
September 11, 2014

Measuring What Matters

An Ohio district goes beyond test scores to measure school system success

By Doug Eadie

“Measuring What Matters” is the title of a report that the Shaker Heights Schools, a suburban district on the southeastern border of Cleveland, Ohio, recently issued to Shaker residents. In Cleveland for a speaking engagement recently, I drove from downtown to Shaker Heights to meet with the dynamic young superintendent of the Shaker Schools, Gregory Hutchings.

Since my daughter Jenny and son William graduated from Shaker Heights High School in the 1990s, I am quite familiar with this superb educational enterprise. In fact, my column in the June 2012 issue of *ASBJ*, “The Shaker Experience,” describes the extraordinary theatre arts program developed by a beloved Shaker teacher, James Thornton, who had died three months earlier. In my column, I observed that “James Thornton’s profound educational impact came from a theater arts program that many people around the country would describe as ‘extra-curricular’—outside of the ‘core’ curriculum—and, for many, an expensive luxury rather than an essential academic offering.”

I closed by suggesting that “what happened under James Thornton’s leadership and continues to happen today at the Shaker Heights Theater Arts Department is as educationally hard core and basic—as essential and far from being a luxury—as anything in the educational enterprise can be.”

Reporting on a multifaceted educational enterprise

As we were chatting in his office two weeks ago about James Thornton’s impressive educational legacy, Hutchings handed me a copy of “Measuring What Matters.”

“In Shaker,” he said, “we passionately believe that a world-class education is so complex and multifaceted that state-mandated standardized testing only scratches the surface in measuring educational performance.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” he continued, “our whole leadership team at Shaker—the board, my executive team, and I—are true believers in accountability for results in public education, but we know that test scores don’t begin to tell the whole story—far from it. That’s why we produced a more comprehensive report, ‘Measuring What Matters,’ which we’ve distributed widely in the community.”

Observing that this comprehensive report to the community was based on input from more than 900 residents and district staff members, Hutchings pointed me to what you might call Shaker’s educational credo in his introduction to the report. He said captured in a nutshell why generating “Measuring What Matters” made the best of sense:

There are many components to becoming a world-class school district. It is our mission to nurture, educate, and graduate students who are civic-minded and prepared to make ethical decisions; who are confident, competent communicators, skillful in problem solving, capable of creative thinking; who have a career motivation and a knowledge of our global and multicultural society.

Some Shaker measures

Thumbing through the report on the plane back to Tampa Bay the next day, I reflected on my kids' good fortune to have been educated in a public school system that defined educational quality in such comprehensive and ambitious terms.

Among other measures this report looks at: distinguishing awards and accolades (Shaker Heights High School is rated among the top 2 percent of U.S. high schools in *Newsweek's* annual ratings); strong fiscal stewardship (In 2012, the district received top-level ratings from investor firms, which allows for a competitive rate of interest for borrowing); community support and involvement (parents, community members, students, and staff members participated in the superintendent search process and transition advisory team, and are also involved in the new five-year strategic planning process); and serving a diverse population (A growing international enrollment, with students from 33 countries).

I was pleased to see that two full pages are devoted to reporting measures of customer satisfaction, in the section titled "What Students Say." For example, students at various grade levels were asked to assess whether their teachers "have high expectations for all students to learn," do teachers and principals "model a culture of respect," do their teachers "like and care about them," do they "feel that they fit in at their school," and do they "can get academic support" when they need it.

Return on investment

The Shaker Schools' return on its investment in "Measuring What Matters" goes well beyond the obvious. To be sure, the report demonstrates the Shaker Schools' commitment to accountability—not only to students and their parents, but also to the wider Shaker community. It's the kind of document that taxpayers should have in mind when they're voting on a school tax issue. But it has served another important but less obvious purpose that school board members around the country should recognize when considering issuing similar reports in their communities: community education.

The report is an effective tool for educating Shaker residents about their public school system. It paints such a richly detailed picture of this multi-faceted educational enterprise that it's impossible for someone to read through and think of the Shaker Schools as an abstract, distant entity.

When you think of such outcomes as believing that the district takes accountability for results, understanding how the district is performing along various lines, feeling like owners of the district, and grasping the multi-faceted nature of the district, you realize that "Measuring What Matters" is, indeed, a Clydesdale of reports. It has a broad back that can carry a tremendous amount of very precious baggage.

Doug Eadie (doug@dougeadie.com) is founder and CEO of Doug Eadie & Company. He is the author of 18 books on board and CEO leadership. His most recent is *Governing at the Top* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).