How Can You Measure a School's Success? It's Not Just Through Test Scores

(This is the first post in a four-part series.)

The new question-of-the-week is:

What are other ways than standardized-test scores to evaluate the effectiveness of schools?

Standardized-test scores are often viewed as the primary way to evaluate a student, a teacher, or a school's success. But are those scores really the best way to measure school quality?

This series will examine alternative or additional criteria to use to determine if a school is a successful one.

You might also be interested in The Best Articles Describing Alternatives t o High-Stakes Testing .

Today, Holly Spinelli, Tameka Porter, Ph.D., Mary K. Tedrow, and Meghann Seril share their responses. Holly, Tameka, and Mary were also guests on my 10-minute BAM! Radio Show . You can also find a list of, and links to, previous shows here.

'One-Size-Fits-All' Doesn't Work

Holly Spinelli is a students' rights activist with specific focuses in alternative, strengths-based pedagogies in which students' voices are the catalyst for their education. She is a New York public high school teacher, an adjunct instructor at SUNY Orange County Community College, and an active member of the National Council of Teachers of English's Committee Against Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English:

Evaluation is nothing new in the educational realm. Schools are anything but standard, yet most evaluation systems treat them as such. Unfortunately, the nuance required to properly assess schools' effectiveness is plagued by excessive reliance upon students' standardized-test scores. This method of evaluation is an outdated tool that fails to properly assess the various roles schools serve in the 21st-century. A balanced, holistic evaluation system to determine schools' effectiveness should address a variety of factors including, but not limited to:

- Schools' curricula and relationships with the communities in which they reside
- The effectiveness of the academic, professional, mental, and emotional support for students and staff alike
- Their commitments and actions to being and creating racially, culturally, socially, and professionally inclusive spaces

Here are additional areas that more accurate evaluations of schools' effectiveness can include:

Community partnerships

Students are typically members of larger communities that their schools serve. As such, evaluations should include segments that carefully assess the relationships schools forge within their local communities. This relationship must extend beyond the elected school board members, because all voices in the community matter. This is not to diminish a school board's role; instead, it includes historically marginalized voices like those of immigrants, folks whose first language is not English, folks who are not from the community's dominant groups, disabled folks, and community members whose jobs and careers do not fall within standard time slots, to name a few.

Students do not attend school in a bubble. Their lives outside of school affect their social, emotional, and physical health, which in turn impacts their academic performance. Students are community members, too. Their voices matter. Effective schools forge safe, strong partnerships with their students and local community members to actively work together to address their needs.

Cultural Relevance and Post-High-School Planning

Culturally relevant curriculum is much more than education's latest craze. Effective schools take this seriously within and beyond the academic realm when they offer curricular choices that reflect the student populations they serve, while also providing what Rudine Sims Bishop calls "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors" to give students opportunities to learn about themselves and others in the world.

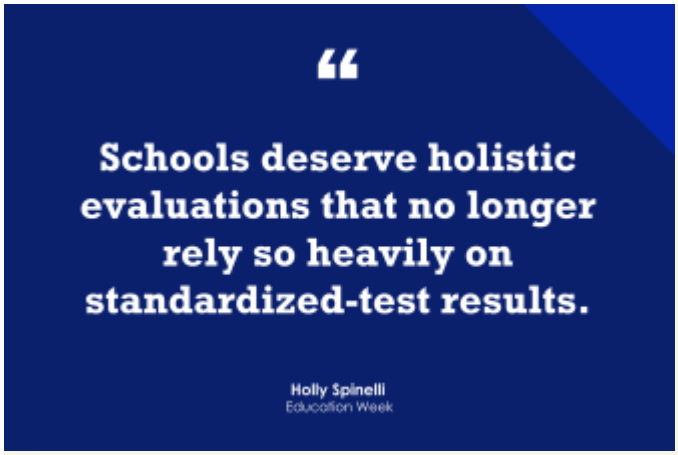
Students' and community members' ideas, voices, and lived experiences should be included in a school's plans and approaches to providing appropriate educational experiences. For instance, despite the popular "college for all" post-high-school plan, not all students wish to attend college right away, or even at all, and effective schools are equipped to support these students' journeys toward success, too.

Faculty and Staff Support

A school's effectiveness also includes staff and faculty morale. It is important to avoid the blame game here, but an appropriate evaluation would consider what kind of relationships are forged and what sense of community is cultivated in schools. While it is imperative to include overall community indicators like mutual respect, safety, and inclusiveness among staff, faculty, and students, evaluations must incorporate a sharp focus on faculty experience. Do faculty and staff enjoy working in these spaces? Do people have strong professional bonds with one another? Are people's professional goals taken seriously and supported? How so? Are teachers encouraged to use their professional discretion and expertise in planning and implementing curriculum or are they required to "teach to the test" and tailor their curriculum to only prepare students for standardized tests?

Effective schools recognize and foster the strengths and talents their faculty and staff possess. For instance, they offer differentiated professional-development opportunities to meet the various levels of familiarity and expertise their faculty and staff have with the presented topics. Much like students' classroom learning, professional development should not be a one-size-fits-all experience. Effective schools encourage and support their own faculty and staff experts to lead these endeavors. When faculty and staff are valued and supported, students and communities can flourish, too.

No school community perfectly matches another, and an evaluation system must acknowledge and evaluate each schools' strengths, plans, and actionable steps toward improvement. Schools deserve holistic evaluations that no longer rely so heavily on standardized-test results, because one-size-fits-all evaluation practices are a detriment to cultivating effective schools.



‘Formative Assessments’

Tameka Porter, Ph.D., is a managing consultant at McREL International and affiliate faculty at George Mason University. She works with teachers and leaders to build and sustain equitable learning systems:

There is no question that high-stakes standardized testing has a prime role in measuring school effectiveness. Legislation like the Every Student Succeeds Act has prioritized annual test-based student outcomes as the most predictive method of evaluating a school's ability to provide a quality education to its students. Indeed, most schools in the U.S. use student performance on standardized-test scores on state content assessments, English-language-proficiency assessments, and other annual summative evaluations to determine school success, with successful schools having most of their students performing at or above the average score on an achievement test or having a large percentage of students reaching a certain proficiency threshold.

Though achievement-based evaluation is an important and influential way of measuring school effectiveness, treating test scores as the singular variable that predicts or determines school quality may make teachers and leaders overlook other factors that may paint a more complete picture of how well schools educate and serve their students. No two schools are alike, so setting raw achievement levels as the uniform standard for school performance tells us nothing about who students are and what their learning environments are like. Students have a variety of social identities and academic backgrounds that they bring into schools and classrooms, and those learning spaces may or not be reflective or supportive of the students they serve.

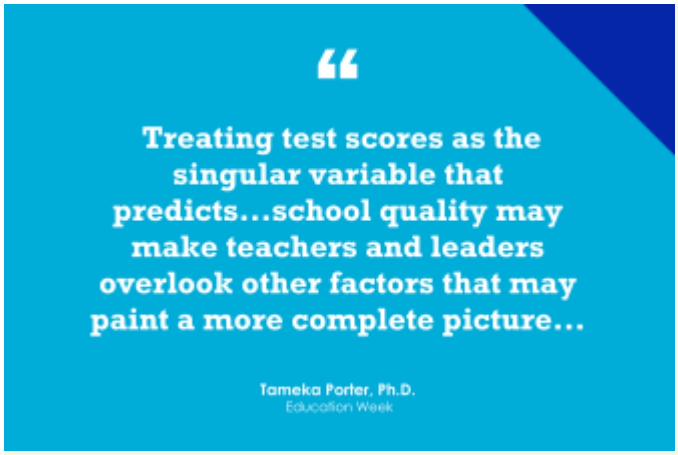
The question at the heart of evaluation is: What are schools striving for when they want to be considered successful? If schools are not ready to pivot away from achievement-based evaluations of school performance, they can build more robust

profiles of what students can achieve by including daily, weekly, or monthly formative assessments in their student-success evaluations to capture what students are learning on an ongoing basis. Schools could also consider introducing quarterly or semi-annual interim checks for learning growth between each test. Measuring progress over time rather than through a once-a-year snapshot of performance can be a sustainable approach to identifying the key concepts that students may be acquiring (or missing), which can provide opportunities for teachers to tailor their instructional practices to target the content areas in which students may need additional support.

One strategy—beyond student performance on standardized tests—that schools can apply to measure school effectiveness is to examine how well they meet the academic-development needs of individual students inside each classroom. Do students have opportunities to engage in learning experiences that are applicable and relevant to their backgrounds? Are students offered access to personalized projects that are tailored to their interests, abilities, and passions? Schools that encourage teachers and leaders to adopt personalized approaches to student learning display a value-added view of what students can achieve that honors their social identities. Moreover, adopting a more holistic view of school success allows educators to engage in continuous school improvement processes through evaluating the courses and programs available to students that are within the school's locus of control.

Another way school effectiveness can be evaluated is by examining how safe, nurturing, and culturally responsive teachers and students perceive their schools to be. Reimagining schools as cultural hubs or gathering places for students, teachers, and leaders to share their cultural assets with one another can transform schools into more dynamic learning environments in which teachers can be innovative with their instructional practices and students can feel academically and culturally nurtured and enriched.

Adopting individualized and culturally responsive approaches to assessing school quality requires schools to shift their perspectives on the characteristics that define effective learning environments. By moving beyond surface observations of school effectiveness to examine targeted culturally responsive interventions that support the academic achievement and social-emotional development of the whole child, schools can lay the foundation for educators to establish, develop, and sustain caring and respectful relationships between teachers and students, which, in turn, can lead to higher student achievement and more effective schools.



Sparking 'Joy'

Mary K. Tedrow taught in the high school English classroom beginning in 1978, ending her K-12 career as the Porterfield Endowed English Chair at John Handley High School in 2016. She currently directs the Shenandoah Valley Writing Project at Shenandoah University in Winchester Va. Tedrow is also a lecturer at Johns Hopkins University and is the author of Write, Think, Learn: Tapping the Power of Daily Student Writing Across Content Areas

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Below is my list of other ways to evaluate school impact without resorting to high-stakes, curriculum-narrowing standardized tests:

1. Climate: To paraphrase Marie Kondo, "Does the school spark joy?" Are diverse student interests represented in activities across the board? Is there diversity in instructors, reading material, art and other cultural features of the school?

2. Attendance: If students feel welcome and excited about school, high attendance would provide confirmation.

3. The overall health variables of students. Data should include ease of access to healthy food, access to resources for mental health, and access to ongoing medical, dental, and vision care. Regular instruction in maintaining a healthy lifestyle and providing regular opportunities for movement.

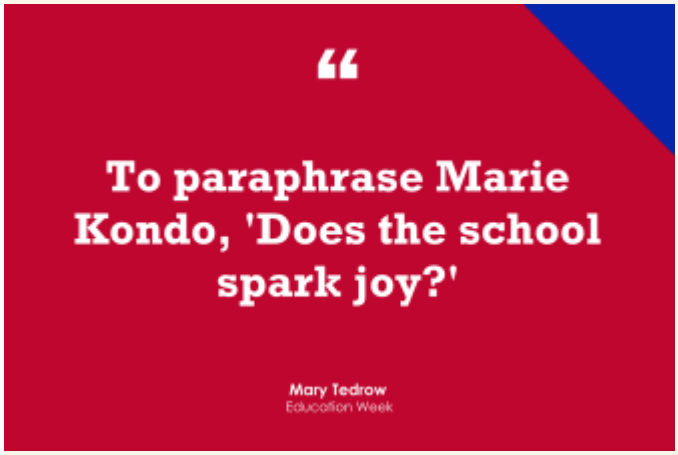
4. Numbers of creative performances (choir programs, art shows, band events, plays, musicals).

5. Numbers of academic opportunities beyond the classroom to support interests (science fairs, internships, social-justice activities, media-production outlets: newspaper, video, radio, magazines).

6. Numbers of graduates who can articulate their next step upon graduation. This would include work placement, college placement, or plans for enhanced technical training. In a visit to Finnish schools, leaders emphasized that the Finnish schooling system is based on building *competencies.* In other words, helping students find what they are good at. That is very different from measuring everyone with the same standard measuring stick.

7. Teacher satisfaction with their core mission and workplace. Surveys of teachers should include questions on whether they have the necessary supplies and an inviting, well-resourced building to provide instruction.

8. Presence of job-embedded opportunities for teachers to improve instruction, gain specific credentialing, and participate in building leadership.



‘School Climate’

Meghann Seril teaches 3rd grade in Los Angeles. She is a national-board-certified teacher and Teach Plus fellowship alum:

One thing we have learned from these past two years of pandemic learning is that schools must prioritize the needs of the whole child. School is about more than just preparing for a standardized test. Schools can give students the support to develop their identities and connections with others. This means that schools must be culturally affirming spaces that meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students.

For schools to be considered effective, we must not only rely on standardized-test scores but also on school climate surveys to evaluate the conditions of learning. School climate influences students' motivation to learn and improves academic achievement. When students feel connected, cared for, and engaged they have a stronger foundation for academic success.

Tools such as the California Healthy Kids Survey collect student responses in areas including student connectedness, school climate, school safety, physical and mental well-being, and student supports. Additional surveys of staff and parents would help schools and districts to have a fuller picture of the ways in which they can meet the needs of the whole school community. This data should be used to support schools and districts in improving school climate and providing meaningful support and professional development for educators to meet the needs of the students they serve. We must also celebrate and learn from schools that are doing the work to create a space that is supportive and engaging for students.