

## DIGGING INTO SCHOOL DISTRICT DATA TO TRANSFORM PUBLIC EDUCATION

### *Session Overview from APQC's 2018 Process and Performance Management Conference*

The public education system in the United States generates massive amounts of data. And yet, educational leaders often struggle to use data to make proactive decisions. At APQC's 2018 Process & Performance Management Conference, Nathan Balasubramanian discussed how leaders can use publicly-available district data to identify low-cost and no-cost solutions to transform education. Balasubramanian is the executive director of school improvement and accountability at Manor Independent School District as well as the president of iLearn, LLC.

*This is a summary of information shared during APQC's Annual Process and Performance Management Conference, which took place October 4-5, 2018 in Houston.*

### THE PROBLEM WITH HOW DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS USE DATA

Too often, districts and schools take too long to perform data collection and analysis. By the time they have completed data collection and analysis for one year, they need to start collecting data for next year. As a result, some school leaders and teachers take a short-sighted view of the data they have. Because the data typically reflects the achievements of last year's students and teachers, leaders don't see it as actionable.

"We look at the data, but it's a stale donut that people don't want to eat. People say, that happened last year and we don't teach those kids anymore. But the holes of knowledge these kids have get worse and worse every year. We have all of this evidence in front of us and we're not doing anything with it," said Balasubramanian.

Balasubramanian argues that districts today are only harnessing one-third of the knowledge that they could gain through data analysis. He presented a chart (Figure 1) that reflects the current and potential state of what districts could achieve through data analysis. Currently, districts focus primarily on collecting data, analyzing it, and reporting the information. Only rarely do they take the time to reflect on the data and transform the findings into insights, decisions, and actions that impact students in the present and future.

"The key takeaway is that we've been spending too much time on the past. We're not short on data. We have data all over the place. But how often do we take time to stop and ask what the data means?" said Balasubramanian.

## Current Efforts and Opportunity to Transform Data into Action

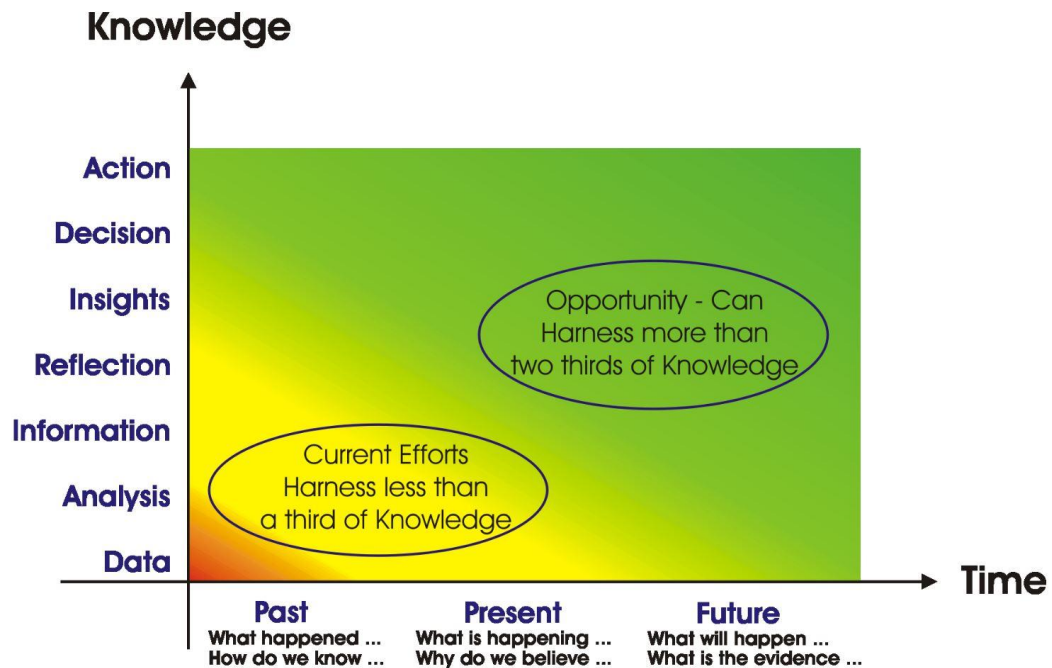


Figure 1

## HOW TO TAKE A PROACTIVE APPROACH TO STUDENT DATA

Educational leaders need to take a more proactive approach and dig into the data that is already available to them. Balasubramanian discussed how this can be done with data in the state of Texas. Texas uses the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) program to measure academic performance for students in grades three through 12. Unlike prior assessments, STAAR does not analyze performance with a simple pass/fail approach. Instead, the program uses four performance categories.

- ♦ **Masters Grade Level:** students are expected to succeed in the next grade with little or no academic intervention
- ♦ **Meets Grade Level:** students have a high likelihood of success in the next grade but may still need some short-term, targeted academic intervention
- ♦ **Approaches Grade Level:** students are likely to succeed in the next grade with targeted academic intervention
- ♦ **Did Not Meet Grade Level:** students are unlikely to succeed in the next grade without significant, ongoing academic intervention

The state rolls up each school’s STAAR results by assigning three points for students in Masters Grade Level, two points for students in Meets Grade Level, one point for students in Approaches Grade Levels, and then dividing by three to create an overall score. This overall score is then scaled against all other schools and assigned a letter grade in the state’s A-F Accountability Rating System.

According to Balasubramanian, the top-level final results (the scaled score and the accountability grade) do not provide educational leaders with actionable insights. Leaders must dig deeper into the data—all of which is publicly available on [txschools.org](http://txschools.org)—to schools’ impact on student performance. Then, leaders can look at student growth (the amount of student progress achieved in one year), which Balasubramanian argues is a better measure of academic health than achievement alone. Balasubramanian analyzed several districts, all of which have an enrollment above 10,000 and in which at least 50 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch (Figure 2).

### Benchmarking Academic Health

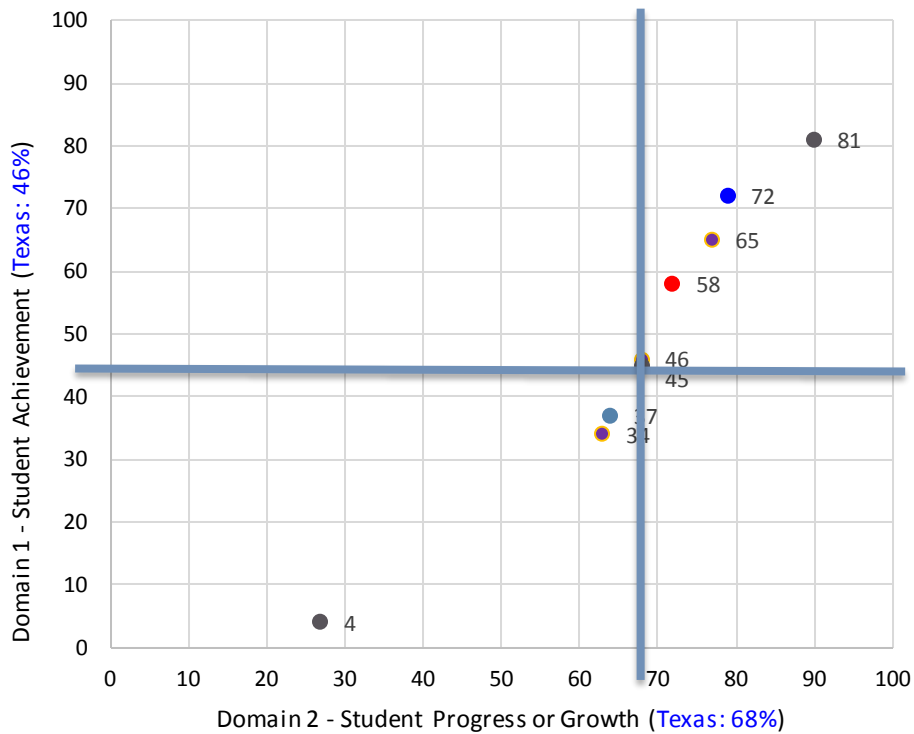


Figure 2

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Median performance for the state of Texas is presented in blue: Texas averages 68 percent student growth and 46 percent student achievement. The graph shows that several districts are achieving strong performance in student growth even as they serve communities with a high level of poverty.

School leaders, teachers, and parents can use the data to perform targeted interventions and to celebrate progress. If you look at individual student performance, you will find some students that achieve more than two years of growth in a year's time. That shows that the school is having an extraordinary impact and is a cause for celebration. However, you will also find students that not only fail to achieve growth, but that actually regress — for example, they achieve Masters Grade Level in one year, but tumble to Approaches Grade Level the next year. When this happens, school leaders, teachers, and parents must act quickly to ensure the student does not fall through the cracks.

## USE STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS TO IDENTIFY INTERVENTIONS

After analyzing the data, educational leaders can identify low-cost and no-cost interventions to improve academic performance. Balasubramanian explained that there are nine key stakeholders that have a role in students' academic performance:

1. student,
2. parent,
3. school administrator,
4. district administrator,
5. community member,
6. career pathway partner,
7. board member,
8. principal, and
9. teacher/counselor.

Balasubramanian recommended that leaders take a look at how each stakeholder role interacts with students and academic competencies. He presented an example for the stakeholder role of board member (Figure 3).

“Competency should always be at the top, because that’s a constant. Just change out board with all of the other stakeholder roles. The interaction of these three circles will help you get to student success,” said Balasubramanian.

## Benchmarking Academic Health

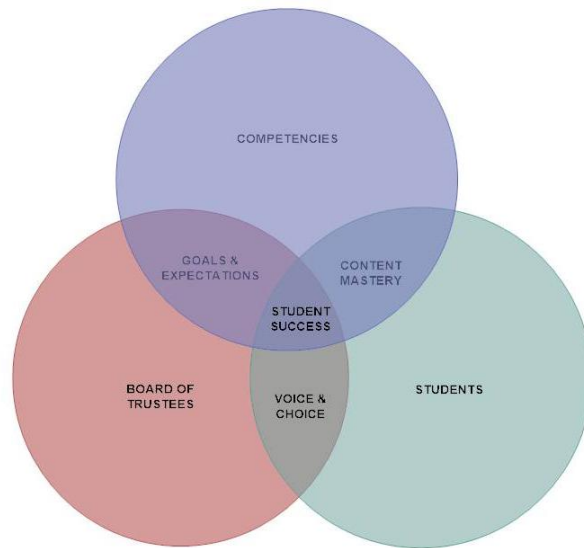


Figure 3

## ANALYZE FINANCIAL HEALTH DATA

People often complain that schools do not receive enough funding. However, the United States spends nearly \$700 billion on public education each year. According to Balasubramanian, the problem isn't a lack of money: it's how money is spent. He recommended that districts benchmark their financial health to ensure they make the right investments to drive student success.

Financial data, like academic performance data, is publicly available online through states' Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports (CAFRs) or, in Texas, via the Financial Integrity Rating System of Texas (FIRST). Balasubramanian recommended that educational leaders focus on the following benchmarks:

- ◆ student enrollment trend,
- ◆ total expenditure,
- ◆ unassigned fund balance ratio,
- ◆ administrative cost ratio, and
- ◆ long-term solvency.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

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Since the authorization of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools systems have been drowning in data. Today, this data is easier to access than ever before. You don't need to be superintendent, board of education member, or a state department of education employee to access a wealth of financial and academic performance data. Whatever your role is in public education, you can dig into the data to understand performance and identify ways to increase success in public education.

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