



PRIZMAH

Center for Jewish Day Schools

Academic Excellence in High Schools

September 21, 2022

A meeting of heads of school

Background:

The head of a Canadian high school is interested in speaking with some colleagues to brainstorm ideas about finding metrics to measure academic excellence. They write, "there is no real standardized testing in Canada (SAT or ACT) and AP classes are small and unpopular. Grades are not an effective metric. University acceptance data is, but probably not to the same extent as in the US." We want to exceed government requirements which set a low bar.

Thinking about how we know that we're doing a good job teaching the kids what we want to be teaching them. While we also focus on so much beyond the classroom, the goal of this half hour is to focus deeply on the question of markers of academic excellence. It's also asked with the fear that school is becoming a place where students are not willing to make mistakes because they need a 98% average in order to be accepted to certain university programs.

Current need: I'd like to bring this to my board and principals to review, discuss, iterate.

Responses from the group

What is the definition of academic? Does that include social and emotional learning? For the sake of this conversation, no. Let's focus solely on academics.

What is the definition of excellence? One head of school shared that she entered a long and complex conversation with her team about their own definition. They chose not to use that word, but to instead focus on: "Determining systems of measurement of academic success in a learning environment."

How do we know that our school is an excellent school?

Markers of academic success/excellence

- Graduation rate
- College acceptance rates
- AP scores
- Comparing how our students are doing with the students at other schools
- Accreditation markers

- Partnership with university professors. Hired a professor to review our English program to see if it prepares the students for that professor's university program. They will write a report about their findings. If that works, they'll do the same for other academic subjects.
- We had a private philanthropist pay for a formal tracking of our graduates for 4 years beyond graduation. Showed the students' successes on campus (not just academic) and allowed us to revisit our programs within the school to make adjustments based on where our students were struggling. The report told us how they were doing in specific subject areas in addition to their extracurricular commitments.
- Tracking academic scholarships received, for the first and second year of university.
- Tracking of your hiring practices and the current team. Showing off the skills of your teaching team.
- Do an external review of your team's classroom teaching. A deep dive into the teaching and learning going on inside the school.
- Your students enter competitions and do well - Puts your school on the map
- Being able to articulate what you're teaching and where that's manifest. My students are learning how to X and therefore they know Y. For example, my student is doing the kind of math that's the basis of NASA sending spaceships into space.
- Student internships - get quotes "these kids come consistently well prepared. That's exactly what we need. Kids from that school are always able to do X, Y, and Z."
- What does academic mean? Does it mean that they score well on a test? Mastered concepts and was able to apply them. If the latter, then you need to have more creative assessments which showcase application to real world situations. This requires a lot of bravery on behalf of the HoS to have their back.
- Ask the admission counselors at universities and professors on campus: What are the top 20 academic skills you want your students to be able to possess in order to be successful in your university?
- If someone bumped into a kid from your school in 10th grade, but they were articulate and helpful about a topic, what are the academic skills they need to have gained and practiced to make you proud to show off your school.
- Success markers in science - look for them across the board in 10th grade, not just in science class. Where are those concepts being reinforced in Tanakh, History, etc.

Questioning the premise

- Portrait of a graduate is one thing, supporting our students to be successful as humans is about the value proposition of school.
- It's worth changing the question around excellence.
- Fear: We can impact the inputs (teaching, curricular, etc), but we don't have control over the outputs. A weak class impacts the data in very real ways.
- I'm equally interested in whether they're willing to take harder classes and risk getting lower grades. Measuring their willingness to take risks.