

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.

- *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?*

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Appendix. Sample Report Card

SCHOOL REPORT 2002

Colégio Estadual Avelino A. Vieira
Rua Julio Mesquita, 12
81330-430 Curitiba-PR

School Performance Assessment, 2000											
	This School							Other Schools in Your Municipality			Paraná
	Mean	Number of Pupils Assessed	Pupils at Level I	Pupils at Level II	Pupils at Level III	Pupils at Level IV	Mean	Number of Pupils Assessed	Mean	Number of Pupils Assessed	
Portuguese	4th	*					257	7,232	250	39,239	
	8th	258 AB	61	16%	25%	25%	263	4,852	250	31,125	
Math	4th	*					255	7,101	250	38,441	
	8th	262 AC	56	23%	11%	27%	261	4,712	250	31,007	
Science	4th	*					254	7,055	250	38,033	
	8th	251 AB	63	19%	30%	25%	260	4,743	250	31,125	

Source: SEED/NIE, AVA 2000

School Effects:

- AC Average above the expected mean, given the profile of the pupils assessed.
- AB Average below the expected mean, given the profile of the pupils assessed.
- AP Average roughly equal to the expected mean, given the profile of the pupils assessed.

Promotion, Repetition, and Dropout									
	This School			Municipality			Paraná		
	Grade 1-4	Grades 5-8	Secondary Education	Grade 1-4	Grades 5-8	Secondary Education	Grade 1-4	Grades 5-8	Secondary Education
Promotion	*	67%	76%	95%	79%	71%	89%	81%	75%
Repetition	*	33%	20%	4%	16%	13%	9%	9%	10%
Dropout	*	0%	2%	2%	5%	15%	2%	2%	15%

Source: MEC/INEP/SEEC, *Censo Escolar 2002 (Resultados Preliminares)*.

Note: Data refers to the 2001 school year for public schools in formal education.

*The school (or municipality) did not offer this level of education.

Teachers and Students										
	Total	This School			Municipality			Paraná		
		Grade 1-4	Grades 5-8	Secondary Education	Grade 1-4	Grades 5-8	Secondary Education	Grade 1-4	Grades 5-8	Secondary Education
Pupils	2,192	*	1,381	811	113,573	100,754	65,965	825,850	737,602	408,020
Average class size		*	37	39	30	35	38	27	34	37
Teachers		*	47	34	6,048	4,193	2,765	39,255	37,464	22,938
Teachers w/ higher education			100%	100%	67%	98%	98%	46%	97%	97%

Source: MEC/INEP/SEEC, *Censo Escolar 2002 (Resultados Preliminares)*.

Data from public schools: total pupils in primary and secondary education.

- The school (or municipality) did not offer this level of education.
- The state government standard for pupil class ratio varies from a minimum of 25 to a maximum of 30 pupils per class for 1st to 4th grade, 30–40 pupils per class for 5th to 8th grade, 30–45 pupils per class for secondary education.

Parents' opinions about this school regarding...
Education quality
59 out of 70 parents (84%) are satisfied with the quality of education their children receive.
43 out of 68 parents (63%) believe the school buildings are well maintained.
63 out of 69 (91%) believe the school infrastructure is appropriate to educational activities.
50 out of 69 parents (72%) believe that school teachers are dedicated to teaching.
57 out of 71 parents (80%) are satisfied with teachers' punctuality.

Parental involvement
65 out of 69 parents (94%) would like to have greater involvement in school activities.
64 out of 68 parents (94%) believe the head teacher favors participation of the school community in school activities.
50 out of 71 parents (70%) indicate that the school promoted parental involvement in education issues. 31 of them participated in such activities.
47 out of 68 parents (69%) indicate that the school promoted parental involvement in school administration issues. 23 of them participated in such activities.

Information dissemination
48 out of 72 parents (67%) report that the school promoted regular meetings between parents and teachers.
55 out of 68 parents (81%) say a regular communication system with parents has been established.
58 out of 65 parents (89%) say that teachers assign homework tasks that promote parents' interest in their children's education.
50 out of 69 parents (72%) report receiving information about their children's homework so they could follow up on it.

Security
51 out of 72 parents (71%) feel safe sending their children to school.
47 out of 67 parents (70%) believe the school has discipline problems.
47 out of 68 parents (69%) believe the school has internal security problems.
60 out of 69 parents (87%) believe the school is subject to security problems in the neighborhood.

School grade
7.8 (mean attributed by 68 parents).

Parents profile
5 out of 70 parents (7%) reported participating in the School Board.
7 out of 69 parents (10%) reported being members of the Parents and Teacher Association Secretariat.
14 out of 68 parents (21%) reported being a volunteer at this school.
22 out of 69 parents (32%) have more than one child at this school.

Source: Survey Submitted to parents during School Family Week, April 20–28, 2002.

Note: Only schools with more than 160 pupils responded to the survey.

The results reported represent only the opinions of those parents who answered the questionnaires and not those whose children attend this school.

The results are based on the total number of valid responses and not the total number of questionnaires received.

The pupil in this school says that...						
	4th Grade			8th Grade		
	His/her parents always read his/her school reports.	*			74%	
His/her parents always go to the school when requested.				66%		
His/her parents always or almost always attend school events.				15%		
He/she has never failed.				59%		
At least one of his/her parents has completed secondary education.				35%		
He/she has a home computer.				21%		
He/she has a car.				63%		
	Portuguese	Math	Science	Portuguese	Math	Science
He/she always or almost always required guidance with his/her homework.				27%	29%	38%
He/she enjoys very much the way his/her teacher teaches.				68%	37%	42%
He/she likes the textbook used.				27%	44%	43%
He/she did not have trouble leaning.				42%	25%	19%

Source: SEED/NIE, AVA 2000: *Questionário do Aluno*

* The school did not offer (or had not assessed) this level of education.

The school head teacher says that ...
During his/her administration, the head teacher dedicated most of his/her time to the organization of the school management structure.
During the general school meetings to which all parents were invited, the educational projects for the different periods of the school year were discussed. On average, parental attendance at these meetings was 75%.
The School Board met every two months.

Source: SEED/NIE, AVA 2000: *Questionário da Escola*

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For more information about EQUIP2, please contact

USAID

Patrick Collins

CTO EGAT/ED

USAID Washington

1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW

Washington, DC 20532

Tel: 202-712-4151

Email: pcollins@usaid.gov

AED

John Gillies

EQUIP2 Project Director

1825 Connecticut Ave., NW

Washington, DC 20009

Tel: 202-884-8256

Email: EQUIP2@aed.org

Website: www.equip123.net

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