

## The Face of Data

*School leaders and educators often are exhorted to use data to improve student achievement. However, test scores only provide partial information on what's going on in your district*

Over the past decade, the public's image of education has largely been shaped by the publication of test scores. Academic achievement certainly is an important element of the public's perceptions of any school system; however, test scores—particularly as they have been reported in the past decade—tell only a fraction of the district's story.

Now, with nearly every school system in the nation strapped for resources, and with public confidence in many governmental institutions sagging, it is essential that the public and the media hear the real story of public education in your schools. As board members, you can play a critical role by being ambassadors for your districts and for public education.

Think of it this way: When a district maintains an excellent reputation, it attracts families to the area, stabilizing property values. Moreover, school districts where board members are strong public supporters of education can attract the best staff and senior leaders who are more likely to work with a harmonious board than with a contentious one.

Here are five practical ways to serve as effective ambassadors for your schools.

### Put a face on the data

Charts, graphs, data, and statistics are part of any effective presentation describing the quantitative elements of an educational system's performance.

However, we must remember—as one group of teachers told me—that “data has a face.”

In other words, the numbers on charts are not sterile statistics, but real children. Charts that include pictures of children demonstrate that increased reading scores are not merely lines on paper, but the result of joyous interactions between students and teachers as they discover the joy of reading and the challenges of learning.

### Beyond the data

A sports team's performance can be reduced to box scores, but there is always a story behind the numbers—the qualitative lens through which we better understand quantitative information. Board members who are ambassadors for education can provide context for data presentations by talking about real stories in which students, staff members, and school communities have overcome adversity, taken on challenges, and learned things far beyond the skills reflected in test scores.

This is particularly true for areas such as student service, leadership, fine arts, and health, none of which are displayed in traditional reports of “adequate yearly progress.” Test data also fail to reflect the exceptional work of teachers who challenge students to perform at high levels beyond the prevailing academic stan-

dards. They also don't tell the story of those teachers assisting students who are far below a standard to make significant progress. This information is best conveyed with rich descriptions and compelling stories rather than a PowerPoint slide.

### Explain the impact

Most people think of education as an expense—and a very significant one for the budgets of most states and cities. However, a closer look reveals that education is also an important source of revenue.

The Alliance for Excellent Education ([all4ed.org](http://all4ed.org)) provides details for each state about the dollars saved when districts reduce the dropout rate. Students who stay in school rather than drop out generate significantly more tax revenue, spend less money on state-provided medical services, and consume fewer resources from the local and state criminal justice system. Other recent studies show the long-term economic and social benefit of kindergarten. Even extracurricular activities have demonstrable positive impacts on student behavior, attendance, and academic achievement.

### Challenge common assertions

When public officials allow critical assertions about public education to stand, the public too easily can infer that the assertions are true. As Netscape founder James Barksdale famously said, “Everybody's entitled to their opinions; they're just not entitled to their own facts.”

Board members don't need to provide a knee-jerk defense of everything in public education. We have some bad teachers, administrators, and yes, perhaps even a few bad board members. The

### Convey a clear vision

same could be said of bankers, lawyers, doctors, farmers, or just about any other group we could name.

But despite the prevailing villainy associated with the word “banker,” we all know of many honest, decent, hard-working bankers who are far more representative of their profession than a few rapacious thugs who capture the lion’s share of the media’s attention. It is similarly inappropriate to generalize about any level of education based upon isolated incidents of violence, poor teaching, or inadequate leadership.

The pages of *ASBJ*, as well as many academic journals such as the *Journal of Education of Students Placed At Risk* and the newly published *Getting It Done* (2011, Harvard Education Press) by Karin Chenoweth, make it clear that there are abundant stories of school success that challenge common stereotypes.

Board members, superintendents, staff members, and students must share a clear vision of the future. For example, in Tulsa Public Schools, there is a bone-deep belief that every student deserves the right to be prepared for college.

It’s a simple one-sentence commitment, with carefully chosen words (“right” is more powerful than “goal” or “objective”). In any public setting, leaders can say, “Our students have the right to be prepared for ...” and everyone else in the room will fill in “college” with an enthusiastic affirmation of their vision. This is not merely a slogan, but has clear implications for how these teachers and leaders address literacy, assessment, schedules, and interventions for student success.

Board members are busy people, balancing the demands of professional

lives, families, and school board meetings. Adding to that list, “ambassador for education” may seem like one burden too many. But if each board member took on one ambassadorial assignment each month—from a private meeting with a legislator to a public presentation to a community group—to send consistent and accurate messages about public schools, we could change the national debate that is dominated by critics who too often are unburdened by evidence and unchallenged by educational leaders. ■

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