

Collecting, Maintaining and Presenting Your Student Data for Internal and External Audiences

By Stephanie Cho, Development Manger, EdTec Inc.

Annice Weinstein, Manager Data Assessment, EdTec Inc.

Managing a program of student data gathering and analysis is an important, yet challenging undertaking for many charter schools, given an environment where staffing is constrained and cash is tight. However, in addition to the everyday benefits to school leadership and staff, solid facts and figures that demonstrate your students' progress and achievements are critical for all charter schools to be successful with key initiatives such as WASC accreditation, charter renewal, and grant writing.

When evaluating school performance, accreditors, authorizers, and grant makers require sound analysis and longitudinal assessment data that illustrate how a school is meeting its instructional goals and delivering results. In practice, many charter schools don't always have the resources or know-how to best gather, analyze and present their data effectively.

Though the time and money to establish a good system may feel onerous and infeasible, such efforts prove a worthwhile investment down the road. The benefits of such analyses are valuable and far-reaching, for both those peak times when you might be tasked with a specific request by your authorizer, as well as for internal, everyday use to actively validate and improve your school's instructional methods.

EdTec's resident student performance data analysis expert, Annice Weinstein, weighs in about actionable best practices in collecting, maintaining and presenting your student data:



Annice Weinstein,
Manager Assessment Data, EdTec Inc.

Q: What's your background, especially related to student data analysis?

A: *I've been working in the field of online assessment delivery and management systems for 15 years. Over the past five years, I've focused on the analysis and presentation of California state assessment results and implementing CA standards-aligned benchmark testing and analysis.*

Q: What can schools proactively do to prepare themselves for data analysis needs/requests?

A: *A key piece to successful student achievement data analysis is having consistent systems for gathering the data in the first place. The output – the statistics/graphs/charts that ultimately lead to data-driven decision making – is only as good as the data that goes into the analysis.*

Maintaining your student information system is one way to ensure the breakdowns by gender, ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, disability, etc. are truly reflective of your student population. Errors in this information can affect your API and AYP numbers, as well as affect any additional analysis done at the school.

For the purpose of internal analysis at a school, it's also important to have a consistent system of storing both state and local assessment data so it can be easily accessed for longitudinal analysis. Oftentimes, with changes in staff and facilities, the CDs with STAR/CELDT/CAHSEE data get misplaced as do annual local assessment data (e.g., NWEA), writing rubric scores, Development Reading Assessment scores, benchmark results, etc. Developing a consistent system of storing this data – on a hard drive or a server or an online data management system such as DataDirector/Zoom – is essential at renewal time when schools are typically asked for proof of longitudinal improvement for continuously enrolled students.

Q: What are the different types of data requests schools should be prepared for in their first year(s)? What about as they grow?

A: *Schools are typically asked to provide evidence that they are outperforming neighboring schools or schools within the district with similar demographics. Because the API and AYP scores are based on the student population continuously enrolled at the school in a given year, from October (CBEDS date) to the STAR testing date, it's important to make a note of significant changes in your enrollment from one year to the next. While neighboring schools may have a relatively stable population, charters tend to grow a lot in the first couple years after opening and have more turnover. Did you enroll a lot of new students? Did you lose a lot of continuing students? Do your new enrollments seem to perform at a different level compared to your existing students?*

Although it can be a difficult task, if you can gather your new students' previous years' STAR scores, either from their parents or the previous school's cumulative folder, you may be able to get a better sense of what your actual API growth is given your new student population. Comparing API growth for two very different sets of students can be misleading, and is unfortunately what happens when you have a lot of change in your student population from year to year. Collecting the previous years' scores for your incoming students allows you to get a glimpse at what changes are really occurring.



Q: What data needs are schools often overlooking?

A: *Charter schools are often asked to show that their students are making longitudinal progress, but the California state criterion-referenced assessments are not designed to show that sort of growth. Norm-referenced tests are intended to show longitudinal growth, but are not required by the state. Examples of norm-referenced tests used by schools: NWEA, ITBS and SAT-9.*

If you plan to collect norm-referenced test data, it's essential to plan long-term and to be consistent with the schedule and students tested. If you choose not to test all your students, select an appropriate cohort

to track over time (example: 6th grade in 2010, 7th grade in 2011, 8th grade in 2012) so you have a comparison of the same group of students each year. If you test in Fall and Spring the first year, continue the pattern of Fall and Spring testing each subsequent year, rather than introducing a round of Winter testing. By testing twice each year (pre and post), you can get a sense of how much progress students make in a single year and compare that across different groups of students, such as students enrolled for 3 or more years compared to new students.

Q: How much time should a school leader plan to spend for these needs/requests?

A: Each school should have a standard practice for what to do when student achievement data is delivered by the state (CAHSEE, CELDT, STAR, etc). The storing or saving of this data to a safe place should only take a couple minutes; the consistency of this practice with all test data is essential.

Implementing norm-referenced testing is much more involved and will take a significant number of staff members to organize and deliver efficiently.

The amount of time it takes to analyze the data will depend on what requirements need to be met for district reporting, the types of internal questions you'd like to answer using the data, whether the data will be presented to a group and what type of audience that is. But if the data is readily accessible and has been consistently collected, that should speed up the process of the analysis.

Q: What are some of the reasons you see for why school leaders aren't using or analyzing their data well?

A: There are a few common impediments to student achievement analysis:

- 1) The data from the state is not formatted in a way that is easy for school leaders to understand
- 2) Each individual round of testing is not linked to previous rounds of testing or other tests, making it difficult to compare how students perform over time or across tests.
- 3) Local assessments are not linked to state assessment results.

As a result, many schools invest in an assessment management system like DataDirector/Zoom, Edusoft, or Pearson's suite of products to help them decode the state test files and compare the same set of students across tests and/or years.

Q: What are some examples of how schools are specifically using or illustrating their data well for different needs?

A: Because it takes planning and foresight to ensure you're collecting all the data you need, many schools find themselves scrambling to collect and report their student achievement data for charter renewals or grant proposals. Use this as an opportunity to create some structure around student achievement data collection. As you're developing charts and graphs for your proposal, make note of what data is missing and should be collected on a regular basis going forward. Then use the graphs and charts from your proposal as a template for future analysis. Update it each year so you can track

changes and look for trends. Successful schools don't just report the data; they actively engage with it on a regular basis to change instruction.

The most useful data analysis usually stems from burning questions the school is trying to answer, such as:

- Why did our API score decrease?
- Is there a specific group of students who need more help?
- Do our teachers instruct with the level of rigor necessary for the students to demonstrate competence on the CSTs?
- Are girls lagging behind boys in Math at a certain grade level?

For each question asked, you have to evaluate if you're collecting the type of data necessary to answer that question. The next step is using the data to find the answer.

Q: What are some of your best suggestions for how schools seeking to use their data better can make the most of their limited time and resources.

A: Sticking to the same reporting template is the easiest way to making sure you're collecting the same data every year. Staff will also become accustomed to the format of the graphs/charts, making it easier for them to process the data and act on it.

Q: Are there resources available that schools aren't utilizing enough for the purpose of data analysis? If so, what are they?

A: Schools can use DataQuest (<http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>) or Ed-Data (<http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/Pages/Home.aspx>) to look at how their school, neighboring/comparison schools, and the district are performing on state tests, as well as to find demographic or staffing information. Most publicly available data about schools is available on these sites.

Q: Are there specific software tools or services you can recommend for data analysis that would fit a school's limited budget, ranging from lower cost (1) to higher cost (3)?

A:

- 1) Schoolzilla Project - <http://www.schoolzilla.org/>
- 2) DataDirector/Zoom, Edusoft, Pearson, Illuminate, LinkIt!
- 3) Build your own that is tailored to your school's specific requirements

Q: Outline a few key ways / strategies that schools can use to highlight their best data.

A: Each school has to identify their strengths and highlight those areas. For some schools, it may be a significant jump in API from year to year. For other schools with modest gains in API, it may be that

they're still outperforming their local area comparison schools by a significant amount. Some schools may have a large percentage of their student population in a certain subgroup, such as English learners, and are achieving greater gains with that particular subgroup than are nearby comparison schools. Start with what you believe the school is doing well at, confirm it based on the data available, and then highlight it.

While often neglected due to time and financial constraints, student data analysis is an increasingly important component of running a successful charter school and is an essential investment in a charter school's long term viability. However, schools don't necessarily have to invest a great deal of money and time in a costly assessment management system; it can be cost effective to simply be organized and consistent in tracking your data, and to be aware of the opportunities that reliable student data affords you to provide quality instruction to your students. The most successful schools rely on their student data to inform and enhance their instruction while also leveraging that data for sound analysis that highlights their strengths to external audiences. 🌱