



To start the day at a typical manufacturing plant, a manager will seek updates on inventory, check whether shipments are on schedule, and inquire about the status of equipment.

Questions about personnel also are a must. In a big, nationwide company, the executive might ask, “How are we staffed in Arizona? Are they back at full strength in New Jersey?” In a small outfit, the manager’s question might be the simple, “Is everyone here?”

Consider the reaction if the response comes back, “Gee, I don’t know.”

Yet that’s essentially the answer parents and the public get if they inquire how many children came to school today. It’s the response an educational official hears if asking for a real-time, district-by-district report on attendance. . . or test scores.

For parents, for educators, and for taxpayers, “Gee, I don’t know,” is not an acceptable answer. And to manufacturers whose competitive survival depends on accurate, up-to-date information, it’s baffling.

Let the data speak

If we can track inventories of billions of inanimate objects around the world in real-time, surely we can manage the attendance of our children at school. If we can verify the quality of a product every step of the way as it moves along the manufacturing process, the education of our children deserves the same careful attention.

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Yet the lack of good, timely data remains a fundamental weakness of K-12 education in the United States, and it hampers our ability to reform, to improve, and to demand accountability. Manufacturers live and die by the credo, to measure is to improve. The same should be true with education.

I start with attendance not because it's the end-all and be-all of educational data (although virtually all education studies agree that the more time students spend in the classroom—the more they learn!). Rather, the lack of solid attendance data reminds us that the goal of public education is the education of the individual student, the child. Transparency—the dissemination of accurate, timely and understandable data—must serve that goal.

In the broad collection of educational data, as a nation we are doing better, and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) deserves much credit for these improvements. While the law and its implementation have become a political football kicked around to score points during campaign season, NCLB still represents progress made toward the transparency and accountability that can only come from accurate, comparable data.

Among its reforms: Not only is a student's performance now measured over a period of time—annually in the 3rd through 8th grade—that performance is linked to academic content and state achievement standards. We can test and measure.

Some states like Massachusetts have raised standards and accountability, demanding more of their students so graduates are prepared either to go to college without need for remediation upon arrival or to enter and succeed in the workforce. In raising the standards, achievement has also risen.

Some states, however, have been less responsive and have accepted lower standards, apparently satisfied with less-than-stellar results or comfortable in not knowing how they stack up against the competition. Manufacturers and other employers will be quick to say this kind of effort falls short—to

many young job applicants lack the basic skills to perform even the most simple of tasks.

Timeliness is key

One common problem is that the data are too old. Students often take state assessments at the end of the school year and the reporting of this and other critical educational information sometimes drags on for years, rendering this data useless in the effort to improve instruction. On the shelves of educators all across the country are brand-new, just-released reports with gleaming charts and tables but footnotes that read, “Based on 2005 figures.”

So again, to the question, “How are we doing today?” you get a response, “Gee, I don’t know, but I can tell you how we were doing three years ago.” That’s not acceptable in the world of manufacturing and it should not be acceptable in the education of our children. State governments have an obligation to get the data right and that data must also be current.

With good and timely information, accurately reported, we surely will discover ideas, reforms and solutions that already exist—that already have demonstrated their value in improving education. Unfortunately, education does not replicate its successes the way we in manufacturing are compelled to by the marketplace. Good data would make this possible.

Technology also has the power to bring even more individualized data to bear. Where No Child Left Behind has definitely pointed the way—and made a great step for transparency—is in the disaggregating of data. No longer can states or school districts conceal their shortcomings by merging bad results in with the good. This separation of test results makes it clear when, even in high-achieving school districts, certain groups

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of students—lower-income or special needs children, for example—score below average. This level of detail is essential to quality outcomes.

Personalize the data to drive achievement

But let's disaggregate further, down to the individual student level, using the power of new technologies to track the performance of each child as he or she advances through the grades.

As the father of three 8th grade daughters, I can attest to the value of timely, personalized information. Their school system uses a combination of Blackboard's online learning platform and Pearson products, so my wife and I literally know about every test, every quiz, every homework assignment—what's expected and the result.

The information arrives e-mailed to my Blackberry and I can look at it and ask my daughters about their latest science or geometry exam. This kind of capacity should be built into every school district's information system, regardless of whether parents are ready to use it or not.

We live in a world where it seems every teenager is texting and has a Facebook page. What we really need is a My Student page, a confidential and protected page that offers daily, class-by-class reports on a student's performance. This kind of transparency would invite greater accountability, for the children, for the teachers, and for the school districts.

I truly believe that somewhere in America we have solved every single problem we have in public education—except for the organization of the system as a whole. We simply need to recognize these achievements and transfer them to other states, districts, and schools. Let's find these solutions, accurately assess them, and use 21st century technology to communicate and apply them.

Elementary and secondary education is, after all, a \$550 billion annual enterprise in the United States. In business, executives of every major

publicly traded enterprise are held accountable through the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, which requires they certify their detailed corporate financial records as accurate – under penalty of law.

Perhaps we need not go quite that far in the world of education, but we should certainly apply the principles. Transparency fosters accountability and technology can foster both. Let's put them to work, so when parents ask, "How are we doing today in school?" the answer comes back, "Well, let me go online, look at the data, and I'll tell you."

About the author

John M. Engler is president of the National Association of Manufacturers, the largest industry trade group in America, representing small and large manufacturers in every industrial sector and in all 50 states.

The former three-term Michigan Governor boasts a lifelong commitment to reducing the size of government as a means of boosting economic growth and job creation. As Governor, Engler inherited a \$1.8 billion state budget deficit and turned it into a \$1.2 billion surplus. He signed 32 tax cuts into law—saving Michigan taxpayers some \$32 billion—and helped create more than 800,000 new jobs during his tenure, taking Michigan's unemployment rate to its lowest level ever.

The top priority of Engler's administration was improving education, with a focus on high standards, more accountability, and strengthened local control to help student test scores climb to record highs. During his tenure, more than 180 charter schools were set up and every Michigan child received a foundation grant to the school of his or her choice.

Prior to becoming Michigan's 46th Governor in 1991, Engler had served for 20 years in the State legislature, including seven years as State Senate Majority Leader. He was the youngest person ever elected to the Michigan State House of Representatives.

Born in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, in 1948, Engler graduated from Michigan State University and later earned a law degree from Thomas M. Cooley Law School in Lansing. He serves on the boards of Northwest Airlines, Universal Forest Products, and is a past chairman of the National Governors' Association. He and his wife Michelle are parents of triplet daughters born in 1994—Margaret, Hannah, and Madeleine.