

Report Cards and Accountability in Decentralized Education Systems

How Report Cards Support Accountability

Education providers may be more directly accountable to parents, community members, and students in decentralized education systems. But transparent and public information, easily accessible and understood, is essential to ensuring this accountability. Such information appears in report cards. It may vary widely, from simple reporting of student test scores to comprehensive descriptions of academic performance, socioeconomic characteristics of staff and students, and financing.

Report cards may be issued for individual schools; collections of schools in a municipality or district; or for regions, states, or provinces. In the United States, report cards are found at all these levels. This makes sense, since responsibilities in most decentralized education systems are distributed across national, regional, community, and school levels.

How can report cards be used to improve the accountability of schools and educational decisionmakers to their citizen-clients? They can

- provide a useful and easily understood management tool, especially at the school level;
- stimulate parental involvement and citizen demand for school performance, thus strengthening accountability; and
- motivate education reform at all levels—school, community, region, and nation.

Because reports cards support clear, quantitative statements of goals and the annual monitoring of goals, report cards can also create greater accountability upward, to managers of educational systems and sources of finance.

Unfortunately, only a few developing countries offer transparent and public information that is easily accessed and understood by parents and other stakeholders. Parents and citizens with little information about school performance traditionally have no voice in education decisions and rarely participate at the school level. The combination of decentralization and well-executed report cards could be revolutionary in developing countries.

Transparent and public information that is easily accessed and understood by parents and other stakeholders helps ensure accountability in decentralized education systems. Report cards are one way this information can be collected. Unfortunately, only a few are in use in developing countries.

Developing Country Report Cards

A few developing countries have developed census-based student assessment systems that publicly report school testing results. Chile has had such a system for over a decade. A more comprehensive reporting is found in the Brazilian state of Paraná, where most schools are managed and financed by municipal governments. The state's education secretary annually issues individual school report cards that monitor education quality and help develop improvement plans (see appendix).

The Paraná report cards provide a management tool for better decisionmaking, especially at the school level, and strengthen accountability for results. The report cards also promote transparency and motivate community and parental involvement. In addition to results of student assessment tests, the report cards include data on student flow, the percentage of teachers with university degrees, measures of school efficiency, and indicators of parental and community involvement. A unique feature of Paraná's report cards is the inclusion of parental, student, teacher, and school principal opinions about the school. Each school's report card also compares its performance and stakeholder perceptions about it to the average for other schools in the municipality and the state.

Report cards that help describe school performance and progress were created and disseminated by the Education Reform Project for Latin America (PREAL). These report cards, used in several Latin American countries, create a more transparent and accountable education system by using concise, reliable, and current information under three headings: results, reforms, and recommendations. PREAL report cards are a maximum of 30 pages, and their format and use of visuals provide clear and direct messages that different constituencies understand. Data are presented in ranked order, with one-page summaries and statistical annexes for supplementary information. Common parameters established for all PREAL report cards are cited on each to ensure comparability. Among the advantages of the PREAL approach, it

- enables a diverse audience of nontechnical users to be informed and engaged;
- increases accountability;
- promotes the improvement of school performance by permitting results to be used in planning change; and
- provides information to monitor and improve understanding of how new initiatives are working.

Challenges

Whether report cards goals are attained will depend on factors beyond the control of education policymakers. Parental and citizen involvement, along with accompanying pressures for reform, may be limited if newly created democratic institutions such as school boards and advisory councils are coopted by traditional elites. Other obstacles include teachers' unions that are interested in maintaining the status quo and the absence of necessary building blocks for accountability. Under these circumstances, report cards may make little contribution to strengthening accountability.

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Other challenges include

- confusion about who is responsible for what in financing and delivering education;
- inadequate education financing; and
- lack of sanctions and rewards for poor and outstanding performance.

Even when basic building blocks of accountability are present, simply providing information may have limited impact if decisionmakers do not know what they should do to improve schooling.

The establishment of New Zealand’s Education Review Office, outside the Ministry of Education, addressed this challenge. The office assesses individual schools; makes findings public (often posting them on the school walls); and provides specific recommendations for actions to improve learning.

Another potential challenge relates to the difficulty of measuring factors that affect student learning in particular schools. Publishing absolute test scores, as opposed to value-added measures, may increase sorting of students by ability and socioeconomic status, thereby decreasing equity. However, increased sorting is more likely to result from the introduction of standardized student assessment systems than report cards, since the cards emphasize a broad array of performance measures. Further, the risk of sorting is small in developing countries that lack census-based, sophisticated student assessment systems.

Some Outstanding Questions

The use of report cards in developing countries is still in its infancy. There is a limited knowledge base on how to collect and disseminate information to best attain the objectives of stimulating parental participation and motivating education reform.

The following questions remain:

- Must it be governments that prepare and distribute report cards?
- Can NGOs (or even the free press) carry out the function?
- How should information be presented so it satisfies the dual objectives of providing detailed and technical support for school based management and increasing parent and citizen participation?

The development of effective report cards requires a careful and flexible approach that is iterative over time for any given country. Design, content, and dissemination strategies developed for report cards need to draw from other experiences.

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