Lessons From Chicago: Developing a Common School Performance Framework

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In 2013, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) created the School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP), a system in which all schools—neighborhood schools, magnet schools, charter schools, selective enrollment schools, and special option schools—receive a rating based on a standard set of metrics. Schools were given scores and ratings (levels 1 through 5) for the first time at the end of the 2013–14 school year.

The SQRP was designed with several different goals in mind. CPS wanted a framework that would recognize high-achieving and high-growth schools and help identify schools in need of targeted or intensive support for improvement. This SQRP also would need to work as a framework for schools to set goals and for the school board to use in their decision-making around school actions, such as turnarounds or closures. Finally, the tool would need to communicate to parents and the public about academic success for individual schools and for the district as a whole.

The school board adopted the SQRP as the tool for assessing performance and rating schools according to Illinois School Code. All charter schools authorized by CPS have accountability provisions in their contract, and the school board has decided to use the SQRP as the accountability system for charter schools. Thus, the school board is responsible for approving the SQRP as the accountability system and the CPS CEO is responsible for its implementation.[1]

With an understanding that engagement and political support would be critical to its success, according to sources from CPS, the process for developing the SQRP began with many focus group meetings led by the Office of Accountability. The planning team invited anyone interested in discussing the framework to participate; initial discussions included researchers from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, education funders, school leaders, internal school district staff, and community partners. While these diverse stakeholders were all part of the planning committee, there was some tension over the group composition. Charter school leaders had a lot at stake in the outcome of the framework, but they had equal standing with other interested parties. While district officials in the Office of Accountability built the final framework, input from this initial planning group directly informed many aspects of the SQRP.

While CPS expected to use the SQRP as the performance accountability tool with charter schools going forward, existing charter schools had the option of amending their contract language to embed this tool. At the outset, 80 percent of the existing 131 charter schools signed on to have the SQRP function as their performance accountability system, and by the beginning of implementation, all but one school had adopted the SQRP. One CPS staff member noted that this high level of voluntary participation and active engagement by charter schools "made it so we couldn't get lazy" with the development process. The single Chicago charter school that did not adopt the new system has had the same accountability system in their charter contract for 13 years and does not want to change. This has led to, as one official noted, a "100 percent single accountability system—minus 1."

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1 The Illinois School Code requires the CEO of CPS to monitor the performance of all schools using a criteria and rating system to identify schools struggling with achievement in reading and math, attendance, or graduation rates, as well as schools failing to implement required programming or improvement plans. Charter schools are exempt from this provision of the school code.

While the development of the SQRP was relatively smooth, the Office of Accountability still had to negotiate a variety of important decisions with input from the stakeholder focus groups.

Outcomes vs. inputs: Focus groups negotiated whether all of the SQRP metrics should reflect academic "outcomes," or whether some should reflect measurements of school climate or other "inputs" for school quality. The Office of Accountability decided, with stakeholder support, to heavily weight outcomes and include some inputs for "color and context." While academics were much more heavily weighted, these inputs also could influence a school's final score and rating category.

Proficiency vs. growth: The groups also considered how achievement proficiency and growth should be treated and whether one should be weighted more heavily than another.

Customized metrics for upper grades: When focus groups considered a high school-specific measure of "college persistence," they had pushback from high school faculty who felt it would be unfair to hold them accountable for results after students left. They challenged, "Will you hold K–8 schools accountable for high school persistence?" This discussion lead to a broader conversation of the validity of college enrollment data, sourced from the National Student Clearinghouse. As one district official noted, these validity questions become key when schools are "scratching and clawing for 0.1 of a point" on an evaluation system.

As of the 2015–16 school year, the SQRP has been in use for two years, and school district staff say that the tool has done exactly what they hoped it would do. In the years prior to implementing the SQRP, CPS had used several different accountability systems. The most recent system was a three-tier rating scale that placed 50 percent of schools in Level 3, the lowest tier. According to CPS staff, this scoring distribution undermined the accountability system because it did not differentiate enough between challenged schools. Additionally, since the prior system was designed for traditional public schools but was used for oversight of charter schools and alternative schools, CPS had to add other specific metrics that were more appropriate to the needs of such schools. For decision making about charter school renewals and closures, CPS used a "comparison school metric." This led to complex explanations of the metric and feelings from charter schools that the district was intentionally making the process opaque. Alternative schools also required a new metric to accommodate for limitations of the traditional assessment metric. The Prairie State Assessment (a standardized test taken by all Illinois high school juniors, administered until 2014) assumed that all students were attending the assessment school for a full year; yet most alternative schools served students for only a portion of a school year. A metric designed to address this issue only made things more complex, undermining efforts by CPS to promote transparency of data and decision making for schools.

The school district and schools themselves are the primary audiences for the SQRP, with the community and parents as a secondary audience. In the first year of implementation, CPS announced SQRP ratings in October 2014 for the 2013–14 school year; this process is repeated annually. The school district cited "a few very smart things" the Office of Accountability did to make sure that the first year of implementation was successful:

▶ It worked proactively to make the development of the SQRP a very public process and to generate buy-in from charter schools and education stakeholders.

▶ It made sure that schools were not surprised by their scores on the SQRP at the public release. All schools received "calculators" to allow them to prepare their scores on their own and figure out where they would be according to the system.

Additionally, the Office of Accountability now provides schools with a preliminary roster for each metric during the summer, with the opportunity to review and provide feedback before official scores come out. This not only helps schools understand how they are being scored, but catches any problems with data or evaluation. While this process does slow down the release of the ratings, one official said, "It is worth it to ensure accuracy." Said another district official, "Three years ago, people wanted my head on a platter; now, they're calling me six months ahead of time to say, 'I think we may have a school on the warning list.'"

After the first year of implementation, district staff report that "to a person, for all schools, the SQRP is a better evaluation system" for several reasons. Schools believed the assessments and metrics included in the SQRP were an improvement over the prior evaluation tool. The five-tier system allows for greater specificity in categorizing schools and avoids grouping all low-performing schools into one tier. However, there are still kinks to be worked out as CPS and schools move forward with the system. For the schools that adopted the system, there are still adjustments. Officials noted that some charter schools were confused over scores generated by the calculators. One result of this is that

many schools are now working to better understand the NWEA MAP assessment (Northwest Evaluation Assessment Measures of Academic Progress test), which is the primary test used for assessment, and the growth metrics used in the SQRP. School district officials say that while they think the schools will need time to adjust to all the aspects of the new system, they are confident that the system will continue to be implemented.

CPS staff offer the following "pearls of wisdom" for other cities interested in pursuing a common school performance framework:

▷ **Check in early with the people who have the ability to kill the effort to create a CSPF.** Know your base and seek out people who are steadfastly in your corner. Focus especially on the political system in your city and its players.

▷ **Get the assessment metrics right.** "Do you have an assessment everyone believes in? If not—get that first and get people comfortable with it. That's the ballgame."

▷ **Involve lots of people so that they can see the evolution of the system and the process.** Use strawman after strawman to demonstrate the system and its possible results. It is impossible to engage too much given how much schools have on the line with an evaluation system.

▷ **Be aware of the big risk of losing the forest for the trees.** A strong system design can start to get watered down when trying to address the concerns of individual schools. Find a balance when engaging stakeholders.