns to said values.

As you tell the story of your school district, it is important to provide details in the form of data. Details are how stories come alive and resonate with readers. The details of your story are your strategic indicators. Therefore, measuring what matters to your community is critical to crafting your narrative.

Do You Have A Mantra?

Do you have a mantra? How many of your employees could articulate it? What proportion of your extended community is aware of your direction?

Consider a few examples:

- **“Think Different”** - Apple
- **“Make People Happy”** - Disney
- **“Just do it”** - Nike
- **“Redefining Ready”** - Township High School District 214 and AASA

These simple mantras embolden organizational values and ultimately explain what the organization measures and why.

Measure What Matters

The volume of available data can seem overwhelming, making it difficult to decide where to focus. But what truly matters? What matters is what your community values. You are what you measure.

Consider the adage:

"Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

As you think about establishing strategic indicators, you will identify data that would be easy to include as part of your strategic indicators. Take pause. Do not establish strategic

indicators merely because they are available and convenient. Beware of the trap of reporting what is easy to report.

You will also identify indicators that you believe matter, that may not be able to be reduced to a number. These are qualitative indicators. It is important to find creative ways to include these qualitative items.

Before adopting any strategic indicators, challenge yourself to answer the questions:

- **Does it matter to my community?**
- **Does it count?**

“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted”

William Bruce Cameron

One can turn to industries outside of education to think about what makes a great strategic indicator.



Airlines

The airline industry for years has monitored a simple but very strategic metric: Percentage of on-time arrivals. Percentage of on-time arrivals is strategic in that it closely aligns to the mission of airlines. That is, to transport people from one location to another in a safe and predictable manner. The percentage of on-time arrivals speaks volumes as to whether an airline is accomplishing its mission. It is also closely tied to stakeholder values.

Healthcare

The healthcare industry often uses readmission rates as a strategic indicator. This indicator is strategic in that rates at which patients return to a hospital after an encounter has shown to be closely related to quality of care and patient safety. It even affects a hospital's reimbursement rates. It is also tied to stakeholder values as healthcare providers and patients value health and do not want patients returning to the hospital.

Hospitality

The hospitality industry uses revenue per available room (RevPAR) as a strategic indicator. RevPAR is another great example of a strategic indicator because it captures a hotels' ability to fill available rooms at an average rate.

Keep It Strategic

As you begin identifying strategic indicators for your district, it is important to keep strategic indicators and benchmarks focused on long-term goals, not short-term process improvements.

Strategic Indicators and Benchmarks

Strategic Indicators answer the question: "If our strategic plan is working as intended, what observable data elements would we expect to change in the direction of the vision?". Strategic Indicators should be high level metrics aligned to broad strategic goals but should not be tied to any specific strategies or actions. This is in stark contrast to operational/ implementation metrics, which are often tied directly to a specific action.

The definition of a benchmark can vary, but usually reflects one of three definitions: a desired target; a normative reference; or a baseline value.

A **desired target** sets the benchmark to the desired future value for the strategic indicator. For example, if a finance strategic indicator to maintain a balanced budget reads "Revenue to Expense Ratio," then the desired target would be 1.0.

A **normative reference** sets the benchmark to an external comparison value. For example, a normative reference for the strategic indicator "Percentage of Students that Meet or Exceed State Standards" could be the average value of peer districts, the county, or the state.

A **baseline value** sets the benchmark to the value at a specific point in time. For example, a baseline value for the strategic indicator "Percentage of parents that rate the quality of education as Excellent" could be the district value for the 2018-2019 school year, the year the district first began measuring stakeholder perceptions.

Actions and Implementation Metrics

Actions and implementation metrics should not be used as strategic indicators. Implementation metrics answer the question "Are we doing what we said we were going to do?" The distinction between strategic indicators and implementation metrics is that implementation metrics refer to processes, not outcomes. For example, an implementation plan

may have a tactic or action that reads: "Send monthly e-newsletter to all parents" or "Implement the new math curriculum." The implementation metric for these examples may be as simple as the degree to which the task was completed. Since neither example is a system level outcome, it should not be a strategic indicator but rather an implementation metric.

Where To Begin

Below are sample strategic indicators pertaining to student success, learning environment, and finance and operations.

Use these examples as a way to create dialogue among stakeholders as to what the district should measure and why. Providing examples of indicators will make discussions more efficient.



Student Success

- **Student Growth: Percentage of students meeting or exceeding their personal growth expectations**
This indicator captures how students are progressing relative to peers.
- **Access to Advanced Programming: Percentage of students receiving above grade level instruction**
This indicator captures the degree to which the school district is providing advanced learning opportunities.
- **Co-curricular Involvement: Percentage of students participating in at least one activity**
This indicator captures the degree to which the school district is engaging students beyond the classroom.

Learning Environment

- **Teacher Attendance: Percentage of teachers missing three or fewer days**
This indicator captures the engagement level of teachers.
- **Student Safety: Percentage of students feeling safe**
This indicator captures the frequency of safety-related events.
- **Parent Perception of Quality: Percentage of satisfied parents**
This indicator captures how well the district is meeting the needs of parents.

Finance and Operations

- **Financial Adequacy: Percentage toward adequacy target**
This indicator captures the degree to which a school district has adequate resources to deliver a high-quality education.
- **Education Expenditures: Percentage of expenditures on instruction**
This indicator captures the degree to which resources are directed toward student learning.
- **Debt Coverage Ratio: Net operating surplus divided by debt service**
This indicator captures the debt capacity of a school district and how much they can afford to borrow.

Final Thoughts

Telling your district's story via a strategic dashboard provides a tremendous opportunity for district leaders to engage their communities in productive dialogue related to the outcomes that matter.

While most school districts engage stakeholders through visioning or other strategic planning processes, few engage communities around tangible student and system-level outcomes. By following guidance shared in this document, districts can begin their journey toward crafting an inspiring narrative that motivates all stakeholders to help their district ensure that all students reach their full potential.

The foundation of evidence-based practice is aligning the work of the

school system to a set of strategic indicators used to measure impact and govern progress. A strategic dashboard provides a data infrastructure needed to operationalize your vision. However, the most important work in shaping a more meaningful definition of student success and school quality is a commitment from all levels of the organization to measure what matters. A sustained focus on a manageable set of strategic indicators will provide clarity to all stakeholders.



“The Strategic Dashboard simultaneously communicates our priorities and progress and presents a more well-rounded picture of our district.”

Rich Schmitt, Superintendent
Sandwich CUSD #430

Bringing decisions into focus.

At ECRA, we focus on helping school districts embed evidence-based practices via predictive models that empower school leaders with the information needed to ensure a more equitable environment where all students succeed. ECRA helps educators and school leaders realize their mission and vision in a way that inspires and engages the community, aligns resources, and provides a framework for continuous improvement.

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