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Governance Brief

The California School Dashboard and Small Districts

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Introduction

The California School Dashboard, also referred to as the Dashboard, reports local educational agency (LEA) performance on multiple indicators and helps the state identify which LEAs need differentiated assistance. The use of the Dashboard as California's primary accountability tool represents a shift from the use of a single "Academic Performance Indicator," which was based primarily on standardized test scores during the No Child Left Behind era. The Dashboard is required by the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), the law passed by the Legislature in 2013, which outlines multiple priorities for student outcomes.

The State Board of Education designed the Dashboard to provide information about each LEA's performance and progress toward meeting standards in all of the state priority areas. The Dashboard lists an LEA's or school's most recent available performance in each area, as well as its change in performance over time. These two measures are known respectively as the Status Indicator and the Change Indicator.

The Dashboard was intended not only to inform parents, educators, and other stakeholders about each LEA's current performance and progress, but also to determine which LEAs will receive assistance through the California System of Support (CASOS), which is made up of the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), county offices of education, and the California Department of Education (CDE). Although support is mandatory for LEAs identified based on Dashboard performance, the form and approach to assistance differ from interventions required in past school improvement efforts. Supports are determined in collaboration with the LEA and are intended to

In this brief, you will find:

- » **How the size of student groups affects the way state indicators are reported in the Dashboard**
- » **Information about the "Safety Net Methodology" for calculating some LEA performance levels for Suspension and Graduation rates**
- » **How missing Dashboard data can impact communication with stakeholders about Dashboard results**
- » **Recommendations for supplementing Dashboard reports with local data**

offer assistance in a broader range of areas than just improving scores on the state's summative assessments.

While two-thirds of California's K-12 students are enrolled in districts with more than 10,000 students, the bulk of the state's districts are small. Approximately 55 percent of California's nearly 1,000 school districts have fewer than 2,500 students. In fact, over 400 districts have an Average Daily Attendance (ADA) of fewer than 1,000 students. These districts face many unique challenges that are often lost in policy discussions, including the impact of the state's accountability reporting mechanism, the Dashboard.

The Dashboard and Differentiated Assistance

Differentiated assistance describes the individually designed support provided to LEAs based on performance issues identified on the Dashboard. All LEAs can receive voluntary assistance—referred to as *Level 1 Support*—from their county office of education or the CCEE, but differentiated assistance—*Level 2 Support*—is mandatory for identified LEAs. As noted previously, what this support entails is determined largely by the LEA. The support provider (usually the LEA’s county office of education) consults with the LEA to develop an improvement plan to meet local needs.

In December 2017, the CDE began using the Dashboard to identify LEAs for assistance through the CASOS. Based on these results, 228 districts were required to receive differentiated assistance. These LEAs have been working with their county offices of education and/or the CCEE to develop strategies for addressing issues raised by their Dashboard performance.

When Small Districts Have Missing Data in Their Dashboard Reports

Due to small sample sizes, the Dashboard can present challenges in reporting the performance of districts with small student populations. The State Board of Education (SBE) established minimum sample sizes for calculating performance on the state indicators included in the Dashboard. In many small LEAs and schools, enrollment is not sufficient to generate performance levels in one or more of the state indicators.

An LEA with gaps in its Dashboard report due to small sample sizes may need to approach the Dashboard and other data differently, both in terms of communication and decision-making.

The state omits or limits some Dashboard reports when sample sizes are very small

When a student group consists of fewer than 11 students, statewide indicator results are not reported because it is difficult to protect student privacy with so few students.

For groups of 11–29 students, the Dashboard lists the status and change data but does not display a color-coded performance level because status and change data are particularly sensitive to individual student performance when sample sizes are small. Even one very high or very low score can pull the average significantly up or down. In these cases, the public can review the numerical data about status and change, but a gray gauge with the words “no performance

Differentiated Assistance for County Offices of Education

County offices of education will be identified for differentiated assistance beginning with the fall 2018 Dashboard release. However, if a county office of education also serves as the district (e.g., San Francisco Unified School District), the LEA might have been identified for differentiated assistance based on their 2017 Dashboard performance.

State and Local Indicators

The Dashboard features two types of performance indicators: state and local.

State Indicators use data that the state collects from all LEAs and schools. This data includes chronic absenteeism, suspension rates, graduation rates, English learner reclassification, and Smarter Balanced assessment scores for math and English language arts. These indicators are reported using both current status and change over time (when available).

Local Indicators are based on data that LEAs collect at the local level and are reported in a more general way: standard met, not met, or not met for two or more years. Local standards include adequate provision of the basics (textbooks, facilities, and correctly assigned teachers), parent engagement, school climate, and implementation of state standards. LEA size has no impact on the reporting of standards being met or not met for local indicators.

color” will be displayed where the colored gauge would appear. In Figure A (below), two student groups were too small to report a performance level. These reports will not be used to determine eligibility for differentiated assistance.

Figure A. No Performance Color Gauge



For the state's smallest LEAs, it is possible that their Dashboards will display no statewide indicator results or performance levels at all because there are too few students to generate a report. Nonetheless, even these LEAs must report whether local indicators are met or not met.

The "Safety Net Methodology" for Graduation and Suspension Rates

In most cases, the performance levels displayed on the Dashboard are determined using a 5x5 performance grid (addressed in greater detail in the Appendix of this brief and in CSBA's November 2017 brief "The California School Dashboard: What Districts Need to Know for 2017–18").

During the spring 2017 Dashboard pilot, the CDE determined that LEAs and schools with small student populations were overrepresented in the lowest (red) and highest (blue) performance levels because the results of just a few students can significantly impact the Change Indicator. To address this issue, the SBE approved a *Safety Net Methodology* for two of the indicators—Graduation and Suspension Rates.

This method is used when an LEA's or school's sample size is large enough to be displayed on the Dashboard but has fewer than 150 students. In these instances, the Change Indicator is reported only as Declined, Maintained, or Increased, and the LEA's performance level is determined using a 3x5 performance grid. For the 2018 Dashboard, the SBE will apply the *Safety Net Methodology* to student groups as well as schools and LEAs.

What can districts do when small student groups result in omissions?

When data are omitted from the Dashboard due to sample size, it impacts how much information about LEA or school performance the public can easily access. It also impacts whether the CDE identifies the LEA for differentiated assistance. There are, however, several ways governance teams in small LEAs can assess and communicate student performance:

Reported or not, governing boards should ensure their LEA is supporting the educational progress of all students and student groups.

LEAs are responsible for educating all of their students, whether or not they belong to student groups that appear on the Dashboard. Even when data are not included on the Dashboard, LEAs should review locally available student data to identify and address performance gaps.

Use other data to inform discussions of the state priority areas.

LEAs can identify sources of data that help them understand how well their programs are serving students, particularly for internal decision-making and Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) development. Such data might include interim assessments designed at the local level (e.g., a reading assessment), course placement data, performance assessments, survey data, or other information the LEA deems relevant.

LEAs have access to individual student and grade-level data on Smarter Balanced assessments for math and English language arts, even when this data is not on their Dashboards. *Internally* reviewing the data can inform decisions about areas of need, but caution must be used to ensure that student privacy is protected. LEAs must remember that:

1. Federal law requires that LEAs and schools protect student privacy, so individual data should *never* be shared publicly.
2. When groups are small enough that students could be identified even without disclosing names (e.g., there are only five third-grade students), that data should not be reported publicly.

The CCEE developed a webinar with suggestions for small LEAs whose Dashboards are missing extensive data. A link is included in the resources section of this brief.

Fewer displayed performance levels might reduce an LEA's likelihood of being identified for assistance.

LEAs with less reported information may not be as likely to be identified for differentiated assistance. These LEAs can still access support, but it is less likely they will be required to participate in the formal process of differentiated assistance.

Keep in mind how small samples can be impacted by outliers and communicate accordingly.

Even when a smaller sample size is large enough to be reported, a few outliers can dramatically impact the results. For example, if a small high school district with 50 students and previously stable suspension rates suspends 10 students after a fight at a basketball game, the district's suspension rate would be 20 percent with no further suspensions that year. This would result in a red rating on the Dashboard. In this case, it would be important for board members to be able to communicate why the suspension rate was so high that year (as well as what steps will be taken to decrease fights).

Make the most of the narrative box.

The Dashboard includes a narrative text box on the Summary Page, designed to be an opportunity for LEAs to explain or elaborate on Dashboard results if they choose. In cases where

reports are missing from the Dashboard due to sample size, small LEAs can supplement information on district or county performance, including context for any missing performance levels and discussion of what is being done to monitor and support students in those priority areas. This is an important communication step and provides a level of transparency that builds understanding and trust.

Questions for Board Members to Consider

When the Dashboard report for a small LEA is impacted by small sample size, board members should ask the following questions.

1. If the Dashboard has any blank sections due to small sample size:
 - a. How will the LEA know how students are doing in those areas?
 - b. Are there other sources of data available locally or on the CDE website that would be useful for monitoring progress on state indicators?
2. How will LEA performance be communicated to key stakeholders such as parents?
3. How can using the narrative component of the Dashboard help the community and the state understand LEA results?
4. Does it appear that a combination of outliers and small sample size led to an inaccurate view of LEA performance on any state indicators?
 - a. If so, how will our LEA explain these results to stakeholders?
 - b. How can the LEA use more reliable data to develop the LCAP?

Resources

The California Dashboard: What Boards Need to Know for 2017–18

CSBA's overview of the 2017 Dashboard, including sample questions for board members: bit.ly/2EhkoER

California School Dashboard

Searchable Dashboard results for LEAs and schools: www.caschooldashboard.org/#/Home

California Dashboard Has a New Look

A one-page flyer that describes the Dashboard 2.0, which will be released in late 2018: bit.ly/2QYHjMJ

CAASPP 2018 Website

Searchable LEA and school Smarter Balanced and California Alternative Assessment results for mathematics and English language arts: caaspp.cde.ca.gov

Small Schools & District Leaders: Build Your Capacity to Make Data-Informed Decisions (Data & Evaluation Module)–Archived March 1, 2018

Webinar with accompanying slides and spreadsheet tool: ccee-ca.org/training-dashboard-small-schools.asp

California School Dashboard Technical Guide

The most comprehensive technical overview of the Dashboard, published by the CDE: bit.ly/2GwGv90

Appendix:

Example of the Dashboard for a Small District and Technical Discussion of the Safety Net Methodology with Examples

CSBA has developed a few examples to further explore how the Dashboard might be impacted for small districts based on their enrollment, including application of the Safety Net Methodology for Graduation and Suspension Rates. The following examples use the 5x5 and 3x5 Performance Grids, which are used to calculate LEA performance for the Dashboard report. The grids are not displayed on the Dashboard report landing page.

Figure 1. 2017 Graduation Rate 5x5 Performance Grid

Level	Change: Declined Significantly by greater than 5.0%	Change: Declined by 1.0% to 5.0%	Change: Maintained Declined or increased by less than 1.0%	Change: Increased by 1.0% to less than 5.0%	Change: Increased Significantly by 5.0% or greater
Status: Very High 95.0% or greater	N/A	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue
Status: High 90.0% to less than 95.0%	Orange	Yellow	Green	Green	Blue
Status: Medium 85.0% to less than 90.0%	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Green	Green
Status: Low 67.0% to less than 85.0%	Red	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Yellow
Status: Very Low Less than 67.0%	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red

Gray colored cell=Not applicable

Source: California School Dashboard Technical Guide, 2017-18 School Year

Example 1: A District with a Graduating Class of 500 Students and an 87 percent Graduation Rate

This first example is an overview of how the performance levels that are reported on the Dashboard (red, orange, yellow, green, and blue) are determined. Every state indicator that has both Status and Change Indicators is associated with a performance grid (table) that shows how an LEA’s or school’s performance will be classified. Based on criteria set by the state, the color an LEA or school earns in each indicator area informs the Dashboard report.

The district in the first example (Figure 1) does not have a small sample size and provides an explanation of calculating a performance level when there is an adequate sample size for each indicator. When sample sizes are greater than 150 students in the Graduation or Suspension Rates, a 5x5 Performance Grid is used to calculate their performance levels. Performance Grids display the school or district’s Status Indicator in rows and the Change Indicator in columns. The square where an LEA’s or school’s Status and Change Indicators intersect determines which of the five performance levels they have earned. These levels are then used to determine if a district will receive differentiated assistance.

In the example above, a district with an 87 percent Graduation Rate, with an increase from 84 percent from the prior year, would have a “Medium” Status Indicator and an “Increased” Change Indicator. The column and row intersect in a green box, meaning that the district would receive the green performance level for its Graduation Rate.

Example 2: A K-5 School Serving 14 Students with No Suspensions during the Past Two Years

In a K-5 school that serves 14 total students, all 14 students would be included in the calculation of the Suspension Rate.

The Smarter Balanced (SBAC) Assessments begin in third grade, however, so only the scores of students in grades three through five would be used to calculate the English language arts (ELA) and Mathematics performance levels. According to these sample sizes, the Dashboard’s Status and Change report would list the numerical values and the Status and Change levels for the school’s Suspension Rate, without a performance color. In this example, fewer than 11 students would have taken the SBAC, so the Dashboard would omit ELA and Mathematics performance entirely to protect student privacy.

Because Suspension Rates are calculated using all students enrolled K-12, it is more likely that small districts and counties have enough students to generate a report. On the other hand, Graduation Rates only measure one cohort of students (those who started ninth grade at the same time), so very small LEAs are less likely to have enough students to generate a Graduation Rate Indicator.

Example 3: The Safety Net Methodology for a K-12 District Serving 500 Students

The State Board of Education approved its Safety Net Methodology to calculate the performance levels for Graduation and Suspension Rates only. The Safety Net Methodology is applied to these two indicators because they were the two areas where over-identification in red or blue was most prevalent based on spring 2017 Dashboard results. This methodology is used for sample sizes between 30–150 students. In these cases, a 3x5—rather than a 5x5—performance grid is used to determine an LEA or school performance level. The Status Indicator still uses five possible ratings, ranging from “very low” to “very high.” The Change Indicator, however, is rated in one of only three ways: increased, maintained, or declined. “Declined significantly” and “increased significantly” are omitted from the grid (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. Example of the Adjusted 3x5 Performance Grid for the Suspension Rate Indicator

Level	Change				
	Increased Significantly	Increased	Maintained	Declined	Declined Significantly
Very Low	Gray	Green	Blue	Blue	Blue
Low	Gray	Yellow	Green	Green	Blue
Medium	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Green	Green
High	Red	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Yellow
Very High	Red	Red	Red	Orange	Yellow

Source: California School Dashboard Technical Guide, 2017-18 School Year

Some LEAs and schools will have their performance levels determined using both 3x5 and 5x5 performance grids, depending on the sample size for the particular indicator. The Safety Net Methodology is not based on the enrollment size of the LEA or school; it is based on the number of students used to calculate the Suspension and Graduation Rate indicators.

If a K-12 district serves 500 students, all 500 students would be included in calculating the Suspension Rate, and a 5x5 grid would be used to identify its performance level. That same district of 500 students, however, would almost certainly have fewer than 150 students in their most recent graduation cohort. In this case, the CDE would apply the Safety Net Methodology, and the district would be evaluated using a 3x5 grid for its Graduation Rate Indicator.

Perhaps few community members might ask questions at this level of detail, but it is helpful when board members are able to address why some grids differ. Furthermore, those serving LEAs with small sample sizes should know that the state has taken steps to prevent disproportionate identification for differentiated support.

Endnotes

- 1 For more information on the various indicators used in the Dashboard, please refer to the CSBA Brief [The California School Dashboard: What Boards Need to Know for 2017-18](#).

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