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Board Level Academic Dashboards

Introduction to Building Academic Dashboards

Overview

While there are many stakeholders involved in the daily operations of a charter school, the overall success or failure of a charter school is a responsibility that rests with its board. This contractual and fiduciary responsibility means charter school boards must make decisions about school leadership, budget, governance, and compliance that fulfill the promises outlined in the school's charter. Charter Board Partners' Standards for Effective Charter School Governance describe effective boards as those that use student data to inform and drive key decisions. At a minimum, great boards:

- agree on the definition of academic excellence,
- understand how student achievement is measured at the school, and
- know whether their students are on track by regularly reviewing indicators of student success to measure progress toward school goals.

Many boards and school leaders struggle with what kinds of academic data the board should monitor, how to present that data to the board in a meaningful, understandable way, and how to use data to inform board decisions. Board level academic dashboards are key tools to resolve these common challenges.

In this series of tools, we define board level academic dashboards, outline the steps boards and school leaders can take to build an effective dashboard, and explain how to use the dashboards to inform board decisions. These tools are meant to jumpstart a conversation between the school leadership, board, and other school stakeholders—including data managers or principals—about what data the board needs to effectively determine whether the school is on track to achieve its academic goals. Because building dashboards should be a collaborative effort, we recommend reading these tools as a team.

Board Level Academic Dashboards Defined

A board level academic dashboard is an information management tool that displays key metrics of academic progress. A dashboard should present visual data (e.g., graphs and charts) concisely and help board members answer the key question: "Are we on track to achieve our academic goals?"

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As an analogy, think about the dashboard on your car—this is, after all, where the term originated. Your car dashboard monitors the car’s most vital systems to let the driver know whether it is on track to arrive safely. The data change to reflect the car’s status, but the measures remain the same and no projection for ultimate outcome or recommended action is offered. For example, the speedometer consistently tells you how quickly you are moving, but does not provide a specific recommendation on whether you should tap the brakes. Your engine light might come on, alerting you to get to a repair shop as soon as possible, but it will not tell you what—if anything—is wrong. However, the dashboard does alert the driver to pay attention to certain warnings and that he/she may continue at the current speed.

BOARD LEVEL ACADEMIC DASHBOARDS

DO	DO NOT
Tell boards whether the school is on track to meet academic goals	Provide nuanced explanations or causal information
Display a few of the most important metrics for student success	Include all data available
Communicate data visually and simply show progress toward goals	Include detailed analyses or lower level information
Contain appropriate data to inform decision-making	Make recommendations or suggest policy changes
Provide data that allow boards to measure past, current and future progress	Provide data that only look back in time

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Why Boards Need Academic Dashboards

Academic dashboards supply boards with the information needed to fulfill their roles. The dashboards help boards:

- Evaluate whether the school leader is driving the organization to achieve sufficient academic results
- Approve a budget that addresses the school's most pressing programmatic needs
- Provide a chance for the board to work with the school leader to agree on the definition of student success and set long- and short-term goals for achieving that standard
- Build board-wide understanding for how the school is currently measuring academic progress
- Identify key successes and challenges in real time

“Sufficient” means the school is meeting its academic goals.

Sufficient means different things to different schools depending on the school's current academic performance and long-term academic goals.

Keep the car analogy in your mind as you begin the process of designing and using your dashboard. There are numerous possible data points that could be recorded, multiple ways of splicing the data, and endless explanations for what might have caused each result. Nonetheless, the dashboard should focus the board's attention on only the most critical metrics of school performance. It should tell the board whether the school leader has the school going in the right direction and invite committee members and school leaders to investigate particular metrics more deeply.

It is important to remember that there is no one single dashboard that is right for all charter school boards. By design, charter schools have different missions, goals, leaders, and board members. Board level academic dashboards must be unique and customized to each individual school. This set of tools provides guidelines to help you get there.

Steps for Creating a Board Level Academic Dashboard

Building a dashboard should be a thoughtful and deliberate process. Too often boards begin by creating a spreadsheet without first considering the process they will use to measure progress. As you build an academic dashboard for your board, keep in mind that if you are doing it right, it should be very hard work. There are an almost infinite number of data points, diverse opinions about what should be measured (and how), and a variety of methods

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for presenting information. There will be no one-size-fits-all solution; rather, how you use the dashboard will vary depending upon what kind of data, challenges, and board you have.

Consider these three steps for creating and using a board level academic dashboard:

Step 1: Set goals and metrics for monitoring progress

Step 2: Design a clear, simple dashboard

Step 3: Use your dashboard effectively

Check out the CBP tool for each step.