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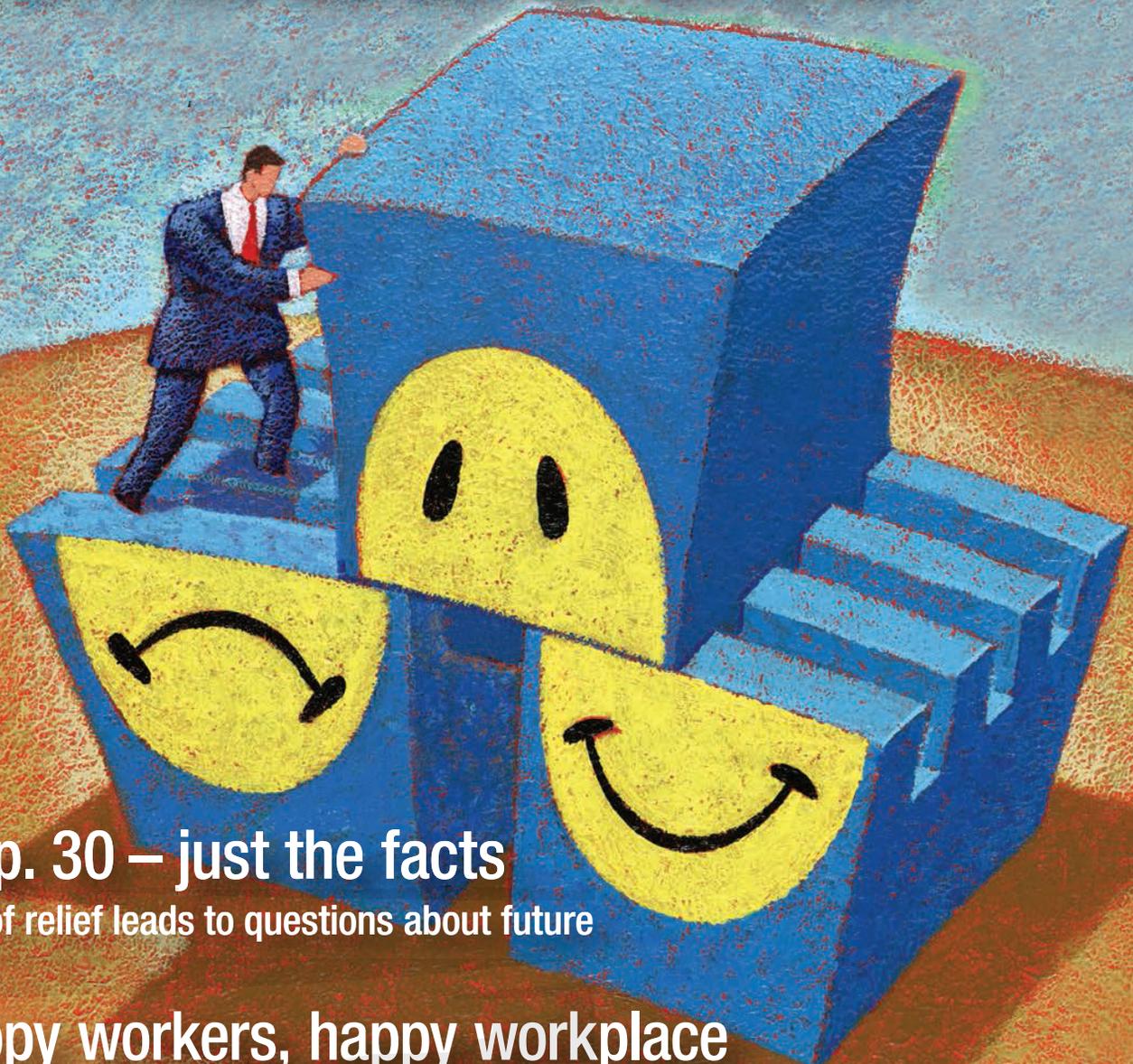
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California Association of School Business Officials

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Digging into Data

Measuring district operations, efficiency
at core of new ActPoint® KPI data system



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Digging into data

Measuring district operations, efficiency at core of new data system

By Lisa Maria Boyles

When it comes to quantitatively measuring student learning, we hear a lot about standardized testing and the tracking of student performance results to assess the success – or failure – of school districts.

But while teaching students is the primary objective of school districts, there are many other measures of a district's overall success, especially when taking business efficiency into consideration.

"We're pretty good about collecting student-achievement data, and in California we've certainly gotten much better at that in recent years," said casbo member Sheila G. Vickers, a vice president with School Services of California, "but data regarding the other operations, the non-instructional operations of school districts, we have not been good at gathering or having access to them. We don't have data on custodial services, food services and other non-instructional operations to use as benchmarks for school districts to improve their efficiency."

That is changing, as more California school districts are able to access the new ActPoint® KPI Performance Management System, a collaboration between The Council of Great City Schools (cgcs) and Transact Communications. The ActPoint kpi system gives districts access to benchmarking and business intelligence tools used to improve non-instructional efficiency. The system is supported by a new partnership between casbo and School Services of California, a Premier Plus associate member of casbo. The partnership will provide strategic support and professional development for school district users.

The ActPoint kpi system allows districts to determine how they are performing compared to other districts within a county, state and nationally. ActPoint kpi helps districts measure performance in the following areas: finance, operations, maintenance, safety and security, transportation, food services, information systems and human resources/personnel.

The system has three subscription levels: Standard (50 kpis), which is recommended for districts with fewer than 2,500 students; Plus (100 kpis), for districts of 2,500 to 10,000 students; and Pro (350+ kpis), for larger districts with more than 10,000 students.

Ensuring greater efficiency

Enrique "Rick" Boull't is the chief operating officer for Los Angeles Unified School District, a casbo institutional member that serves 660,000 k-12 students. Boull't said his district has been actively involved with the Council's kpi work since its development began in 2004, and has been using the ActPoint kpi system for three years.

"As the business service providers in support of schools," Boull't said, "it's paramount that we're able to strategically project, track and monitor operating expenses. Food, transportation and procurement are three areas that are vitally dependent on kpi performance data. Cost per student, cost per meal and material cycle times are just a few of the metrics that enable us to ensure efficiencies."

Ruth F. Quinto is a deputy superintendent and the chief financial officer for the Fresno Unified School District, which serves about 72,000 students. Quinto, a member of CASBO, described one way that district has improved its operations with data from the ActPoint KPI system, which it has been using since 2008.

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"A specific example of how we have incorporated the measures into our daily work," Quinto said, "is the targets set annually for the average days to fill a vacancy. As part of our board-adopted data dashboard policy, human resources established the average days to fill vacancies as a key measurement toward their operational effectiveness. At that time, Fresno Unified was in the bottom quartile for the CGCS districts reported. We set our target based on best practices as described by the highest performing districts, and improved our average days to fill a vacancy from 70 days to 24 days."

New set of lenses

The information the ActPoint KPI system will provide isn't something that has been easily accessible to school business leaders in the past.

"Right now, a school district doesn't really know for sure whether it's high-performing or low-performing in a county, state or nationally because non-instructional benchmarking data isn't available to see how your district compares to others," said Rick Passovoy, President and CEO of TransACT, the company that automates the data. "The system is going to identify performance measurement blind spots and opportunities. It might be that a district finds out for the first time that what it thought was efficient really isn't, or vice versa. So this system operates like a diagnostic set of data and business intelligence lenses that give a district a chance to do a self-assessment. This will hopefully illuminate where the opportunities for improvement are."

The ActPoint system allows school business officials to narrow their benchmark results to include just the criteria that matter the most to them. Officials can filter criteria from district enrollment size, labor status (union or right-to-work), poverty level, geographic county, region, census region or state. When showing district comparisons, other districts aren't named, only the district number and demographic data is visible. Districts may choose to share their number with peers to create a unique "peer group" for comparison purposes.

Michael Bishop, deputy superintendent of operations with Santa Ana Unified School District and a member of CASBO, likes that aspect of the system's benchmarking.

"The good thing about the system is you don't know who you're being measured against," Bishop said. "So there's no reason not to be honest in the data inputting because you're a number – you know what your number is, but no one else knows what your number is. All they know is that you rate well on a particular metric or you don't."

Inputting the data

After the close of each fiscal year, participating districts input raw data into the ActPoint KPI system. To assist districts with this process, approximately 40 percent of the raw data required by the system will have been imported into the system. Then, after the data is input and processed, subscribers will have access to the new KPI data and benchmarks. For school districts in California, that will be in March, said Vickers.

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"The ability to benchmark against like-size districts, in real time, is a tremendous asset," said Boull't of LAUSD. "We're able to either validate or, if necessary, follow up with peers to improve/gauge performance."

Hard data about what works and what doesn't will also give school district leaders something concrete and quantitative to justify spending decisions and budget requests.

"On a political level, this is like a gold mine," Passovoy said. "If you're asking the board for an investment in a particular area, and it turns out that the benchmarking results support that

investment to save money, improve efficiency and effectiveness, the superintendent and executive leaders now can use the ActPoint kpi business tools to support business positions proposed to the board.”

Making sound decisions

In times of economic uncertainty, like those the nation has been experiencing in recent years, every dollar counts.

“The political pressure up to this point has been to cut non-instructional budgets as deeply as possible from the central office because that’s not classroom money,” Passovoy said. “And sometimes severe budget cuts in finance, operations and information technology are a little short-sighted because you still have a business to run, and service-level promises to honor.”

Ron Bennett, ceo of School Services of California, said the data gained from ActPoint kpi will allow business officers to run school districts more like businesses.

“What this system allows is you can look at a national benchmark, you can establish a group of districts that are going

to be your benchmark, you can measure against yourself over time, you can measure against the benchmark groups over time, and you can go into these business areas,” Bennett said. “Private business and industries, they run on data. They go and they look at it and they look at these efficiency ratios and they make decisions differently as a result of that. We want our schools to be able to be run more like a business. This is a tool that helps them to do that.”

Quinto, the Fresno Unified cfo, said, “One of the best aspects of the kpi system is not only the ability to gauge where we compare in these important measurements, but also being able to target our outreach for best practices.”

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Planning for the future

The ActPoint KPI system also allows districts to plug in “what-if” scenarios that could occur in the future through its data modeling feature. This tool is helpful for strategic planning, forecasting and budgeting purposes.

Bishop, of Santa Ana Unified, said his district is just beginning to use the ActPoint kpi system.

“We’re not used to measuring ourselves this way,” Bishop said. “In school districts, we’re used to measuring ourselves in some very simplistic ways – fund balance, expenditures, per ada , per enrollment, per fte –but not looking at our operational activities as private industry might do. Participating in this kind of project forces you to ask yourself, ‘Are you doing business in the most efficient way?’”

Bishop expects it will take some time for his district to see the results of the data, but once there is a history for comparison, he expects the information to be useful at streamlining efficiency.

“More awareness and understanding of what it is we’re measuring will make the measurements more accurate and more



meaningful to look at how effectively we’re using the resources that we’re allocating,” Bishop said.

A new way of thinking

Getting staff to consider the data behind efficient school operations will require a certain shift in the way people look at things.

“You’ve got to build up the capacity of the organization to be data analysts because that’s not a natural activity,” Bishop said. “We also probably have to learn to be more self-evaluative, self-critical and accepting of constructive criticism. That’s not a way that most school districts operate. I see this certainly as a step in the right direction. This will take our data collection and data reporting to a much different level.”

But ultimately, this improved business efficiency of school district operations will be felt at every level, including in how much money is available for classroom instruction.

“What you would see as a parent is that fewer decisions about programs that affect your child’s schooling would be made based on how people feel about them,” Bennett said. “And more decisions would be made by someone with data in front of them determining what they think about those decisions.”

Vickers said even school districts that are already operating efficiently could benefit from the increased access to data that ActPoint kpi would give them.

“If we were to give school districts in California a letter grade in terms of their operations, many of them would be A’s already,” Vickers said. “This kind of data can help school districts examine the way they’re doing things now, and it will help them identify more effective ways so they can become more of an A+ and provide better service, save money and drive more resources to classrooms. That’s the whole idea. Even districts that are operating well and efficiently can still gain by using this data. And they have. The districts that are using this have proven that.” ■■■

Lisa Maria Boyles, a freelance writer based in Fresno, Calif., was a journalist with The Fresno Bee for almost 19 years.



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