



# Using the Dashboard to tell our stories

It's important that our California School Dashboard interviews, presentations and Q&As are carefully tailored for different audiences, compellingly messaged and delivered strategically by the most effective spokespeople.

**When it comes to** telling the stories of our schools and districts, a brutally honest assessment is that, collectively, we don't always do it as effectively as we might hope. Maybe it's because we headed into education through the classroom and lack that strong foundational knowledge of marketing or communication. Maybe it is because educators are generally humble and not as adept at tooting our own horns.

But when it comes to the new California School Dashboard, we must do just that. We must be chief strategists and competent spokespeople who use the data to shape the stories we need the public to hear. In the era of instant information and misinformation, advocacy around programs, schools and districts must take us from educating to activating.

Communicating about the Dashboard and how it can be used isn't intuitive. While it looks very similar to a Consumer Reports review, the context in which it is used and the words we choose to explain it must be focused and intentional. Superintendent Pam Hernandez of the San Antonio Union Elementary School District shares that communication about the Dashboard needs to move beyond the traditional avenues of

board meetings and newsletters and toward more interactive approaches.

She explained, "It is a work in progress, but also a potential opportunity to engage families in a deeper understanding of how we can work together to increase student success in all of California's education priorities and in understanding the significance of the Local Control and Accountability Plan."

What is important to remember is that our Dashboard messages need to be carefully tailored for different audiences, compellingly messaged, and delivered strategically by the most effective spokespeople.

## Dashboard 101

The first step in effectively painting the picture of our schools and districts for the public, with new lenses on data, came when the California School Dashboard, a collection of indicators that summarizes how schools and districts are performing, was launched this past year. The color-coordinated indicators use progressive icons as well as five colors ranging from blue (great) to red (danger). Unlike the Academic Performance

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By Lisa Gonzales and Holly Edds



Index of the past with just one number, the Dashboard denotes performance over time, rather than just the current status of its six state indicators, including high school graduation rates, academic performance, suspensions, English learner progress, preparation for college/career, and chronic absenteeism. Likewise, four local indicators collect information on implementation of state standards, school climate surveys, parent involvement/engagement, and basic conditions, such as teacher qualifications, safe campuses, and access to textbooks.

The Dashboard's Equity Report shows – at a glance – how student groups are performing on various measures. Student groups include ethnic and racial groups, low-income students, English learners, foster youth and students with special needs. Looking at more data – and more meaningful information – helps more precisely identify a district or school's strengths and weaknesses and highlights performance gaps between groups of learners.

Mary Ann Valles, assistant superintendent of educational services in the Napa Valley Unified School District, sees the Dashboard as a positive change for California.

"The new accountability system uses multiple measures to assess a district or school's progress," she said. "We are encouraged by an accountability system that recognizes a variety of indicators, including academic progress on state assessments, college and career readiness, school climate and safety. We are also encouraged by an accountability system that recognizes improvement over time."

### Tailor the message and the rule of three

When it comes to the Dashboard data, particularly around student achievement and suspensions, what do you want to say? The average listener and reader can grasp three concepts in any presentation or article, so the important focus is on the central message and the rule of three with which you will support it.

Let's say you are working to address a disproportionate number of students who have been suspended. Crafting your message should start with an acknowledgement as well as three supporting points:



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- **Key Message:** The Dashboard is helping us better analyze data and address how we are working through issues of student behavior, and supports our students and staff need to intervene before arriving at the level of suspensions.

- **Supporting Point #1:** By looking at best practices around addressing behavior, our school leadership teams of teachers and administrators are redirecting their attention to alternatives to suspension.

- **Supporting Point #2:** Using the PBIS approach (positive behavior interventions and support), our staff is catching students making good choices, and reinforcing those as levels of intervention prior to suspension.

- **Supporting Point #3:** In just the first four months of this school year, we have seen a decrease of 20 percent in our suspension data over the same time period of the last two years based on intentional conversations and change in practice.

What's important to remember is that messages don't exist in vacuums, but are fluid and impacted by the everyday happenings in our schools. Clear messaging with specific points that are intended to help educate our communities, even those beyond our parents, will help us more effectively utilize the Dashboard data to improve practices.

Denny Rush, superintendent of the Newcastle Elementary School District, shared that it is not only important to explain the performances in all focus areas, but to get out there first with our messages.

"We must be proactive and deliberate," she said. "Educating the public is critical to avoid misinterpretation of the Dashboard data."

### Know your audience

You know the old saying that "the customer is never wrong"? The same goes for the audience, even if they are. There is no sense in arguing or getting defensive. Instead, you have to meet them where they are and help them activate new knowledge. From the way we budget to the way we assess students, the system of public education is complicated. Step into the shoes of Joe Public and try to understand the prior API scores or even how the governor's mid-year budget message has the ability to affect programs and people midstream.

Map your messages. Know who you want to communicate with and adapt those messages for different recipients. The most strategic approach is to think like a CSI investigator: profile your audience. Crafting an audience profile is a great way to determine how to connect your Dashboard messages.

The most effective way to do this is to focus on one group at a time and ask the following questions:

- What is their knowledge or familiarity with the new accountability system and its purpose?
- What is their interest or investment and why should they care?
- Do they already have an opinion on the subject? How do they feel about the school

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in their community?

- Are they generally open to new ideas? Are they open to looking at education differently than what they received in school?

- What is their role as a stakeholder?
- What historical/cultural factors influence them, and do they feel education is a priority?

- What is the top issue in their world and how does that relate to education?

Understanding these points of view and thinking through the questions helps those communicating about the Dashboard to best identify their audiences' perspectives so the messages can be most persuasively honed.

## Create effective messages

Now that you know your audiences, the next step is to message directly to each. For example, in a large, diverse community, you may have messages that are targeted to senior voters around high academic performance and housing values, to business leaders around STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) and the need for more partnerships to increase math (and soon science) scores, and to parents around Local Control and Accountability Plan funding and its support of health and wellness programs that improve attendance.

When it comes to the effectiveness of messaging, there are a few key rules to follow:

- Keep it simple.
- Find the sense of immediacy.
- What is the benefit of receiving the message?
- Consider audience power; what do you want them to do with the message?

These four points are important because they are the framework for strong communication. They help craft the brevity and nucleus of the message and what you need your audience to know in order to do what you want them to do. Use the Dashboard to guide your stakeholders toward celebration of successes, additional funding, volunteer opportunities, and even parent engagement.

Review your message framework, consider the what and why for the Dashboard. A place to start, for example, might be the increased focus on equity to meet the



needs of all learners, the incorporation of local decision making, or the focus on multiple measures.

Rhonda Buss, director of secondary schools in the ABC Unified School District, focuses on the decision-making perspective when she works with principals who explain the Dashboard.

“Proactively delivering information about the Dashboard and using the information to tell an accurate story will ensure everyone is on the same page when making decisions about accelerating student success in schools,” she said.

Considering these shifts, think about the audience and identify the points that will resonate most strongly with them. Make sure to minimize the points that do not work and be sure to consider the message tone and vocabulary, make it your own but be sure to relate with the audience as much as possible.

Planning what you are going to say is critical to successful advocacy. Don’t just fly by the seat of your pants. Start with your message framework, analyze the audience, and tailor your message. Utilize your notes;

the many resources available on the Dashboard are a great place to begin but don’t write them into a script. Identify your main talking points and be able to speak to them. Organize your remarks: tell them what you are going to say, say it, then tell them what you said.

### Choose the right spokesperson

Not just anyone can deliver a message, and sometimes the best messengers are not the first ones that come to mind. Joe Public is most impressed with two key messengers in public education: the teacher and the principal. Study after study note that these are the two most credible and trustworthy representatives in public education. Knowing that, what can you do to carefully select your spokesperson?

When it comes to Dashboard data, grab those principals and train them up. Similar to sentence starters used in primary grade writing lessons, bring principals up to speed on both the district data, the deeper dive into their site data, and the overall message you want communicated to parents and the

school communities.

Having a lead teacher or two is also highly effective, as those individuals have connections with parents in the school as well as with their colleagues on staff who also need to walk through the data, the stories it tells and the next steps. But choose wisely, as some communities may not understand the complexities and need a messenger who can remain calm, cool and collected, especially with the media.

### Get ready to speak

Before you begin to talk, remember to breathe, smile and speak slowly. Plan to make eye contact with three points of the group and while you should gesture while speaking, try not to do it too much or it will be a distraction. Avoid jargon whenever possible and try to minimize filler words or breaks such as “um,” “so,” “like” and “you know.”

Stick to your notes and practice, practice, practice. The more experience you have talking about the Dashboard, the more familiar and more comfortable you will be in sharing

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it. Remember, when delivering your message, be sure to control your body language and use it to your advantage. Use your voice as a tool to build credibility with your audience and keep your emotions under control at all times.

Sue Kaiser, assistant superintendent of educational services in the Monrovia School District, reminds herself of centering oneself before speaking, especially about the Dashboard, sharing: “As we look at these data, we see in the rear-view mirror where we have come from, and this look informs our view through the windshield as we make necessary improvements in our journey forward. Practicing messages with clarity and intentionality is critical.”

### The use of bridging phrases

Much like the sentence starts we previously mentioned, here are some specific phrases that are instrumental in shifting conversations, responding to fake news, and hitting a point home. These bridging phrases should be printed out and taped to the side of your computer, so you can regu-

larly refer to them and infuse them in presentations, question/answer sessions, in board meetings, and in emails, particularly with the media.

- “If you’re not going to listen to anything today, listen to this...”
- “I think the core issue you are addressing here is...”
- “I can’t speak to X’s motives, but what I can tell you is...”
- “At the same time...”
- “To the contrary...”
- “What is really at stake here is...”
- “To go a step further...”
- “Let me share some facts relevant to that...”
- “I respectfully disagree...”

Skilled presenters and public speakers know the value of bridging phrases. They are key shifters of focus that you need to have handy to increase the professionalism of your presence.

Napa Valley Unified School District Superintendent Patrick Sweeney knows the value of bridging phrases. He reflected, “I began using phrases like this with difficult

audiences. They are invaluable when responding to misinformation and for clarifying key points.”

### Final tips

Remember, you’ve got this! Be confident; don’t wing it. Be prepared. Create a framework from which to work. Know your audience and tailor your message to resonate with them. Use notes, not a fully written out script, and keep your remarks organized. Simple is always best, and whenever possible, weave a story into your remarks to carry the message and make the point stick.

The Dashboard can be effectively maneuvered to inform practice in your school and district. The how of its communication is up to you.

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