

Ten Steps to Better Student Achievement Results

By Tom Coyne

Every student in Colorado takes the ACT in eleventh grade. It is the last comprehensive measure we have of the cumulative result of the taxpayers' investment in twelve years (K-11) of their education.

Consider the 2015 results for students not eligible for free and reduced lunch who live in six relatively affluent suburban districts: St. Vrain, Boulder, Jeffco, Cherry Creek, Littleton, and Dougco.

Only 52% of these students met the ACT's "college and career ready" standard in reading, only 54% in math, and only 50% in science. The results for free and reduced eligible students are much worse.

Please don't reply, "but my district outperforms (fill in the blank)." In the real world, that doesn't matter. If our children can't do algebra, they aren't getting the job or into the college they want. In today's intensely competitive global economy, if our children aren't graduating college and career ready, they're going to struggle for years.

Unfortunately, when it comes to substantially improving the performance of complex organizations like school districts, there are no silver bullets; you have to experiment your way to better results.

There are ten changes superintendents can make to accelerate this process:

- (1) Acknowledge the need to substantially improve. Just bragging about the districts you outperform has two insidious effects. Trust erodes with parents and employers who aren't fooled, and staff that are told their performance is great feel no pressure to change.
- (2) Make achievement growth results more easily comparable across student groups and schools. Too often, reporting focuses on student achievement level (which is based on both parental demographics and school value added) rather than student achievement growth (which heavily depends on school value added). To improve learning and choice, make clear which

schools do the best and worst job of growing different types of students.

- (3) Make your most important experiments visible. How many school board and accountability committee members can describe the three most important achievement improvement initiatives underway in their district or school this year, the research on which they are based, and their expected results?
- (4) Get better at execution. Problems with “fidelity of implementation” repeatedly come up in school and district Unified Improvement Plans (UIPs). What good is a promising experiment if it is poorly executed? Here’s a simple idea: Create an online, public dashboard that shows the implementation status for every “major improvement initiative” listed in your district and school UIPs. What gets measured gets managed.
- (5) Rigorously evaluate your experiments and publish the results. Unfortunately, this seldom happens. For example, \$30 million was spent on full day kindergarten in Jeffco over six years before the board asked for a rigorous evaluation of this experiment and found it hadn’t met its goals.
- (6) Get better at developing the new capabilities you need. The New Teacher Project recently found that the districts they studied spent an average of \$18,000 per year per teacher on professional development with no positive return (see their report, [“The Mirage”](#)). It’s time to take a hard look at PD.
- (7) Reduce teacher absences. The Civil Rights Division of the US Department of Education requires all districts to report the percentage of teachers who are absent (for personal or sick days) more than ten days per year, which they determined to be the threshold for significant negative effects on student achievement. The most recent public data show that this varies widely across districts, from Boulder (53%) and Dougco (51%) to Cherry Creek (20%).
- (8) Make resource use more transparent. Many private sector organizations use activity based budgeting, which links goals to the activities required to achieve them to budgets. In too many districts, the link between achievement improvement and budgeting remains a black box, raising suspicions about how

efficiently and effectively billions of taxpayer dollars are being spent.

- (9) Take a comprehensive approach to managing change. To drive execution and learning, most large transformation efforts make use of a program management office, which maintains an integrated view of the relationships between multiple improvement initiatives as well as their progress and results. In K-12, PMOs are rare.
- (10) Seek out “critical friends”. All management teams are naturally subject to biases that hinder performance improvement, including over-optimism, over-confidence, focusing on information that supports their views, and promoting conformity that silences dissent. The most effective antidote is outsiders who will constructively challenge a management team’s views, for example as members of a board of education or district and school accountability committees. Unfortunately, too often these people are criticized for “attacking the district.”

The cost of these ten changes is minimal; yet over time they can have a substantial impact on achievement results, and how prepared our children are to meet the challenges that await them after high school.

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