

Education Week's blogs > On California

Accountability Needs Narrative More Than Numbers

By Charles Taylor Kerchner on June 10, 2015 11:22 AM | [No comments](#)

Numbers don't gain leverage over schools unless they lead to knowledgeable action. Data that schools can respond to are often contained in the story or narrative that a school tells about itself. Sometimes these stories are accurate, sometimes they are aspirational, and sometimes they are romantic fantasies. Regardless, the convergence of narrative and numbers builds local capacity for improvement.

"At the local level, the key is to get information that people will act on and more importantly will tell a story about your school," says University of Oregon professor David Conley who has advised the California State School Board. The numerical data that educators need are likely to be different than the data the state collects for the dashboard reports that are replacing single-number indicators.

Take attendance information, for example. Keeping track of attendance is one of California's eight state indicators, but average attendance levels don't tell a school how to improve. A more actionable place to start is the names of students who are chronically absent. "If a student is piling up absences in the first ten weeks of the 9th grade, it's pretty clear that they won't graduate," Conley said in a recent interview.

So, a school needs more fine-grained numbers and rapid feedback about attendance. It needs to connect those numbers with its narrative about school improvement. A statement such as, "we support 9th graders in their transition to high school and closely monitor their progress" links action and outcomes. Action on attendance and other process variables strongly influences outcomes, such as graduation rates, dropouts, and the success of career and technical education students in workplace experience.

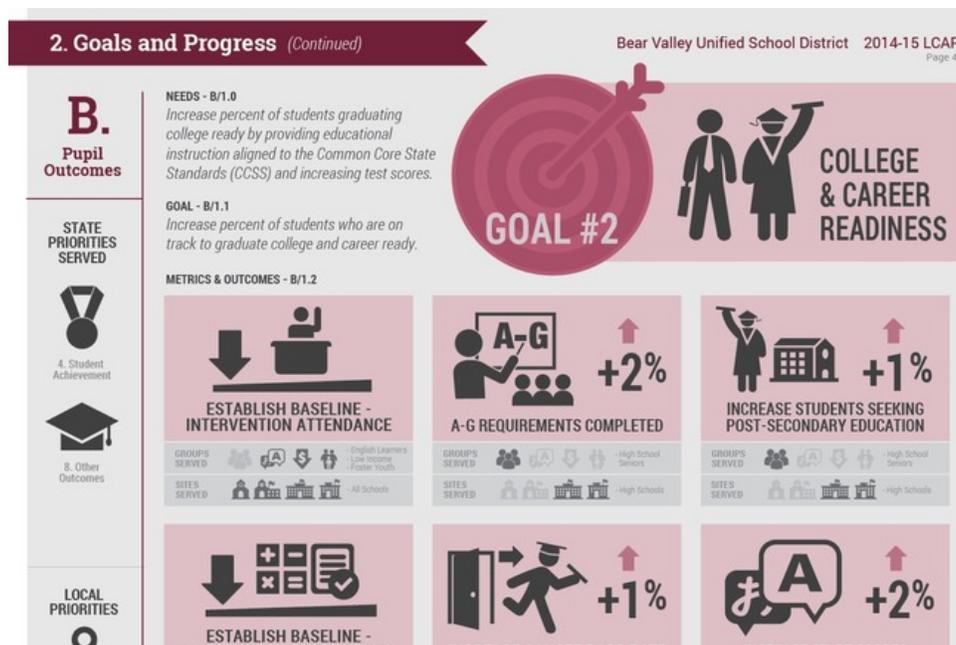
"Not everything is a number," notes Jon Snyder, executive director of the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE), which is designing and advocating for multiple measure accountability systems.

The merger of numbers and narrative is emerging in several California school districts as a product of the required Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). In part, narratives are emerging because the reporting templates required by the state are so cumbersome that they convey little meaning to anyone and are hopelessly confusing to parents and citizens.

Several districts provide case examples of using the LCAP executive summaries to communicate their academic goals and strategy and the use of funds. [Berkeley Unified](#), for example, specifies that it is spending its supplemental funds to expand its AVID student support program and actively recruiting African-American and Latino teachers, among other ongoing priorities. It's adding English Language Development Teachers at each school site. And it aligns academic goals with specific practices (beginning on p. xi).

The [San Jose Unified](#) plan, in contrast, places the district in its economic context, and illustrates how it is using its LCAP funds to recover from the deep cuts brought on by the 2007-2011 recession and cope with the fiscal implications of declining enrollment.

The [Bear Valley Unified](#) (enrollment 2,600) plan is summarized in an intricate series of infographics that connect its plans with the eight state achievement priorities in an easy-to-understand visual that on the page illustrated shows progress toward college and career readiness. (Example below.)





West Contra Costa County Unified has created [school-level infographics](#). And it has made its plan [interactive](#) allowing the user to connect programs and budgets.

These stories are important because they allow the public and educators alike to connect resource allocation with goals, process with outcomes. Some of the stories will prove to be untrue. Putting resources into a particular program may not lift measured cognitive achievement or other goals. The presence of a school or district story, then, invites a more critical look what happened and the generation of alternatives.

When this happens, organizational learning results.

∞ ∞ ∞ ∞

Going Deeper: [Education Trust West](#) curates LCAP plans, provides examples, and offers a tool kit of resources.

(Next: Making feedback work for students.)

Categories: [Accountability](#) [California politics](#) [Local Control Accountability](#) [On California](#)

Tags: [Bear Valley](#) [Berkeley Unified](#) [David Conley](#) [Education Trust West](#) [Jon Snyder](#) [San Jose Unified](#) [West Contra Costa](#)