

The argument:

WE CAN'T TREAT SCHOOLS LIKE BUSINESSES

What's at the heart of it? To some, accountability is ruthless and cutthroat. They think it's not fair because businesses can eliminate stuff that's hard or under-performing, while schools can't just push out students who are challenging.

FIRST FIND COMMON GROUND.

"You're right, kids and schools aren't businesses. But schools should be able to demonstrate results to parents and the community. We need information to know when something's working or not."

THEN PIVOT TO A HIGHER EMOTION:

WHAT'S BEST FOR MY KIDS.

"Parents have a right to know if their kids are getting the best education they can. It's what all parents want for their children."

DOs ↑

- 1 Do consider your audience. Most people want results and are comfortable with the concept of accountability. Common sense is on our side. It's teachers who are likely to be more challenged by treating schools like businesses.
- 2 Do normalize the practice of measuring performance. Relate it to other organizations in your community.

"There's a measuring stick for everything. Every organization in your community has ways to measure progress and direction—the YMCA, the Girl Scouts, churches, local businesses, sports teams. They all want to know, 'How are we doing? Is what we're doing working?'"

- 3 Do keep this about parents and kids.

"All parents want the best for their child. They deserve solid information that tells them whether or not their school is delivering what they say they are."

- 4 Do stress the importance of reading and math.

"Schools are complicated, kids are complicated, but reading and math are basic. Reading and math are just too important to leave to subjectivity."

DON'Ts ↓

Don't make this about teacher or school performance. But if you have to go there, be prepared. Know your state or district's evaluation formula. Then always bring the conversation back to the benefit for the student.

"It's true. The information is used for other things, too. It's one of the ways we measure how teachers and schools are doing. But just one. For example, in Minnesota, student test scores make up just 35% of a teacher's evaluation. The rest is based on classroom observation and student surveys. So it's just one of the tools we use. But first and foremost, the tests were created to help parents and teachers know if a student is reading and doing math at the level they should."



WATCH OUT FOR RABBIT HOLES!

Recent examples of data causing things like cheating and school closings can easily hijack the conversation. Be prepared with other facts about the situation—how tests and information were part of the solution, not the problem.

AUDIENCE SHIFTS

BUSINESS

Most business people are comfortable with the idea of metrics and measurement, but don't assume all are. Take your cues from your audience.

PARENTS

They want to know that schools are delivering results for their kids.

TEACHERS

Don't assume all teachers are anti-accountability. Many are sympathetic to the message.

THE FACTS ARE ON YOUR SIDE

You just can't undervalue the importance of reading and math. A student not reading at his or her grade level by third grade is four times less likely to graduate high school on time—six times less likely for students from low-income families.

(Annie E. Casey Foundation)

A 2012 study revealed that reading and math ability at age 7 was linked to social class a full 35 years later. Participants who had higher reading and math skills as children ended up having higher incomes, better housing, and better jobs in adulthood. (2012 University of Edinburgh Study published in Psychological Science)