



MEASURE OF SUCCESS

Charters go farther and deeper to gauge performance

Every business should know how it is doing, and what it can do better. For schools, measuring performance can be more complex than looking up sales figures, market share numbers, or stock prices.

Charter schools, which must perform well in order to attract students and retain their charters, have gone deeper and longer than other schools in evaluating the education they provide. Charters are independent public schools run by a non-profit board, rather than a local school board. In exchange for autonomy from local districts, charters must meet educational benchmarks. Charters have gone above the usual metrics, like standardized test scores, in gauging the quality of education their students receive. Charters measure areas that might not show up in test scores, like graduation rates, improvement in grades over time, workforce readiness, student involvement in school culture, students' emotional growth, and parent satisfaction.

"I think charter schools are held more accountable because we're under more scrutiny," says Linda Clautti, CEO of Downtown's Northside Urban Pathways Charter School. Clautti's school uses a "balanced scorecard", an analytic tool many businesses use to measure how well a company is performing in areas a profit-and-loss statement can't reveal. The school's scorecard measures student participation in extra-curriculars, median SAT scores, parent satisfaction, diversity in hiring, and staff turnover levels.

The higher level of self-scrutiny enables the school to quickly make changes if an area needs improvement, Clautti says.

"It's imperative that we be objective in terms of the

data we produce," Clautti says. "With the balanced scorecard, you can easily track your progress and prove in black and white whether you're really up in an area."

Parent surveys are another common tool used by charters. Parents are the schools' main client, explains Jon McCann, principal of the Environmental Charter School at Frick Park. "If parents feel that the school's communication levels are below par, they're going to let you know quickly," says McCann. "It's not all academics that dictate how a parent feels about the school. It's how they feel when they walk in the school, if they feel the principal is communicating with them. In a large sense, a lot of what we do falls under customer service."

Outside evaluations are another tool charters use to improve their product. The Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh Charter School used the recommendations from an outside evaluator to revamp its reading program, adding more reading time and more guided reading for students. The Environmental Charter School is bringing a team of University of Maryland researchers to evaluate its new environmental curriculum.

At the end of the day, charters are more rigorous in their self-examinations because they must be, says Manchester Academic Charter School CEO Vas Scoumis. "Charter schools are giving parents a choice where they might not have had one before. If a parent's not satisfied, they can look at other options," Scoumis says. "So you have to do everything you can to keep them coming through your doors."

This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.



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