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Board Level Academic Dashboards

Step 3: Using your dashboard effectively

Overview

Board level academic dashboards help board members see if their school is on track to achieve its academic goals. As discussed in other parts of this *Board Level Academic Dashboards* suite of tools, creating a dashboard with simple, concise, visual data is a challenging process that requires defining academic success and setting annual goals that will lead the school to achieving its long-term strategic plan.

The final step for creating a board level academic dashboard is to determine how the board and school leadership will use it. School performance committees (which include school leadership) must determine when to share the dashboards and how they will inform board-level decisions. Dashboards only become tools when they are actually used.

Sharing the Dashboard

- **The school performance committee¹ and school leaders should review the board academic dashboard at each school performance committee meeting².** School performance committee members and school leaders can examine more detailed data at committee meetings to better understand what the data shows, what mid-course corrections should be explored, and whether interventions are working. The academic committee monitors progress, proactively identifies challenges, and notes progress.
- **Include the board level academic dashboard in the board packets regularly.** Boards need to create a culture of accountability for goals. Make it a policy to include dashboards in your board materials regularly. Many schools include the dashboard in every board packet, highlighting updates since the last meeting or acknowledging that there are no updates to report (See CBP Tool, Agendas and Board Packets.) Encouraging the board to become familiar with the dashboard each month improves members' ability to read and use it. However, school leaders may not have new data to report. In this case, they can either include the previous month's dashboard (to remind board members of last month's data or

¹ Remember, the school performance committee includes the school leader, additional principals if appropriate, and board members.

² Note: School performance committees should meet at least once between every board meeting or as often as needed to complete their work. See CBP's school performance committee charge tool for more information.

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promote familiarization with the dashboard), or not include the dashboard, notifying members the reasoning behind the omission (i.e., there is no new data).

- **When the dashboard is included in the board packet, members should also receive a dashboard briefing sheet that pairs the visual data with clear narration.** The briefing sheet includes explanations of the changes or lack of changes in the current data in comparison to recent dashboards and highlights relevant information. The briefing sheet should not attempt to address every question or to explain away bad news. Avoid the temptation to include pre-emptive explanations that might stifle board discussion.
- **Present the dashboard for board-level discussion at the full board meeting at least twice a year** to allow time for meaningful discussion about progress toward goals. It provides the school leader and school performance committee an opportunity to highlight areas of success, sound alarms, and inform the board of mid-course interventions that may be needed.

Regardless of how frequently the dashboard is presented at board meetings, it is best practice to present a final dashboard to the full board after the end of the school year when all—or at least most—academic results are available. This final summary report will answer the question, “Did the school achieve its annual academic goals?”

Allocating board time effectively is a challenge when reviewing the dashboard. Boards run the risk of spending so much time on questioning and understanding the dashboard that little time remains for problem solving. This is why the dashboard should be focused, clear, and concise—helping the board focus on the high-level results and the most important data, and not become mired in overwhelming details.

If the board discussion does become too detailed, the school performance committee and school leadership can identify the board’s key questions and commit to reporting the answers back to the board at a later meeting. School performance committee members and the school leader should work together to keep the board’s discussion at an appropriate level—not too far into the weeds—and focused on answering the question: are we on track to achieve our annual academic goals?

Using the Dashboard to Inform Board Decisions

The dashboard may inform key strategic board decision-making. Boards should be able to look at the dashboard, immediately absorb critical information about student achievement, and then move on to discuss strategic decision points. Focus board discussion around understanding the current successes, challenges, and asking the school leader to share his/her explanations and proposed solutions. Remember, it is not the board’s role to determine the implementation strategy (e.g., should the third grade teacher be fired? Should the school offer Saturday classes?)

However, the board does use the data from academic dashboards to inform several of its key decisions.

- Determine whether the school leader is driving the school toward achieving “sufficient” results. Is his/her leadership achieving the rigorous annual goals? Is this the right leader for your charter school going forward?

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- Approve a budget that appropriately funds the program in ways that support the school in achieving its goals. This includes spending levels for professional development, staff, resources and materials, new programs, and interventions.

Make sure to avoid common pitfalls when using an academic dashboard:

- **Timing of data release and board decisions does not line up.** The release of many standardized test results is often in July or beyond, meaning boards may not have access to the end-of-year data until mid to late summer. Add to this additional accountability metrics from the authorizer and boards may not have a complete picture of the school's performance until the fall. This timing can be tricky—budgets are passed and school leaders are hired without the benefit of a full data set. Have a candid conversation with your board and school leader about how to make the data collection and decision-making timing work for you.
- **Beware of knee-jerk reactions to dashboard information.** Unsatisfactory results on the dashboard are not sufficient reasons to seek a new school leader or switch to a new curriculum. The board should avoid these types of errors by using the dashboard as one—and only one—source of information. Ideally, alarming results will provoke engaging conversations with school leaders about strategic priorities.
- **The academic dashboard is NOT a formal school leader evaluation and should not be construed as such.** While the information in the academic dashboard can certainly inform the evaluation of the school leader, as the metrics for academic success should be aligned, the two should not be conflated.
- **The school performance committee is not the only committee that can use this dashboard to inform its work.** For example, the development committee may use the dashboard to identify the top three data points of school success and use that in their development materials. The finance committee will use dashboard data when asking questions about the budget. And the governance committee will use the dashboard as an onboarding tool as new members come on board. The academic progress of the school is fundamental to every board member's work.

Tweaking the Dashboard Over Time

Most likely, not everything about your dashboard will be perfect throughout the first year. Luckily, the dashboard is a living tool... it can change! Once the results of the academic dashboard have been reviewed, reflect on the past year's goals and develop new goals for the following year. The graphic below demonstrates the cyclical nature of this work.

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The school's strategy for setting new goals will vary depending on the outcome of the previous year's academic dashboard.

Board level—academic dashboards are powerful tools that keep school leadership and the board aligned on progress toward goals. But the real power of these dashboards is when these stakeholders use dashboards to spark healthy discussion, make real-time programmatic tweaks, and inform key decisions.

At the end of the day, charter school boards hold the charter, given to them by the authorizer. Board members are responsible for students' achievements meeting the levels promised in the charter. Dashboards are key tools to help board members do just that.

