

Data-Driven Decision Making
A Play in Three Acts—A Stage for Board Accountability
By Linda J. Dawson and Randy Quinn

Prologue: A tale of two boards of education—one focused on itself, the other focused on its students. You decide which you would rather serve on, then let's decide if and why either board would need data to drive its decision-making.

Board of Education A has a long tradition of characteristically:

- deferring to state and federal government mandates rather than identifying community expectations for student performance;
- rarely deliberating student achievement issues at its meetings;
- operating on a short-term basis;
- focusing on day-to-day operations;
- rehashing and redoing operational decisions;
- handicapping unity with single agendas; and,
- claiming individual rights rather than group responsibility.

Board A wouldn't need data. This board has no concept of its unique governance role in providing leadership and direction to the school district. In fact, it has abdicated its responsibility for working with community and staff to establish student performance results and asking for data to show progress. Board A does not hold itself accountable to the citizens of its taxpaying community for student learning. It chooses to focus on itself and each member, rather than on the future of its students.

Board of Education B has developed written policy that clearly governs its behavior and staff operations, and defines student achievement goals. It has established a tradition of operating with written policies. This board characteristically:

- focuses its meetings, first and foremost, on student achievement;
- requires multiple measures of student performance to determine progress toward board-established achievement End Results;
- focuses on strategic leadership rather than administrative detail;
- delegates operational decisions to its expert staff, but monitors performance rigorously for compliance with its stated values;
- speaks through its majority vote to give clear and final direction;
- encourages a diversity of opinion when deliberating issues, without personalizing and eroding unity or mutual support.

Board B cannot operate without data. This enlightened board has come to understand that it alone can govern—not manage. It knows that it must establish, on behalf of its community, the benchmarks and targets of learners' success and monitor how students and subgroups of students are progressing in their learning (see box: Board Process for Data Analysis). It knows that staff can and should make operational decisions, but that the board responsibly must acquire appropriate data to confirm the prudence, ethics and

lawfulness of staff operations. And finally, this board knows that the deepest satisfaction of governing will come from externally focused, aspirational and accountable strategic leadership.

And so we come to the bottom line of board accountability—data-driven decision making. How can a board know what students are achieving and by what measures? This is the work of governing boards of education.

Act I: An Evolving Case Study in Trenton, New Jersey

The mayor and community leaders in Trenton, the state capital of New Jersey, are passionate about recreating and then sustaining a viable community. Sharing in that endeavor, the Trenton board of education members are equally passionate about their piece of that community-building: students staying in school, doing well, and applying their skills and knowledge to build a successful future for themselves. And hopefully, students staying in or returning to Trenton as contributing citizens.

To that end, board members know they have to transform the way they work. They know they have to focus unerringly on student achievement, understand the barriers to increased performance, and demand and support change for improvement. All board members, to the person, no longer want any “failing” schools – or children unable to realize a bright future.

“We want to know why we have schools failing. We need to understand and discuss the data so we can set realistic targets and hold staff accountable for increased student learning. We want to be hands on, but hands on about the right things! We need to get our act together so students can get theirs together,” said Joyce Kersey, chair of the Trenton Board of Education.

In 2002, individual members undertook research to find a disciplined way to govern that would continually focus all of their time and efforts on students and increasing their achievement. To start, this district board of education came together at the board table with different experiences, energies, concerns, and personality styles to govern with a common and single purpose ... improving student achievement.

First, the Trenton Board members drafted their mission based on years of experience in working with, and providing representation for, their community:

“All students will graduate with a vision for their futures, motivated to continually learn and prepared to succeed in their choice of college or career.”

But they didn’t stop there! The board, working with senior administrators, defined the necessary components that could achieve their mission, which include:

- Academic performance: All students, regardless of ethnicity, race, culture, socioeconomic factors, orientation, or disabilities, will achieve to their level of potential while meeting or exceeding grade level expectations;
- Citizenship: Students will be productive, contributing members of society;
- Character: All students will demonstrate good character in order to lead fulfilling, mutually respectful lives and to positively impact and contribute to their families, school, local and world communities;
- Workplace performance: Students will demonstrate the knowledge, basic skills and abilities required for successful employment; and,
- Balanced and healthy lives: All students will have self-respect and practice behaviors that lead to responsible, healthy, balanced and positive lives.

Taken together, these further defined student achievement results surpass the *No Child Left Behind* academic requirements and the standards of the state. But more importantly, the mission and results reflect the breadth of expectations held by their local leaders and citizenry.

Secondly, the board knew it had to clarify its role and allow staff to perform their roles as they were hired to do. Then, working together but in their unique roles, they could focus on the mission:

“You know, the board and I were frustrated. We needed to work together, each playing our unique role, to improve student achievement in this district. And we both needed to have a clear agreement on what data would be collected and presented to the board to assess achievement and hold all of us accountable. We’re getting there,” said Dr. James Lytle, chief school administrator for the Trenton School District.

Based on staff reports on available data processes, the board knows that the easiest data assessments to collect will be in the academic performance area due to the large number of available indicators. They also determined that their district’s highest priority for learning would be literacy. For example, with guidance from their chief administrator, the board determined that the following assessments could best inform the board of student literacy achievement:

- The New Jersey Department of Education Annual Testing Programs.
- District wide standardized tests in grades K-10.
- Student report card grades.
- Formative assessments: (The board has a variation of assessments by school that are driving further board discussion on a need for standardization).

Third, the board required benchmark or “baseline” data to establish current performance of all students, in all of their identified subgroups. The subgroups include those already identified by the state: White, African American, Hispanic, Other, Poverty, Special Education, Limited English Proficient.

Finally, the board set targets for increased performance and placed the monitoring of performance on their annual calendar for work that drives each meeting agenda, focused on student achievement. This “evidence of reasonable progress,” as monitored throughout the year, forms the basis for the superintendent’s annual evaluation.

“The data being collected is driving our actions on several levels,” said Dr. Lytle. “We have: increased instructional time; targeted professional development for extended impact, not short term fixes; worked with local colleges and universities on leadership development and professional development. These are just a few examples! We could give a list thirty pages long of changes that have come about as a result of data.”

“Additionally, data is driving resource reallocation,” said Dr. Lytle. “The board has given us clear focus through its Ends policies. School Leadership Councils know the job to be done. We have had to refocus and reallocate our time, attention and energy to achieve them.”

“Our End Results on citizenship and character are beginning to drive conversation, behavior, curriculum and instruction ... something pretty cutting edge for district wide expectations. We have to gather the data to make sure the board knows students are making progress. We have been laboring to identify the quantitative and qualitative assessments acceptable to the board. Thank goodness we have our assessment guru, Kelly LeCreque! It means analyzing what we have in assessments and determining what more we need, down to the school level.”

Systemic alignment is one critical key to true district wide reform. The board has labored to draft End Results for student achievement to drive all district efforts, from the boardroom to the classroom and back again.

“We need every staff member understanding their role in achieving the defined student achievement results,” stated Mrs. Kersey. “Dr. Lytle and his staff will be working with supervisors, principals and teachers to help them understand we are serious about increasing student achievement – now! Everyone must perform; teachers must study and use data in their classroom to help each student. Principals will have to use data to evaluate teacher performance and guide supervisory decision-making. Dr. Lytle must use data to assure the board that our personnel are achieving the End Results.”

The board recently prioritized Literacy as its own main focus for board meeting deliberation and for linkages with community members over the coming months, beginning in June. It will be further defining “Literacy” in Trenton with very targeted questions like: Literacy for which students? Do we really mean “All”? At what cost? Will we differentiate or reallocate resources? Will our current data prove that students are literate to our definition? Will each student reach his or her individual potential for literacy? How will we know? What are the best practices in the state and nation for

closing any achievement gap in literacy? What advocacy role do we need to undertake in linking with the community, business, civic and political leaders to support necessary changes to assure all students are literate? In short, a huge body of board work.

But the board's values didn't stop with academic achievement. At its February retreat, the board shared its overriding concern about improving district culture. "Students learn best when they are treated with dignity and respect in a safe environment," said Dr. Bernard McMullan, vice-chair of the Trenton board. "The board has put in written policy our expectations for all staff in treating students well and modeling the behavior we require from these kids."

But even a step further, the board wrote into its governing policies that all community stakeholders, including parents and guardians, be welcome and treated respectfully in the district. "We need staff to welcome, respect and encourage parent and citizen involvement. It starts at the front desk in every school office with sincere and punctual greeting and helping people looking for answers," added Dr. McMullan.

Shortly, the board will be meeting with cabinet and site-based staff at a board meeting to discuss the board policies on treatment of parents and citizens as well as students and their learning environment. Together, board and staff will discuss the ramifications and impact of this board parameter prohibiting disrespectful, undignified or unsupportive treatment. Cabinet will be collecting data to benchmark the current climate and post-assess to determine improvement

In summary, the path the Trenton board has chosen to achieve their mission, clarify roles, and demand accountability using data can be separated into four essential areas:

- ***Vision***—*Build a community-based vision for student achievement* The Trenton board members and senior staff labored to draft this ambitious and heart felt vision. Take apart the component words of this mission and you'll see the tremendous significance: all, graduate, vision, motivated, prepared, succeed, and choice. Is it achievable? Yes, because the board has in place a "structure."
- ***Structure***—*Ensure that policies, operational plans and resources are in place to support the vision.* The Trenton board has structured itself through brief, comprehensive and written policies to govern four major areas of board work, which include: the board's commitment to its own governing style; its delegation to and evaluation of its chief administrator; its clear limitations on what the chief administrator cannot do when operating the district; and its end results for student achievement. Each of the four areas of governing policy requires rigorous monitoring through the use of data to ensure "accountability".
- ***Accountability***—*Use data to ensure that reasonable progress is being made on expectations for student achievement.* How many students are entering, staying in and returning to the Trenton Public Schools to graduate? How many are achieving incremental progress on pre-determined indicators? Where and in what

areas are we seeing, or failing to see, students' progress? What will be done by staff to address and improve student performance? How will staff use the data for self-improvement and to increase their targeted efforts?

Use data to ensure the board that staff operations do not violate the board's stated limitations. The board has chosen to focus on student achievement and therefore has remanded operations to their professional and expert superintendent and staff. But have they given away power and control over decision-making? No, because scheduled monitoring reports in each operation area, supported by data, assure the board that operations are being addressed within its stated framework of values and concerns, like the example of treatment of all stakeholders cited above.

- ***Advocacy—Support district efforts for improvement throughout the community.*** The board is taking its stage to its constituencies. Since the mayor appoints the board, the Trenton Board communicates to him about its student successes, areas for improvement, external challenges and need for resources. It works with the New Jersey Department of Education to question continual and confusing assessment changes and funding shifts. The members are learning to speak to - to link with - civic, business and parent groups to build support for the vision and communicate accountability data. They have spoken with their consumers/students asking, "Are you feeling your achievement equals your seat time?" They are working together to urge state and national associations to advocate on their behalf.

Act II: Setting the Stage for Powerful Board Decision Making

Scene I. Don't Shy Away from the Data What keeps boards from asking for data even when they know it is available and necessary to drive the board's work? Perhaps fear, but if you dig, these are the unspoken questions board members have:

Question: I don't understand the different assessments. There are so many acronyms and so much jargon. What are the tests? What do they mean?

Answer: Plan a board development work session for members that pre-assesses board knowledge about data and aides them in identifying the data they want collected and analyzed. (take the Data Terminology pretest at a workshop!)

Q: People expect me to already know what all this information means. What if I look stupid asking basic questions?

A: Always prepare ahead. See the answer above. Remember: the only stupid question is the one not asked.

Q: This is a highly litigious environment. What happens if parents or students claim a violation of privacy when data is released and we are sued?

A: Your board attorney can assist you in this area. Find out about case law and your exposure.

Q: Segments of the community are not going to deal well with the truth about achievement. How do we avoid the backlash of criticism and possible recall?

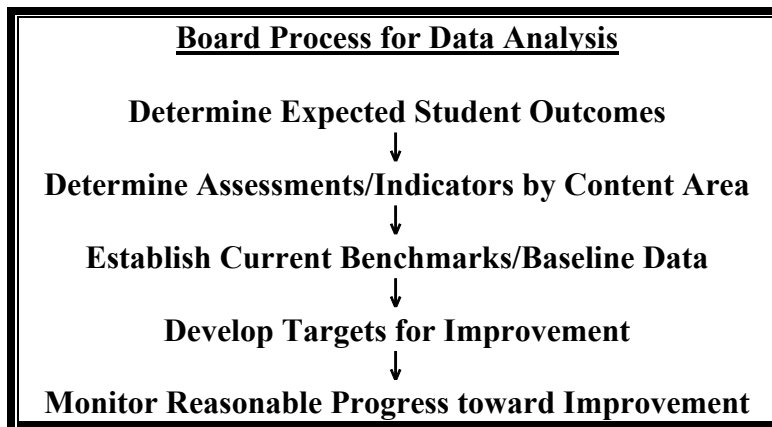
A: The most effective way to avoid backlash is for the board, as representatives and leaders of their constituents, to conduct on-going linkages with representative segments of your community. Speak the truth, speak to what board expectations are, support the staff's instructional and delivery plan to improve performance, and promise to speak with them again and share new data when it comes in. Promise and provide for two-way discussion on an on-going basis and deliver on your promise.

Q: People and sometimes media misrepresent data to serve their own purposes. How can we prevent that from happening?

A: You must be clear about the data, its use, what it says and doesn't say about achievement, and how you are using it to inform the board's decision making. Consistent publication of current data and accompanying explanations of what it means can allay misgivings and misuse.

Q: Information can be presented in such a way that it is misleading or fails to give us the whole picture that is both valid and reliable. How can we trust what we are getting?

A: After board development, the board decides which data indicators provide valid and reliable assessment of their end results. The board decides who presents the data and how it wants the data presented to it.



Scene II. Engage in Board Development Most board members would agree that they did not know everything they needed to know when they were elected or appointed to office. The education world has its own lexicon, its own history, values and culture.

Legislative interference through statute and mandates defy description, let alone comprehensive understanding.

So what is new about data-driven decision making that it requires more education? Sometimes you need to know what exists before you know how to ask for it!

The Burlington School Board in Kansas has a regular item on its agenda—board development. This team of five members knows they have much to learn to provide strategic leadership to the district’s employees and to be accountable to their citizens. One recent agenda read: “Board Development—Instructive conversation with the district’s curriculum staff and guest experts about academic standards and assessments and their application to the board’s policy end, which is for students to meet or exceed established national standards in all core academic disciplines.” Board development topics could include defining data and how to use it; funding data collection; using data to drive teacher development; and understanding *No Child Left Behind* legislation and its long term impact.

Scene III: Commit to an Ethical Use of Data

Before collecting data, boards would do well to determine their values governing its use. Following is a sample school district policy (developed by the Texas Association of School Boards to customize and adopt) on data collection:

As a member of my local board of education, I shall do my utmost to represent the public’s interest in education by:

- Requesting information and data gathered by district staff that helps me make a better-informed decision about policies affecting student achievement district wide;
- Requesting data as a board, not as an individual;
- Using data to represent all of my constituents honestly and equally and refusing to surrender my responsibilities to special interest or partisan political groups;
- Avoiding using my board position, and the information and data supplied to me in good faith, for personal gain;
- Recognizing that decisions can be made only by a majority vote at a board meeting after everyone on the board has had adequate time to review all the data and information;
- Respecting the confidentiality of privileged information; and,
- Abiding by majority decisions of the board, while retaining the right to seek changes through ethical and constructive channels.

Scene IV. Determine Indicators to Assess Performance. As Trenton has discovered, academic data is easier to collect than data to support their other end results on citizenship, balanced and healthy lives, etc. Here is a partial list of different data points, or indicators, a board might want to consider in its data analysis:

Results Information

Norm-referenced test
Criterion-referenced tests
SAT or ACT or both
Advanced placement tests
Teacher absence rates
Student attendance rates
Drop-out rates
Graduation rates
GPA of graduating seniors
Disaggregated data analysis
Scores on district assessments
Ability tests
Graduates enrolled in college

Perception Information

Interviews with selected individuals
Focus groups
Public opinion surveys
Exit interviews
Study circles
Survey of employees
Teacher evaluation
Media coverage/clippings

Scene V: Determine how Monitoring Reports are to be presented. Many times, boards have something different in mind for monitoring data presentations than staff does. Remember, staff wants you to understand what they are sharing. Therefore, we recommend:

- First and foremost, remember monitoring data on results is not about *how* staff have tried to improve learning, but rather *what* students have actually achieved;
- Agree on time frames for presentations ahead of time;
- Establish clear time limits for lecture presentations. Leave the bulk of time for questions and answers among board members and with staff;
- Staff can function as Robert Greenleaf’s “Servant Leaders” by telling the board what data did and did not tell them and what questions they as professional educators still have. In effect, lead the board members into learning how to ask questions of data;
- Provide short and clear narrative explanations to accompany the data by section, and in the summary. Members will use this data presentation with their community members;
- Use good graphic design and color, when appropriate, to increase ease of interpretation and understanding. Remember, confusion breeds distrust.

“In Trenton we get the data out there and keep it out there as our monitoring reports to the community,” said Dr. Lytle. “We strive for absolutely candid disclosure and accessibility to data about school and district performance. We get data out on our website and keep it current. We have started publishing School Profiles that describe for everyone the work going on in each school and the achievement/performance levels. We never want to be perceived as guilty of anything less than full disclosure.”

Scene VI. Know What to Ask of the Data. Asking good questions will drive a board to “drill down” into the data and “mine” it to reveal what may not be apparent at first review. This deeper investigation can reveal trends, causal relationships, articulation and integration needs, breakdowns in transitional years . . .

Sample questions to ask:

- Is the data longitudinal—based on the same students or student subgroups over time?
- Has the assessment being used been changed over time?
- Where are the consistent dips in performance? How do we explain them?
- Are the reports summarizing important trends and will they aid us in forecasting the future?
- What are the comparative analyses that will further inform us about our students’ achievement: subgroups of students, different schools, students in adjacent districts, and districts in the state or nation of similar demographics? Compare to conditions found in highly effective schools and school districts.
- Who will conduct the research? Will it be unbiased?
- Is the research valid and reliable in relationship to what we are measuring? Is there other data we should be collecting and analyzing?
- What are realistic targets for improvement based on this baseline data?
- Do we need to redefine our expected results based on what the data shows us? Do we need to reprioritize our budget to make sure that results happen?

Scene VII. Inquire about the Extent of District Expertise. Never assume teaching staff knows more about data than you do. This is not criticism, nor is it meant to be harsh. Historically, many colleges and universities offering programs in education require only one course in data and testing. Times have changed and staff needs the job appropriate professional development in hardware, software, application, input, use and interpretation of data to ensure the board’s priorities can be achieved in their classroom.

Scene VIII. Budget Prioritization Two issues are at play: First, boards must demand that budgets be presented in such a way as to show that their student achievement priorities, as established through board deliberation on data, are being funded. Trenton’s budget/financial planning policy opens with, “Financial planning for any fiscal year shall not deviate materially from the board’s ends policies . . .” In Trenton, the state establishes budgets but leaves some discretion, especially at the School Leadership Council level. “The board established End Results and their operational values essentially direct the allocation and reallocation of all resources at the site level,” said Dr. Lytle.

Secondly, collecting and using valid and reliable data is not inexpensive. Budgets across school districts are stretched to support the hardware and software necessary to judge authentic achievement. New technology is being promulgated that is alleviating some of the district-by-district cash outlay by not requiring the number of multiple in-district experts dedicated to technology.

Act III: Lessons from the Veterans

Scene I: A Data Champion, Lake County School District in Leadville, Colorado was challenged to educate a highly mobile, non-English speaking sub-group of students. These students and their families migrated from Mexico each fall to find employment in the service industry of local ski resorts. Each spring, the children and families returned to their home country. The data gathered attested to the fact that the achievement gap was large, the dissatisfaction of parents was significant, and the standardized district reports to the state left them in danger of take over.

The board of education was committed to improving student achievement. They prioritized reading as the number one area for increased achievement.

Having established that priority, the board held a retreat with senior staff to communicate and discuss their focus and asked staff how this could be achieved within their current, small budget. Administrators jumped at the chance to join the board in unlocking the barrier to learning—reading. Their challenge back to the board was to give them unerring support when tough decisions were made. The pact was sealed. The board said what it wanted. In return, the board committed to support professional decision making on how to achieve students reading performance targets.

Working in this team environment, the high school vice principal offered to retire from his position and have his salary and time reallocated to the primary grades in the form of a reading specialist. The superintendent and staff worked with the union leadership to designate all staff development for the coming year to teaching all teachers to teach reading. Curriculum and instructional delivery focused on integrating reading into every course and classroom. All new staff hired were required to have a reading background.

Within the following year, state and district assessments showed student test scores rose significantly, with the Hispanic students' achievement gap closing dramatically:

“The data was clear and convincing to board and staff. Together we made bold assertions, undertook bold strategies and were able to make a difference in children's lives,” said Peg Portschellar, former superintendent of Lake County School District.

Scene II. Contact other Boards for Help: Several boards of education around the country are actively engaged in data-driven decision making—not only in regards to student achievement, but in assessing district operations as well. Each of these districts has developed an annual calendar, a full year in advance, which schedules board discussion of student achievement and monitoring progress.

We invite you to contact any of these districts for more information about their boards, their data driven systems and policies.

Lake Washington School District	Redmond, Washington	Dr. Don Saul
Newark School District	Newark, New York	Robert Christmann
Beaufort County School District	Beaufort, SC	Herman Gaither
Horry County School District	Conway, SC	Dr. Gerrita Postlewait
Guilford County School District	Greensboro, NC	Dr. Terry Grier
Austin Public Schools	Austin, Texas	Dr. Pat Forgione
Burlington Public Schools	Burlington, Kansas	Dale Rawson
Aspen School District	Aspen, Colorado	Dr. Diana Sirko
Lake County Public Schools	Leadville, Colorado	Dr. Bette Bullock
Clark County School District	Clark County, Nevada	Dr. Carlos Garcia

Prologue Boards themselves set the stage for accountability by requiring valid and reliable data to measure student progress. They can enjoy the satisfaction of effective governance by working with the community to set district performance results; examining data with staff to identify progress and areas for targeted work; providing support for tough staff operational decisions that unerringly focus on students; advocating on behalf of the district and its efforts; and finally, linking back to the community of taxpayers and asking for its partnership in this strategic effort.

Successful Boards can win the *Tony Award for Good Governance* focused on improving student achievement, but it requires their education, discipline to stay focused and dedication to the use of data in their decision-making.

Authors:

President Linda J. Dawson and co-founder Randy Quinn are the lead actors of The Aspen Group International, Inc. Their consulting work has trouped across the United States (including Trenton!) and to five continents, focusing primarily in working with “The Players”, Boards of Education. Dawson and Quinn consult with, facilitate and coach board efforts to become true and powerful *governing* boards, using board policy and data to focus on increasing student achievement.