

## *Victoria L. Bernhardt*

### **How do schools measure what matters?**

Many educators in schools say they do not measure all important things in their schools because “some things are not measurable.”

Let’s put that idea to rest right now – *all things we do in schools are measurable.*

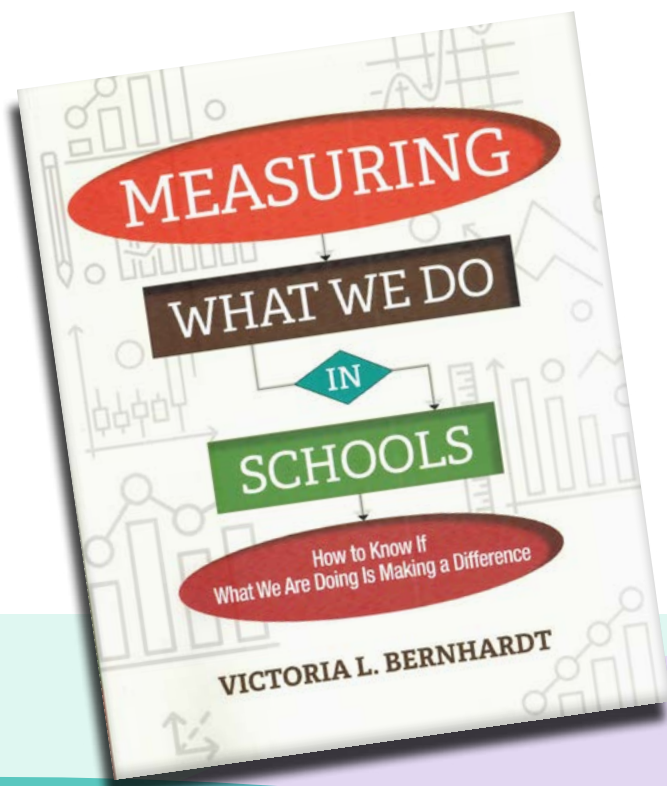
Schools know everything they do matters. So, how do schools get tripped up on not measuring what matters, and what can they do to get on track to measure everything that matters?

### **How schools get tripped up on not measuring what matters.**

There are three terms that seem to trip up schools when measuring what matters:

- 1. Accountability**
- 2. Mission**
- 3. Vision**

In some cases, *accountability* in our country has led to wonderful outcomes for many schools and students. We have seen more schools focused on teaching standards in Mathematics and English Language Arts and reaching more students in terms of proficiency since No Child Left Behind began in 2001. Unfortunately, in other cases we have seen schools trying so hard to get more students proficient in the accountable subject areas, they have taught only what is being measured by the state, and look only at high stakes student achievement results when determining how to get more students proficient. The result is that these schools add tutoring, interventions, after school programs, and the like, to improve the number of students proficient, or to close gaps between student groups. Subjects like social studies and science have taken a back seat; and, in some cases, have not been taught for a decade and a half. Big picture visions have neither been created nor implemented during this time.



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Focusing only on accountability often finds high-achieving students not being challenged, quality of instruction not being assessed and improved, and graduation rates decreasing.

## **Mission. A *mission* should be the most important statement a school makes.**

The *mission* tells us what the school believes is most important for its students and staff. This mission should reflect why members of the school believe the school exists. This, above all else, is what a school believes matters most – everything they do in a school should be aligned to this statement.

Not having, or defining, a mission could mean that a school does not know what matters, or does not understand how important a mission is to the school community. Not defining a mission is akin to not knowing what matters in the school. A statement to satisfy some other party is akin to not knowing what matters in the school. Having one person write the mission statement, without full staff agreement, is like not having a mission, as well.

## **Vision. A great school *vision* spells out how the school plans to implement the mission.**

If there is not one shared *vision* in the school, there are as many visions as there are people. If there is one shared vision, with a clear mission, all members of the school can work together to implement the one vision. Too many schools create a vision statement for an outside entity that never gets implemented. A vision statement can never get implemented because it lacks details.

### **How to measure what matters.**

If you cannot define what is important, you cannot say it is important, or that it matters. If you can define it, it can be measured. Learning organizations measure what matters by:

1. Analyzing their multiple measures of data,
2. Creating a mission,
3. Defining comprehensive outcomes for the mission,
4. Determining how they will implement the mission through a shared vision,
5. Shaping how they will measure the outcomes and vision, and then
6. Measuring along the way, and adjusting their processes, to ensure they are getting the results they desire for every student.

### **Analyze multiple measures of data.**

Canyon High School focused so much on accountability ratings and getting more students proficient, they missed understanding their students, how to offer a better education for every student, and ultimately how to get better results. The school tried hard to move students to proficiency through interventions, tutoring, and credit recovery. Alarmed by their decreasing and low graduation rates for four years running, the school staff decided they had to stand back and take another approach. They followed the steps above to determine what matters, and how to implement and measure what matters.

Canyon High School performed a comprehensive needs assessment to understand where they are as a school, and how they got there. In their single-mindedness to improve their accountability ratings, they realized they were using a remedial approach to getting better results. Obviously, that approach was not working. The comprehensive needs assessment shed light on the fact that the students they were getting had changed dramatically over the past four years. They had more students living in poverty, speaking English as a second language, mobile, with only 70% of students attending school 90% of the time. Proficiency percentages were decreasing each year.

Looking at their school processes, they concluded the school's curriculum and instruction had not changed in seven years. The school was doing a great job of preparing the highest achieving students for postsecondary education, with advanced placement and honors curricula. Beyond that, they were not preparing the other students for the futures they desired and deserved. There were no pathway options for students. Few career tech options existed, even though most of their students reported in a questionnaire that they would not be aspiring to 2 or 4-year academic postsecondary education. Students also stated they did not like the way they were taught and wanted school to be more fun and practical.

The first step in measuring what matters in a school is to analyze multiple measures of data. Schools need to review the following: **demographic data** to understand whom you have as students; **perceptual data** to understand what students want to do in the future and how they prefer to learn; **student learning data** to understand what students know and do not know, with respect to what we want them to know; and **school processes** to understand what processes have been implemented to get the results the school has been getting over time.

### Create a mission.

After assessing what the data revealed, staff created a simple mission, for every student, to which all staff committed.

## The mission of Canyon High School is to prepare every student to be college and/or career ready.

After a comprehensive analysis of the data, determine what really matters and incorporate these items into the school *mission*.

Make what matters become your *mission*, whether it is a part of the state accountability or not. If you live your mission that is created from what you learn from your data, the accountability will take care of itself.

### Define comprehensive outcomes for the mission.

Canyon High School determined and agreed that when students are college and/or career ready, the following outcomes will be achieved:

#### Students will be able to -

1. Successfully *complete* a college or university curriculum, without the need for remedial coursework. This requires:
  - Having the reading, writing, mathematics, science, social, and cognitive skills to qualify for and succeed in the academic program of their choice.
2. Seek and realize gainful employment.
  - Career ready students possess both the necessary knowledge and technical skills needed for employment in their desired career field.
3. Demonstrate that they know how to build upon learned content to solve problems.
  - Students must develop communication skills, work collaboratively in the school and work environment, present information, and use research to make informed judgments.

What should we expect to see when the mission is accomplished? Define comprehensive and systemic outcomes to allow all staff to understand what is expected as they implement the mission. These outcomes are also reflective of the comprehensive data analysis, and the details included in the vision.

### Create a Shared Vision.

With the outcomes in place, it was time to create a shared vision to spell out what staff needed to implement to realize the mission and desired outcomes. A summary of the vision, by the three outcomes, follows. The actual vision contained much more detail.

*Students will be able to successfully **complete** a college or university curriculum, without the need for remedial coursework. This requires having the reading, writing, mathematics, social, and cognitive skills to qualify for and succeed in the academic program of their choice.*

Staff agreed on the standards and curriculum to use to help students achieve this outcome. They agreed on how they will instruct and assess the standards, and what environment needs to be created to ensure students will have the reading, writing, mathematics, social, and cognitive skills to qualify for and succeed in the academic program of their choice. Staff also knew they had to become aware of the requirements for academic programs that the students might choose.



To this end, they created partnerships with neighboring 2-year and 4-year postsecondary education institutions, to help them refine a curriculum that matters for the students. Staff also committed to work to align the curriculum in the district to ensure college and career ready students throughout a continuum of learning, K-12.

Staff also created career pathways, and ensured a curriculum that would help students achieve outcome number 2: *To seek and realize gainful employment. Career ready students possess both the necessary knowledge and technical skills needed for employment in their desired career field.* To this end, staff created partnerships

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with the local 2-year college technical programs and community businesses, which will review the pathways, and establish joint programs and internships.

Woven throughout instruction and assessment in every content area and pathway, *students will be required to demonstrate that they know how to build upon learned content to solve problems: Outcome number 3. This includes requiring students to develop communication skills, work collaboratively in the school and work environment, present information, and use research to make informed judgments.*

To get everyone understanding how to implement the mission, the vision must spell out how the outcomes will be implemented, taking special note of what the data analysis reveals about what school processes need to change to get better results. The shared vision should be more than a statement created to satisfy some outside entity. The shared part of shared vision means that everyone understands it in the same way.

The shared vision needs to spell out what curriculum, instruction, assessment, and learning environment components will be implemented in order to achieve the outcomes. Spelling out the details gets the school closer to implementing its vision with integrity and fidelity. The details also contain measurement. The comprehensive data analysis and the way the example outcomes are written gives clues to what needs to go into the vision.



## Measuring Outcomes

**Shape how the outcomes and vision will be measured.**

These outcomes looked as if they would be very difficult to measure. By thinking logically about how the outcomes might be measured, staff created a table (next page) to display the outcomes in the first column, and how the high school might measure the outcomes in the second column.

# Measuring What We Do In Schools

## OUTCOMES

## HOW CAN THIS OUTCOME BE MEASURED?

**Students will be able to successfully complete a college or university curriculum, without the need for remedial coursework.**

**This requires students to have the reading, writing, mathematics, science, social, and cognitive skills to qualify for and succeed in the academic program of their choice.**

1. Number and percentage of students graduating from high school.
2. Number and percentage of graduates entering 2 and 4-year postsecondary education programs.
3. Number and percentage of graduates entering 2 and 4-year postsecondary education programs who need remediation, by subject.
4. Number and percentage of graduates entering 2 and 4-year postsecondary education programs who successfully complete their courses and program.
5. Graduate questionnaire to understand if students felt ready for postsecondary education, if they were able to succeed in their chosen program, and what could have helped them.
6. Parent and staff questionnaires to understand how to improve this outcome for all students desiring an academic postsecondary education.
7. Assessment of the quality of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Are these processes helping to change the number of students proficient and entering college without the need of remediation, and are they completing 2 and 4-year postsecondary education programs.
8. To understand if there is a continuum of learning, curriculum maps, lesson plans, assessment results-including indicators of individual student growth, classroom observations, and student work will be reviewed for each content area.

**Students will be able to seek and realize gainful employment.**

**A career ready student possesses both the necessary knowledge and technical skills needed for employment in their desired career field.**

1. Number and percentage of graduates seeking employment after graduation.
2. Number and percentage of graduates obtaining employment after graduation.
3. Perception of students about the career field they desire.
4. Perception of graduates about their knowledge and skills, and what the school can do better to prepare its graduates.
5. Perception of employers about the knowledge and skills of the graduates, and what the school could do better at preparing its graduates.
6. Quality of pathways and programs offered to students. Are students being offered employment? Do they have the knowledge and technical skills needed for successful employment in their desired career field? Review student knowledge and work. Review curriculum maps, lesson plans, assessment results-including indicators of individual student growth, classroom observations, and student work.

**Students will be able to demonstrate that they know how to build upon learned content to solve problems. Students must develop communication skills, work collaboratively in the school and work environment, present information, and use research to make informed judgments.**

Review how teachers are incorporating collaboration, the development of communication skills and problem solving in their lessons through lesson plans, student achievement results, classroom observations, and student work.

Measurement of what matters should be logical and include multiple measures, such as demographics, perceptions, student learning, and school processes. By looking at multiple measures, schools can see how they are getting their results and what they need to do to get better results.

**Measure along the way, and adjust processes, to ensure results for every student.**

Canyon High School is on the road to implementing its shared vision; and staff members are committed to measuring as they go to ensure that the school is implementing what matters most, and that the students are excelling in their choices for the future.

It is too late for students if the only measurement is at the end of the year. When a school is clear on what matters and how it will be measured, that measurement can be conducted throughout the year, so adjustments can be made to ensure the outcomes are obtained.

**Measuring Deeper.**

While this example shows possibilities for measuring outcomes of the mission, there is more measuring to do schoolwide. Each type of skill requires a measurement. If we think the skill is important to teach and mention, it needs to be measured, to know the impact of how it is being taught, and to know if the skill is being acquired. Most of the skills mentioned in the outcomes can be measured using a lot of the thinking displayed above.

But what about the really hard to measure traits similar to social skills? If a school says it is important for students to have, for teachers to teach and model, they must think logically about what they want it to look like. It will take the details of what the school wants to see as results to know how to measure these skills.

**Results: Tips for other Schools.**

We do not know if this school is improving student proficiency and graduation results, yet. We do know that what they are going to be implementing this year is going to serve every student much better than in the past. They have done this through --

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Starting with the comprehensive needs assessment, one cannot help but see who you have as students, how you are getting your current results, and what you need to do to get different results.

Creating the mission defines what matters. Defining and measuring outcomes and vision sets you up to measure along the way to get the results you want for every student.

**If you can define what matters, you can measure it.**

~

**Victoria L. Bernhardt, Ph.D., is Executive Director of Education for the Future, a not-for-profit Initiative whose mission is to build the capacity of learning organizations at all levels to gather, analyze, and use data to continuously improve learning for every student.**

**Dr. Bernhardt is the author, or co-author, of 22 books, including *Measuring What We Do in Schools: How to Know If What We Are Doing Is Making a Difference*, published by ASCD, and *Data Analysis for Continuous School Improvement, 4th Edition*, published by Routledge.**



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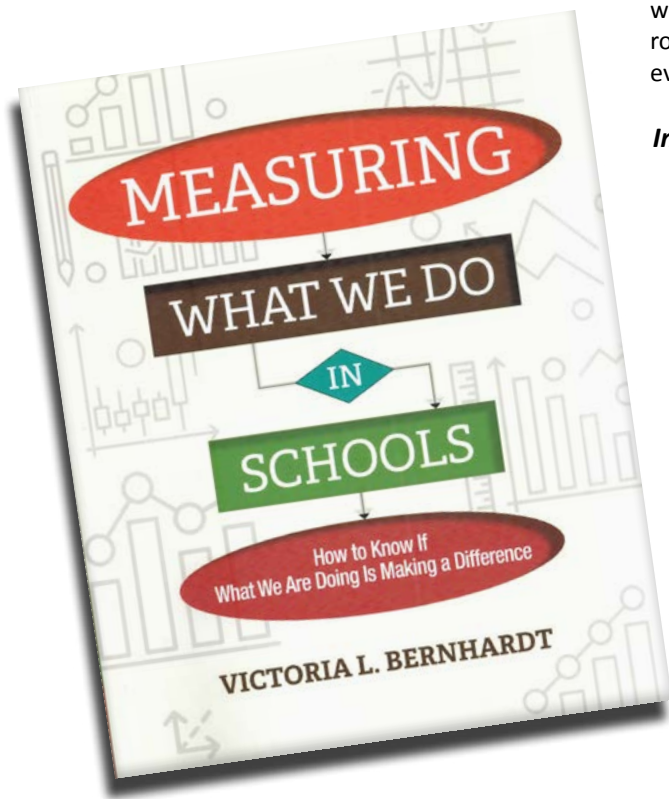
**To excel**, schools must embrace continuous school improvement and evaluation, as well as systems thinking. In this book author Victoria L. Bernhardt details the crucial role program evaluation serves in school success and how to implement meaningful evaluations.

***In this book you will find***

- ***How to conduct comprehensive, system wide evaluations of programs and processes***
- ***The tools needed to obtain usable, pertinent information***
- ***How to use these data to expand teachers' and administrators' data-informed decision making***

Program evaluation and data analysis can begin with a single program or process and build over time. Filled with practical strategies and featuring an in-depth case study, this book is designed to help educators see how evaluation work is logical and easy to implement. You and your team can gain confidence to do this work on a regular basis by working together to become a true learning organization.

Victoria L. Bernhardt has published over 22 books and numerous articles on the subjects of continuous school improvement and using data to implement school improvement. She is the Executive Director of [Education for the Future](http://www.edforthefuture.com) and Professor Emeritus in the College of Communication and Education at California State University, Chico.



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