Assessing School Success Comprehensively

By Invited Contributor Listed Below on March 21, 2014 12:53 AM | 2 Comments

*Today's guest contributor is **Joshua Starr**, Superintendent, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), Maryland.*

Eva L. Baker effectively describes the necessary conditions for appropriate assessment of student learning. I hope that state, local and federal policymakers take her advice. Yet, even if we get individual student assessment right, are we clear about how to effectively assess school performance? What are the "conditions for success" that are necessary in every school in order to drive increased student achievement? How can they be articulated, taught and measured?

As a Superintendent with more than 151,000 students in 202 schools, my unit of change is the school house, not the individual teacher. In fact, one of the great missteps of the current education reformer's quest to hold individual actors accountable for individual student achievement reform is the lack of attention paid to the systems that create great teaching and learning. My job as Superintendent is to organize the complex systems within Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) to support great teaching and learning, which includes resource allocation, policy alignment, communications, operational supports, assessment, knowledge management, community engagement, curriculum development and professional learning, among others.

Every Superintendent has a range of schools in his or her district. One school may have high student achievement but has stagnated for a while and hasn't achieved the next level; another school might have a problematic history of student achievement but has a new principal, an engaged staff and all the pieces in place to accelerate achievement; another school might be deficient in all areas. If I were to assess a school's potential for success - the likelihood that all students will achieve the standards they need for the next level - solely on the lagging indicator of student achievement results, I would miss a significant part of what makes great schools. Thus, I have to have a comprehensive and holistic view of school performance and the conditions, or leading indicators, which are likely to drive increased performance for every child.

In MCPS, we have developed a School Support and Improvement Framework (SSIF) that enables us to understand those conditions for success.   The first element is student achievement, which includes all of the typical student achievement data, including disaggregation by demographics, trends and behavioral data. The second is school climate and culture, including engagement of staff and students. We use the Gallup Q12 survey to measure employee engagement and Gallup surveys to measure students' sense of hope, engagement and well-being. These measures directly correlate to increased student achievement. Third, we look at leadership data. Through direct observation and document review we assess whether the principal leads teams, leads for equity, uses our Professional Growth System, engages the community and creates a positive culture. Finally, we assess implementation of programs and initiatives, including curriculum and interventions.

All of these measures enable us to make decisions about the resources and supports that a school needs in order to improve student achievement. A school with a disengaged staff has different needs than a school that has not been able to effectively implement a new curriculum. These determinations - done in concert with principals and schools through our school improvement process - then create accountability for central office because our supports have to align explicitly to school needs.

Ultimately, the measure of our success is a student's ability to thrive in their future with the commensurate academic, creative problem-solving and social-emotional competencies. I must be accountable for those results and for aligning systems of support and intervention so that every school is able to meet the needs of every child. Assessment of school and system performance must, therefore, be aligned to *all* the factors that make a school great, not just standardized test scores.

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