

THE BENEFITS OF BECOMING A DATA-DRIVEN SCHOOL

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Introduction

A school that systematically collects, analyzes and uses data that is relevant to student performance and school improvement is geared for success. Timely, accurate and complete student information helps to identify the strengths and needs of the school and is crucial for decision-making. This article focuses on four types of student data that a private Islamic school in Minnesota, Al-Amal School, has found to be relevant in identifying areas of concern and achieving its improvement goals. The student data consists of demographic, assessment, conduct, and attendance data.

1. Demographic Data

Like other Islamic schools, Al-Amal School serves students that are ethnically and racially diverse, coming from families with various income and educational levels. Information about student ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status helps the school determine which groups in the Muslim community are being served and which are underserved. Socio-economic data helps the school make sound decisions about tuition charges, financial aid allocation, and to determine student eligibility for federal and state services, such as nutrition programs, language instruction programs for immigrant students, and other title services. Demographic information is also used to desegregate assessment results, determining those subgroups that are performing well above average and those that are struggling and need remedial help.

In addition, tracking enrollment growth over the years and identifying its patterns enable school boards and administrators to make better prediction about future enrollment for staffing purposes and to allocate sufficient and adequate resources and services.

2. Assessment Data

Like public schools that administer some kind of high-stakes tests to their students each year, Al-Amal School has been administering the IOWA Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). For the last two years, the school has also started administering the Gray Oral Reading Test (GORT) to its elementary students to get a better handle on how students are doing in the area of reading fluency and comprehension.

High-stakes test scores are normally used in public schools for accountability, helping to determine if these schools are helping all student subgroups to make adequate yearly progress as required by the No Child Left Behind Act.

While Al-Amal School is not required by law to administer a particular standardized test or report its results, it wants to hold itself accountable to the parents and the community which it serves, by showing that the students are progressing at a reasonable rate.

Once collected, assessment data are analyzed, interpreted, reported and then used to improve the programs and the quality of instruction and to seek funding.

Analyzing and interpreting test scores

The school principal examines the results by using percentile as an indicator. Grade equivalent is also used to further explain students' growth to the parents and the teachers. Test scores are desegregated to identify possible achievement gaps among student subgroups. Student groups or individuals that are performing poorly will need remedial help through local school programs or federally funded programs such as title 1. Exceptional students with high-test scores are also identified so that their needs can be addressed.

For the last two years, the school has offered after-school advanced math for middle and high school students who have shown exceptional performance in this subject. Moreover, the school has been offering a Saturday tutoring program for the last three years for struggling and low-performing students in the area of math and reading. These students receive one-on-one help in those subjects from qualified parent and community volunteers.

Comparing Test Scores

Comparing current test scores with that of previous years can yield insightful information about program growth and cohort growth. Program growth compares student performances at the same grade level for multiple years. For instance, Al-Amal School introduced a new reading program for first grade during the school year 2003-2004, and will be comparing the reading scores of first grade students in 2002-2003 (one year before the new program was introduced) with first graders' reading scores in 2004, 2005, 2006, etc). Such comparison will help the school determine if the new program is effective and yielding positive results.

Cohort growth, on the other hand, compares the performance of a particular student group as it progresses from year to year to track their growth starting from a specific year till their graduation. This type of data comparison helps the school assess the quality and effectiveness of instruction, and to determine what kind of impact teachers are having on their student performance. Both types of data allow the school to improve the quality of its programs and instructional practices.

Reporting Test Scores

Once student test scores are analyzed and compared with that of previous years, the results are presented in the form of simplified tables, graphs and narrative to all stakeholders (the board of directors, the teachers, the parents, the donors, and even the students). After the assessment results are communicated, explained and discussed, it becomes easy for the school to gain support from the board and the parents for its requests to make changes in its academic programs, introduce remedial programs, allocate more resources, create staff development opportunities, etc.

3. Conduct Data

Improving student behavior is of paramount importance in Islamic schools, which strive to create an Islamic environment in accordance with Islamic morals and ethics. Monitoring, documenting and analyzing all infractions through the use of discipline referral forms help the school understand and improve student behavior. The referrals forms that Al-Amal School has used to document infractions contain information about the student, description of the incident, location of the incident, date and time of the infraction, staff member who referred the students, etc.

Such data is compiled and analyzed to identify patterns in student misbehavior and whether such misbehavior tends to occur with certain students, at certain times of the day, in certain classes, in certain common areas, etc. A quarterly report is produced and shared with the staff, showing a summary of infractions by type (example: fighting, disrespect, profanity, vandalism, inappropriate behavior, etc.), and actions taken (warnings, detentions, suspension, etc.).

Upon reviewing student infractions during the first semester of 2003-2004, it was noticed that many infractions are occurring during recess, and in the cafeteria. As a result, the school is assessing its rules and procedures being used during recess and whether those rules are effective, and whether they are being consistency implemented by all staff. Teachers discuss these issues during staff workshops and work together to develop rules and procedures dealing with common areas.

In addition, the Principal examines the report to see if there are certain classes where many infractions occur in order to work with the teachers and help them modify their classroom management techniques to make them more effective.

Based on conduct data collected from previous years, which was discussed among all the staff, it was concluded that one of the improvement goals for the school ought to be the improvement of student behavior. As a result, the school started implementing a new approach to managing student behavior. All staff received on-site training on the new approach during the summer. This approach seeks to balance the teaching of academic skills with the teaching of social skills. Some of the principles of the Responsive Classroom are:

1. The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.
2. There is a specific set of social skills that the children need in order to be successful academically and socially.

The school is now monitoring and documenting student behavior in order to determine if the new approach is working.

4. Attendance Data

Learning can take place when students come to school regularly and on time. Students that are frequently absent and/or tardy are not likely to perform well academically. The school documents student truancy and tardies and take appropriate actions to correct them. Student conduct and attendance information need to be included in the student report card and communicated to the parents.

Because parents are usually responsible for making sure that their children come to school regularly and on time, the school has a policy that penalizes the parents for bringing their children late to school. Parents who bring their children late for more than three during a specific quarter have to pay a five dollar fee for each child that comes to school late.

Other types of sanctions that affect students in middle and high school include failing the course if a student reaches six unexcused absences.

5. Using Data to Seek Funding for School Improvement

Student data cannot only be used to improve programs and instruction. It can also be used to seek outside funding by applying for grants. For the last two years, Al-Amal school has received funding from American Express to support its Saturday tutoring program, a program that was created to provide help for the struggling students. The school has also received funding from the county and district to support other after-school activities, language instruction for immigrant students, hiring interpreters for non-English speaking parents. The school hopes to receive more funding in the future to support its improvement efforts.

The school is becoming more successful in its effort to seek funding for its programs and activities by using student data to back up its proposals, assuring grant donors that their money will make a difference in student performance.

Conclusion

Al-Amal School is continuously striving to improve its student performance by pursuing an approach that is based on data collection and analysis. Al-hamdlillah, this approach has empowered the school in many ways, allowing it among other things to identify major challenges and find effective solutions for them.