

Implementing a “Stat” Program:

Lessons from the Boston Public Schools

Strategic Data Project Fellowship Capstone Report

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Introduction

For those who have seen the HBO series *The Wire*, the term “CompStat” evokes an image of conflict. The show, based on the Baltimore, MD, Police Department’s efforts to address the city’s drug war, portrays several contentious interactions between precinct captains and the police commander during CompStat meetings. In one scene, the precinct captains, against a backdrop of crime statistics projected on a board, are aggressively questioned about their strategies for reducing crime by an unforgiving and unrelenting superior. The tone is harsh, and the purpose is to emphasize a “no excuses” approach to reducing crime.

This portrayal accurately captures the tenor of CompStat (a shortened form of comparative statistics) in many police districts, most notably the confrontational implementation of the original CompStat in New York City, NY. One might assume that the value of CompStat lies in the meeting itself, and in the tense interactions that arise from holding people accountable for performance. The truth is that the value of CompStat comes from the *process* it requires, the *preparation* expected of the meeting participants, and the relentless *follow-up* and clearly *delineated actions* assigned to people who have the agency to drive improvement.

CompStat is a performance management, process improvement, and statistics-based accountability framework. Many jurisdictions have implemented a variation of a “Stat” program to manage performance. Some cities have CitiStat, some school districts have SchoolStat, and some government organizations have launched PerformanceStat. What these implementations have in common is not the tone of the meetings, but four core elements:

1. clarity of organizational mission and purpose,
2. statistical analysis of problems and results,
3. organizational flexibility and responsiveness, and

4. internal accountability.

Starting in 2010, the newly formed Office of Accountability began implementing a Stat program in the Boston Public Schools (MA). This report outlines that implementation and identifies five lessons that can inform other districts' efforts to institute similar performance management processes.

Overview of Stat Programs

In 1994, New York City Police Department (NYPD) Commissioner William Bratton created CompStat as a leadership and management strategy. Since that time, CompStat has grown in popularity among police departments. By 1999, almost one-third of police departments with more than 100 officers implemented CompStat (Weisburd, Mastrofski, Greenspan & Willis., 2004). Stat programs also became popular in nonpolice organizations. Several New York City agencies adapted the NYPD approach: For example, the Parks Department launched ParkStat and Human Resources Agency launched JobStat (Behn, What All Mayors Would Like to Know About Baltimore's CitiStat Performance Strategy, 2007). Baltimore became the first city to introduce a citywide version in 2000, which they called CitiStat. While these adaptations varied according to the needs and personalities of the leadership of those jurisdictions, the "Stat" suffix indicates a similar premise, described by Behn (2008): "Government needs to improve its performance, and, to do so, it needs a demanding and strategic approach" (p. 2).

A review of 13 jurisdictions¹ that have implemented a Stat program in a variety of contexts found four key elements of the process. Each of these elements has specific evidence that the structure is in place to execute a Stat program.

¹ The following SchoolStat programs were reviewed: Baltimore City Public Schools (MD), District of Columbia Public Schools, New York City Department of Education Facilities Department (NY), Paterson Public Schools (NJ), Memphis City Schools (TN), and the School District of Philadelphia (PA). The following CitiStat programs were reviewed: Baltimore, MD, Montgomery City, MD;

Clarity of Organizational Mission and Purpose²

Leadership is responsible for clearly communicating the mission and ensuring everyone understands their roles in achieving success. The CompStat process provides the venue for leadership to emphasize the mission and regularly verify that the organization's strategy aligns to the mission. CompStat meetings are typically held at regular intervals—monthly or biweekly—and are attended by key decision makers within the organization. A common mistake in organizational meetings is not having the chief executive or an official designee at every meeting (Behn, *The Seven Big Errors of PerformanceStat*, 2008). In the simplest form, the leadership gets in the same room and decides what needs to be done, how they are going to do it, who is responsible for completing the task, and how they will measure success. All departments within the organization are on the same page because representatives from each were present when decisions were made.

Statistical Analysis of Problems and Results³

One of the hallmarks of a Stat program is accurate and timely information about performance. Key performance data needs to be analyzed and distilled so that it provides a clear picture of performance deficits and successes. The first step is to look for evidence of problems or proof that interventions are working. Continuous monitoring of performance can trigger corrective action *as problems arise*. By reviewing what works, organizations develop an internal “playbook” of successful interventions to share across the network.

Syracuse, NY; Somerville, MA; and Springfield, MA. The following CompStat programs were reviewed: Boston Police Department (MA) and New York City Police Department.

² Evidence: regularly scheduled meetings with key decision makers

³ Evidence: reports of performance metrics, dedicated analytical staff

Importantly, successful Stat implementations have a dedicated analytical staff that can monitor performance in a consistent and nonbiased way. Not having a dedicated analytical staff is a common error that diminishes the effectiveness of the process (Behn, 2008).

Organizational Flexibility and Responsiveness⁴

In a given year, Boston Public Schools (BPS) will educate 57,000 students; 10,000 students will enroll after the start of the academic year, and 10,000 students will leave before the end of the year. This does not include the transitions that occur at the start of each year when students change teachers and schools. This is just one example of the constantly changing conditions facing educators. Organizations need to adapt and respond to changes. The structure of CompStat meetings creates the context for leadership to review problems and develop appropriate responses.

Internal Accountability⁵

The success of the original CompStat implementation at the NYPD relied on the relentless follow-up on commitments and tasks (Behn, *The Seven Big Errors of PerformanceStat*, 2008). Follow-up is an important aspect of internal accountability and is an often overlooked component of a Stat implementation (Behn, *The Seven Big Errors of PerformanceStat*, 2008). Part of having all of the key decision makers in the room is that someone is there to take responsibility for any issues that arise. The follow-up on those assignments is then deliberate and public.

⁴ Evidence: collaboration during meetings

⁵ Evidence: public task list

Examples of SchoolStat

SchoolStat implementations have taken two basic forms: district/central office focus and school-level focus. Central office SchoolStat focuses on three main performance categories (Fullerton, 2011):

1. instructional—operations focused on delivering instruction and monitoring student progress (e.g., student scheduling, testing, and assessment, and after-school programs);
2. student-facing—operations focused on non-instructional services to students (e.g., transportation, food services, and facilities); and
3. back office—internal services necessary for smooth operation of the district (e.g., payroll, hiring, and purchasing).

Under Chancellor Michelle Rhee, the District of Columbia Public Schools implemented a central office-based SchoolStat program (Morford, personal communication, September 20, 2010). This implementation centered on the performance of district departments and their ability to serve schools and students. Rhee used SchoolStat as a lever for raising expectations and demanding accountability; under her leadership, these meetings took on her personality. As DC SchoolStat Director Zach Morford (2010) explained, “Our belief is that you can’t beat up the schools until you’ve beaten up the central office.”

Other districts, however, focused their SchoolStat programs on school-level performance. School-level SchoolStat usually includes the following performance categories:

1. student academic performance—instructional quality and student growth and learning (e.g., grades and formative assessment results);
2. attendance and student rates—the social, emotional, and behavioral factors that affect learning (e.g., average daily attendance, chronic absenteeism, and suspensions); and

3. school climate—the nonacademic barriers that influence learning (e.g., safety and family engagement) (Patusky, Shelley, & Botwinik, 2007).

Beginning in 2003, Philadelphia, PA, launched the largest implementation of a Stat program in education (Patusky, Shelley, & Botwinik, 2007). This ambitious implementation organized schools by regional superintendents who would be the key executives running the Stat meetings. Within two years, the rolling implementation of SchoolStat covered 12 regions of 290 schools, serving 185,000 students. Each regional superintendent was responsible for 12 to 40 schools, depending on the region. These regions were organized by geographical area to facilitate involvement by school leaders from elementary, middle, and high schools.

Memphis City Schools (TN) also launched SchoolStat. Their implementation monitored and supported only the lowest-performing schools in their district—“striving schools” (Cash & Barker, 2011). Memphis deliberately cultivated a collaborative process whereby principals received feedback and support from their colleagues in the central office, as well as from other principals facing similar issues at peer striving schools. In contrast with DC, this was a more supportive and collaborative approach.

Boston Context

Created in 2007, the BPS Office of Accountability’s purpose is to foster greater internal accountability and external accountability for the achievement of district goals and objectives. Their work is to develop, manage, oversee, and support the use of tools and processes by schools and central office departments. Because it is a new department, the Office of Accountability has the flexibility to design and implement a district-wide accountability infrastructure. In 2009, this responsibility expanded to include supporting 11 schools designated by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as chronically underperforming. Similar to the

Memphis striving schools, the 11 “turnaround schools,” as they became known, were the focus of heightened scrutiny and raised expectations for improvement.

Turnaround schools were given additional autonomies including the hiring of new school leaders and the ability for that leader to replace 50% or more of the staff at certain schools. In addition, they were eligible for and received grants under the Federal School Improvement Grant Program. The 11 turnaround schools in Boston also received \$20 million over three years. In order to receive this funding, the state also stipulated specific measurable annual goals that set performance expectations for schools. Failure to meet standards would result in a loss of funding and, in severe cases, takeover by the state. The combination of benefits, attention, expectations, and consequences meant that these school leaders felt extreme pressure to dramatically improve their schools’ performance. The Office of Accountability is responsible for organizing the district’s support for these schools.

At the same time, BPS was reorganizing the academic departments around the Academic Achievement Framework (AAF), based on models of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). One characteristic that directly impacted the district’s Stat implementation was the creation of cross-functional rapid support teams (C-FRST). The district created four C-FRST teams corresponding to groups of schools: elementary schools, middle schools and K–8 schools, high schools, and turnaround schools. The Office of Accountability was responsible for organizing and running the turnaround C-FRST.

Why Boston Chose a Stat Program

There are many performance management systems that have been popularized in public and private sector organizations. Balanced scorecards, for example, focus on creating management reports that are fully aligned with the mission and strategic vision of the organization. An

organization implementing Six Sigma will organize and train problem-solving teams of “black belts.” Stat programs, by contrast, focus on creating a data-informed conversation around ownership and action. None of these systems are one-size-fits-all; organizations should assess their current needs and culture to determine which system is the best fit. For Boston, the following factors led to the decision to implement a Stat program.

Boston had only three years to improve 11 underperforming schools. Under the turnaround schools timeframe, the district needed to quickly understand the performance of the 11 identified schools and take action. One of the distinguishing characteristics of a Stat program is its emphasis on execution. The balanced scorecard methodology heavily emphasizes the process by which an organization aligns its mission, goals, strategies, and initiatives (Niveen, 2008). Only after there is alignment between the mission, strategies, and initiatives should an organization determine key performance metrics and review performance against those metrics. While this process has its merits, it can be time consuming. Stat programs quickly reorganize the leadership around action and accountability. The metrics are useful insofar as they hold a group accountable for what they say they are going to do. More importantly, those metrics should address challenges upon which the organization will act.

Stat programs create the venue for strategic conversations informed by performance metrics. Stat programs provide a structured opportunity to discuss performance and understand progress toward a goal. The call to action is the public task list. By having a step in the process where someone asks for a specific, time-bound action and a clearly identified task owner, the conversation moves from what is the problem to what will be done about it. What made this appealing to the BPS is that no single individual had to insist on commitments; the process took care

of it. All that was required was for everyone involved to commit to and persist with the Stat program.

District leaders' awareness of CompStat combined with new resources. Most district leaders want to make data-informed decisions, and BPS leaders were no different. In a variety of settings, leaders talked about the need “to look at the data.” This led to the creation of several data strategies. In 2009, members of the district’s executive team attended the Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) at Harvard University. PELP uses a case study on NYPD’s CompStat during the training. This sparked several internal discussions about using a Stat program at BPS. That fall, Boston became a part of the Strategic Data Project (SDP), a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-funded initiative aimed at improving the use of data in public education. Nathan Kuder, an SDP Data Fellow, had recently worked at the Boston Police Department on a project to review their CompStat methodology and recommend improvements. The timing of resources and the awareness of Stat programs was a major factor in selecting it for the BPS performance management processes.

The Boston Stat Model: Quarterly Review

The Boston Stat implementation, known as Quarterly Review, had four distinct phases:

- **Phase 1: Align District Resources and Establish Credibility**
- **Phase 2: Design and Communicate the Plan**
- **Phase 3: Pilot the Process**
- **Phase 4: Full Implementation at Turnaround Schools**

Phase 1: Align District Resources and Establish Credibility

Assemble turnaround support team. The Office of Accountability wanted to assemble a truly cross-functional team that combined the academic teams with budget, operations, and transportation. Each academic department, including Curriculum and Instruction, Office of English Language Learners, and Special Education and Students Services, designated specific staff members to the turnaround C-FRST. When possible, this person was the highest-ranking person in the department, thus reinforcing the importance of the turnaround effort.

Model action and accountability. To set a collaborative tone, the Accountability Office communicated the expectation that the C-FRST team was created to facilitate, support, and collaborate. The goal was not to monitor or focus on compliance with district policies.

Frank Barnes, the chief accountability officer, was particularly concerned with the issue of credibility while his team designed this implementation. At times, central staff has been viewed by schools as slow or unresponsive. To change that perception, the Office of Accountability embraced the motto “reciprocal accountability.” Going forward, Barnes emphasized that the C-FRST team would be held accountable during Quarterly Review meetings as much as (and probably more than) the schools. To reinforce this expectation, the Office of Accountability spent the first year of the turnaround process serving as a fixer of problems on behalf of turnaround schools. Schools were given a single point person whom they could call to find answers, fix problems, or exasperate people in the central office until turnaround schools got what they needed.

Phase 2: Design and Communicate the Plan

Identify initial metrics. The Office of Accountability believed that metrics would be useful if they had four characteristics: understandable, actionable, aligned, and communicated. By making each measure *understandable*, Accountability ensured that central office and school leaders could

interpret the metrics and that these leaders would recognize the relevance to their work. It was also important that metrics sparked a sense of urgency; therefore the designers wanted all measures to be *actionable*. Accountability officers expected adults to be agents of change, which meant they needed to be focused on measures and issues that were within their sphere of influence. The third characteristic, *aligned*, follows the first element of a Stat program: It ensures clarity of mission and purpose. For turnaround schools, this meant identifying performance measures that aligned to their measurable annual goals. The final characteristic, *communicated*, means that the measures should be made clear to all stakeholders, internal and external. Everyone in the community should know the priorities and goals of these schools, so that they can offer specific supports.

Establish the frequency of meetings. Timing of meetings is particularly important when considering the balance between the desire to have frequent updates and discussions and the limited availability of new data. Having frequent meetings could mean no new information to drive the discussion. Waiting too long between meetings could lead to a diminished sense of urgency, especially among central staff. After reviewing the availability of three main data sources—report card grades, district-wide formative assessments, and early learning assessments—the Office of Accountability decided to hold four meetings throughout the academic year:

- school launch (held before the second week of school),
- early December (after the first marking period ended),
- early March (after the second marking period, but before the statewide assessments), and
- year in review (near the end of school to plan for summer professional development).

Get Buy-in. Despite the effort to model accountability and to support the turnaround schools during the first year of turnaround, the accountability team needed to ensure that school leaders were on board with the Quarterly Review process. At the August Principal and Headmaster

Institute, the accountability team presented turnaround leaders with the following overview of the process:

1. There would be regular, data-informed check-ins on student performance. The communicated purpose was to ensure that everyone was on the same page and focused on student outcomes.
2. Principals and headmasters would have the opportunity to learn from one another's practices, challenges, and successes. At the same time, the Accountability Office would provide additional capacity and professional development for data analysis.
3. These meetings would ensure reciprocal accountability: Central office staff and school leadership would hold one another accountable for performance.

Principals were also notified about who would be involved in the process: turnaround principals and school leadership (as selected by the principals), the Office of Accountability, members of the turnaround C-FRST, and a support team from operations.

After the institute, the accountability team offered schools the opportunity to receive a year-in-review presentation and professional development session. At these sessions, the accountability team presented performance data to the school leadership and instructional leadership teams. The purpose was to ensure that principals had time to use and react to the data before they were held accountable for results. This was the first time they saw the data assembled in this method, which gave them an opportunity to process it and give their feedback before the first Quarterly Review.

The final step in garnering buy-in was engaging strategic partners. Boston was fortunate to have partners at the turnaround schools who could provide analytical support to the schools.⁶ These partners, along with several other partners providing support in a variety of ways, were given an overview of the Quarterly Review process. They were so excited by the idea that they asked to hold a strategic partners meeting following each Quarterly Review to evaluate the identified issues and to provide support on action items that fit their partnerships. This enthusiasm helped even skeptical principals begin to see the value of the process.

Phase 3: Pilot the Process

Following the year-in-review presentations, the Office of Accountability launched a modified version of the Quarterly Review process. The principals had the opportunity to have a “no-stakes” conversation about their performance data during the year-in-review. Similarly, the accountability team wanted to give the principals the opportunity to experience the Quarterly Review process before they were put in front of their peers and central office staff. Not only did this facilitate buy-in, but it also emphasized the tone of support over accountability.

In preparation for the Quarterly Review, schools were asked to reflect on their performance data from the prior year and identify two or three “problems of performance” to the Accountability Office. During the Quarterly Review, meeting participants discussed the problems of performance and the schools were asked four questions:

1. What is the problem?
2. Why is it occurring?
3. What are you going to do about it?

⁶ Three of the turnaround schools had City Year VISTAs serving as school-based data coordinators; two of the schools had a Diplomas Now data coordinator; and the Boston Plan for Excellence–Boston Teacher Residency supported teacher leaders in data analysis and provided part-time data analysts for three of the schools.

4. What support do you need from the district?⁷

During this conversation, a public task list was displayed. As an action item came up, it was typed on the screen for everyone to see. This had the intended effect: Meeting participants quickly understood that follow-up would be intentional and thorough.

The decision to limit the meeting participants had one downside: All central office tasks needed to be assigned to someone in the Office of Accountability rather than directly to the responsible department. The team clearly communicated to both the schools and to the C-FRST that the tasks would be distributed shortly after the meeting ended. In fact, copies of the task lists were distributed to both school leadership and to the C-FRST within 48 hours of the meeting.⁸

Phase 4: Full Implementation at Turnaround Schools

At the writing of this report, Boston is preparing for the second Quarterly Review. Unlike the first meeting, the second Quarterly Review will involve the entire C-FRST team. Also, rather than having a single school at each meeting, cohorts of schools will come together on three consecutive days. The schools were organized by level (elementary, K–8 and middle schools, high schools) and then by similar size and issues, so that there will be no more than four schools presenting at each Quarterly Review meeting. During this time, schools will have three, three-hour meetings in which each school has the opportunity to present for 40–45 minutes to their peers and central office staff.

To supplement the four Quarterly Reviews, the team committed to the following:

⁷ This was, for obvious reasons, a very popular question. What the Accountability Office did not anticipate was that by simply asking the question (or in this case, letting them know the question was going to be asked), they demonstrated that they were serious about offering and following through on supporting the schools with their strategies.

⁸ Distributing tasks appropriately was always the first task entered by the accountability team when they introduced the purpose of the public task list at the meetings.

- The Office of Accountability will provide analysis of school performance one week prior to Quarterly Review sessions.
- The post-meeting task list will be sent following the meeting. Status updates will be sent at regular intervals to all participants for all schools.
- C-FRST will meet between each Quarterly Review to review commitments and progress.
- Strategic partner meetings will be held the week after the Quarterly Review.

All of these activities are meant to ensure consistent and intentional follow-up to the issues and needs identified during each school's Quarterly Review.

Lessons Learned: SchoolStat

Decide Which SchoolStat Model Is Right for Your Organization

For Boston, the turnaround process necessitated a school-based implementation at only 11 schools. This may not be right for your organization. In Washington, DC, the leadership believed that the first step to district-wide accountability was district office-focused accountability.

Alternatively, Philadelphia, PA, had the resources and manpower to roll out a district-wide, school-based approach. Understanding your organization's culture, resources, and goals is fundamental to designing the right version of SchoolStat.

Commit to the Process by Committing Resources

One of the issues outlined by Behn (2008) is the lack of dedicated analytic staff. Schools and school leaders have different capacities to analyze school-wide performance metrics and participate in a Stat process. Rolling out a data-informed process requires extensive professional development and support.

Boston was fortunate to have partners at the turnaround schools who could provide analytical support to their schools. It is easy to underestimate, however, the amount of time it takes to prepare for, execute, and follow up on Stat meetings. The work of creating performance reports, PowerPoint presentations, and supporting documentation is time-consuming. When one adds the amount of time needed to read and interpret the performance reports and prepare briefings for key leaders, supporting a single Stat meeting for one school requires approximately 50 hours of preparation. As Behn (2008) notes, “To produce meaningful results, [the process] needs a few analytical people working on it full-time to understand—through the use of data—what kind of results are really being produced” (p. 5).

Make Your Commitment to the Stat Program Public

It is easy to view this process as a compliance mechanism and, therefore, not as valuable as “real work.” If this is the perception, it can be tempting to postpone the meetings, especially the first few, for other work that is perceived to be more important. Boston shared the plan to hold Quarterly Reviews widely with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, partners, school leaders, and, as importantly, large portions of the staff at turnaround schools. They publicly committed to holding these meetings.

For the initial Quarterly Review, this motivated the Office of Accountability to hold the meetings before the process and metrics were fully fleshed out. They discovered that the act of holding the meeting was more important than getting it right the first time. In fact, the process changed fairly significantly from the first Quarterly Review meeting, held at the Harbor Pilot Middle School the first week of September, to the 11th meeting of the initial Quarterly Review, held almost three weeks later at the Blackstone Elementary School. They executed the initial plan, got feedback from the participants, modified it based on the initial results, and implemented the changes.

Invest in the Back End of the SchoolStat Process

Once an organization designates a SchoolStat team, it is important to think about how the team will work and what tools are needed to make SchoolStat a success. In Boston, many of the back-end processes—those that supported the execution of the Quarterly Reviews—were not established before the meetings began. Planning centered on finalizing the meeting format and style, communicating the process to participants, and identifying and assembling key performance data. Other issues, like when the SchoolStat team would review and discuss performance data, how they would manage the public task list, or how they would appropriately assign and follow up on tasks, were not well planned and took several iterations to find a methodology or tool that did not overly burden the responsible team member.

Enhance the Process With Activities Outside of the Stat Meetings

Stat programs are not just about a meeting protocol or quality performance reports. Therefore, organizations implementing a Stat program should think of ways to interact with the participating schools or departments that will reinforce the process. In Boston, the Accountability Office conducted instructional walkthroughs that provided qualitative reports on instructional quality, met with school leadership teams to review data and aid in the interpretation of performance metrics, and organized a network of school-based data users to build capacity throughout the organization. Each of these activities serves as an opportunity to develop capacity, give and receive feedback, and reinforce the importance of the process.

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