

EDUCATION WEEK

Benchmarks to Allow Urban School Districts To Track Business Side

Published Online: May 1, 2007

Published in Print: May 2, 2007

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As accountability has become an established feature of school life, district leaders have grown used to being able to compare their schools' academic performance with that of other districts. Now they have a tool that will help them do the same with their business operations.

Using a new set of benchmarks, district officials can see how key aspects of their work in transportation, food services, procurement, maintenance, and security stack up against those of big-city districts.

They can see, for instance, that the median annual cost of transporting a student to school in those districts is \$988, and examine their own costs for comparison. They can find out where they stand on the cost of building maintenance and operations compared with large districts, which spend, on average, \$3.22 per square foot.

The Council of the Great City Schools, a Washington-based organization whose members are 66 of the nation's largest districts, developed the benchmarks. The group spent four years devising the metrics and surveying members about their operations in order to present a picture of selected district operations.

Michael D. Casserly, the executive director of the council, said the project was sparked by district leaders' frustration with the lack of comparative data they could use to judge their work.

"These indicators are meant to complement the reforms that we're pursuing on the instructional side of the house, and spur our improvement on every front," he said.

The study, “Managing for Results in America’s Great City Schools,” released last month, comes amid growing pressure on districts to measure and maximize their performance. It falls in line with a trend toward schools’ adaptation of private-sector business methods to analyze their own work.

“There’s some momentum building for school systems to use the tools that businesses have been using for years to improve their operations,” said Travis D. Colton, a senior project manager at the American Productivity & Quality Center, a Houston-based nonprofit group that helps businesses assess and improve their work.

The center recently expanded that work to school districts with the creation of benchmarks to help measure their performance in areas such as information technology, professional development, and recruitment. ("[Districts Compare Notes on Best Business Practices](#)," Jan. 17, 2007.)

Gauging Efficiency

James P. McIntyre, the chief operating officer of the 57,000-student Boston public schools, said the Council of the Great City Schools’ study is useful in several ways. Having data about their own and other districts’ operations helps district leaders think through their goals and strategic plans, decide what metrics to use in measuring their progress, and put their work into a national context, he said.

Examining information and comparing it with other districts’ also allows a district to determine if it is operating efficiently and thus helps free up as much money as possible for instruction, Mr. McIntyre said.

“[Business] operations enable and support teaching and learning,” he said. “The better we can do our jobs, the better we can support teachers in doing theirs.”

The council’s compilation of data offers ranges and averages on 49 indicators in five areas. The council will use the data to pinpoint which districts’ operations appear most promising and conduct case studies on those districts to build knowledge of good practice in the field, Mr. Casserly said.

Each indicator shows the range of districts' responses, as well as explanations of how the data were analyzed and what factors affect the data.

For instance, a chart for one transportation indicator shows that among large districts, the median number of students scheduled per bus is 51.6. But it also shows that the number varies from 11.3 in some districts to 124.8 in others. It explains that factors such as school bell schedules and the effectiveness of bus-route plans can influence those numbers.

The council has begun work on another, similar report focusing on district operations in budgeting, finance, human resources, and information technology.

How Urban Districts Compare

The Council of the Great City Schools has devised a set of benchmarks that district officials can use to compare their performance on various indicators of business practices and operations with that of other districts. Highlights include:

Transportation:

Cost per district-operated bus:

median **\$43,400**

(lowest \$26,529, highest \$123,075)

Food Services:

Student participation in pre-K-12 lunch program:

median **59.6 percent**

(lowest 31.4 percent, highest 89.1 percent)

Maintenance and Operations:

Backlogged work orders:

median **9.2 percent**

(lowest 0.1 percent, highest 29 percent)

Procurement/Supply Chain:

District procurement spending:

median **21.4 percent** of budget
(lowest 0.7 percent, highest 63.3 percent)

Safety and Security:

District staff in safety and security jobs:

median **1.1 percent**
(lowest 0.3 percent, highest 5.8 percent)

SOURCE: Council of the Great City Schools