EQUIP2 State-of-the-Art Knowledge in Education
School Report Cards

A Guide to Education Project Design Based on
a Comprehensive Literature and Project Review

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INTRODUCTION TO SCHOOL REPORT CARDS

The importance of parental and community support in enhancing children's school success has become increasingly clear in both developed and developing countries. Parental and community participation in education often improves opportunities for students to learn by providing tools and resources that increase student interaction with and complement the subject matter in the classroom. However, effective parent and community participation in education requires that they have knowledge of their children's educational needs and are empowered to act on that knowledge. One promising innovation for encouraging parent and community participation to improve learning in the education sector is the School Report Card. This state of the art brief examines the current international experience using the School Report Card to stimulate parent and community and offers tips for implementing a successful School Report Card effort.

In many countries, education is seen as the nearly exclusive concern of governments. Ministries of education have largely worked alone to improve the quality of education in schools, with little involvement from other sectors of society. Given the amount of resources invested in education and increasing concerns on educational quality, the lack of input from non-governmental stakeholders is problematic.

> Educational decentralization requires that substantial information is available to local and regional stakeholders. Increasing transparency, establishing a basis for accountability, and providing tools for effective management at the local level help parents, teachers, and school officials to assess school performance and status (EQUIP2, 2006).

Educational systems often lack accountability measures that set goals and hold students, parents, teachers, principals and educational ministries responsible for results. Relevant and reliable data on system performance and learning is limited and rarely distributed even within the Ministry of education. Moreover, in only a few countries does policy dialogue contribute to educational decision-making. Parents and the community at large are typically uninformed about how well schools are doing and have little or no role in contributing to the dialogue on how to improve education. As a result, Ministries and schools face less scrutiny and pressure to reform the current system.

Four key themes for improving learning have emerged from the visibility of education in the international political debate: high standards for teachers, parent and community participation in education, a focus on underachieving students, and school choice (PISA, 2010; Barber, 2007; Mourshed, 2009). This state of the art

knowledge brief focuses on promoting community participation in student learning by establishing accountability and transparency using school-level information management systems known as School Report Cards.

School report cards refer to information on school progress provided at any level in the education system, such as student report cards that report on student progress in achieving educational objectives, faculty report cards that report on teacher performance, and school system report cards that report on student progress at a national level in achieving national education objectives. The various report cards, modeled on the original report cards developed for students, document how education systems are performing, help Ministries of Education set priorities, and generate recommendations and actions for change.

The central argument of this brief is that school report cards are essential tools to encourage greater community participation to improve education quality. By engaging parents and communities to better understand and use information on how their schools are being managed, their voices can be strengthened to demand better quality of education for all children.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF SCHOOL REPORT CARDS

School report cards show, how a particular school, district, province, country or region is performing with respect to key indicators of educational outcomes such as student learning, enrollments, graduation rates, gender and social equity, and school environment. At a district, provincial or national level, policy indicators used in these report cards such as government spending, teacher quality, student assessments and learning standards are generally used. By using summary formats, user-friendly grading systems, and a system for monitoring of results and progress at regular intervals, school report cards allow a broader audience to see which indicators are contributing to improving schools and what still needs to be done.

There are different kinds of report cards that are used in various ways, depending on the audience and purpose. There are bottom-up school report cards to mobilize communities (students, parents, teachers, principals), top-down school report cards created by governments to delegate management authority and allocate resources, and school report cards created by governments and organizations (i.e., NGO's, multilateral banks, donor organizations) to improve basic information sharing and transparency, and few to improve education quality. There is research gathered on a variety of school report cards developed in different countries, such as Brazil, Ghana,

Guinea, India, Namibia, Nigeria, Uganda, and the United States, and by different organizations, such as the USAID/Civic Engagement for Education Reform Program in Central America – CERCA-, USAID/PREAL (for Latin America), UNICEF (Quality School Grid), (EQUIP2, 2006; CERCA, 2006; Winkler and Sevilla, 2004). This research shows that these tools have been increasingly useful in assisting parents and communities to better understand what is happening in the schools and with their own children.

Table 1 shows some examples of plans to provide information that increased community involvement in school-level decision-making. Each of these programs had different purposes, such as developing and monitoring information systems, setting goals and holding public services users responsible for results, and promoting community participation. There are also successful examples of top-down approaches in which a state plays an important role to support participatory approaches in education. For example, in the Ghana example, the state used standardized tests to develop a model that supported the local planning process. The cases of UNICEF, Brazil, Namibia and Ghana focused mainly on highly participatory schemes with actions that can be addressed at the schools. In the UNICEF example, school report cards were used to collect data from parents and the school community to help prioritize school improvements. Parental opinions about their children's schools were also collected in the State of Paraná in Brazil. However, Paraná's case is unique because it combined the parents' surveys with the results of the state's standardized tests. Namibia's school assessment is an example where stakeholders developed the capacity to conduct their own report card and to link the results with a school improvement plan.

From the examples outlined in Table 1, CERCA was the only report card that was created to involve and mobilize teachers, students, and parents to work as a team to collect, analyze, interpret, disseminate, and use data for quality improvements rather than administrative improvements. Measures of cost-effectiveness showed that this type of community involvement effort was more effective than several other community involvement strategies that had tracked program costs (CERCA, 2006). The bottom-up approach to school report cards was also shown to provide statistically significant value added to student achievement in math and language arts, when taken to scale in El Salvador (EQUIP2, 2009).

Table 1. Report Card Experiences Around the World

Characteristics	CERCA SRC (USAID)	Namibia-School Self Assessment	UNICEF Quality School Grid	Brazil-Paraná	Ghana-School Performance Appraisal
National Regional Impetus			X	X	X
External Data Analysis			X	X	X
School Feedback	X	X	X	X	X
Local Impetus	X				
Local Data Analysis	X	X			
Community Feedback	X				
Local Action Planning	X	X			
Local Monitoring/ Follow-up	X				
External Monitoring/ Follow-up					

Source: CERCA, 2006

TIPS FOR DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING EFFECTIVE SCHOOL REPORT CARD PROGRAMS

Define the purpose and audience when designing the intervention. Report cards are most effective when the organization producing them has a clear idea of the intended audience and what its goals. Because report cards can be used for a variety of purposes, not all of which overlap, organizations should have a clear sense of a report card's intended use from the outset. If the intent is to strengthen existing systems for collecting data, a top-down approach report card will serve the needs

of ministries of education. If the intent of the school report card is to strengthen community decision-making and local accountability, a bottom-up approach is likely to be more effective.

Conscious planning is essential. Adequate time must be provided to staff, teachers, or other stakeholders during the development phase of report cards. The planning process must include conscious decisions about who will choose the areas of the school report card to be analyzed (teacher profiles, students' performance in subjects matter, classroom environment, and school management) , who will design the indicators, and who will define the goals. Report card producers need a clear idea of what indicators are available and appropriate to measure key educational outcomes and policies, as well as a strategy for reconciling conflicting data and filling in gaps where possible. Working with the ministries of education and local authorities will ensure that planning and budgeting activities take into account local realities to plan for support needed. Successful projects ensure adequate funds for implementing, monitoring, and evaluating report card efforts.

Design school report card interventions that begin early in the school year. The process of developing school report cards should begin early in the school year to ensure that communities have enough time to collect information, analyze results and implement all the actions and monitor the results during the school year. Towards the end of the year, there is typically less time available to dedicate on these interventions. Students and parents are focused on final exams, school principals are busy with end-of-year administrative tasks, and government officials are racing to plan for the next year's activities and budgets.

Political will matters. It is important to obtain the endorsement of the ministries of education during the implementation design stage. Whether the school report card is top-down or bottom-up, this approval will ensure that the use of school report cards are considered within the planning activities of the ministry and schools. Moreover, having an endorsement allows school principals, teachers, parents, and students the possibility to freely participate in the implementation efforts. The local authorities and school principals are key factors in the success of the school report card efforts.

Emphasis should be on results. Educational quality has consistently been defined in terms of academic achievement. Consequently, student achievement measures must be an integral part of school report cards. Graduation rates, repetition rates, and data about socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity should be included as more basic indicators of schools' abilities to retain and provide quality education for all students.

To be accessible for different audiences, the school report cards should be user-friendly, utilizing simple data, graphs, and maps. For example, CERCA's indicators were simple: the indicators were presented using real numbers, not percentages, and they were designed and validated with communities so that all of their members could understand them, regardless of their educational backgrounds.

A focus should be on the quality of education and opportunities to learn. There is evidence that community members, regardless of their educational backgrounds, care about educational quality and can act to improve learning. For example, in the CERCA report card, parents established an adequate place to do homework and read with students, students developed norms of conduct for the classroom or served as tutors for younger children. Teachers studied participatory methods, organizing classrooms into small groups and training parents as tutors. Examples of community-level actions to improve learning efficiency included visits by teachers and parents to the homes of habitually tardy or absent students, discussions of schooling at church meetings, and the identification of school-age children not enrolled in school (CERCA, 2006).

Implementation of top-down approaches requires governments to invest in their own capacity and the quality of the data collection that they process. National school report cards should contain information, including system size, information on student learning, access, equity, current and future policies and impact, efficiency and financial accounting. Quality information requires that governments establish a common set of national educational standards that make it easier to monitor progress. Governments will also need to disseminate results and create mechanisms for engaging with stakeholders on the implications of the current state of educational systems in their countries.

Implementation of bottom-up approaches requires capacity-building efforts for all stakeholders. School communities must have the capacity to collect, analyze, interpret, disseminate, and use the data for specific improvements. Local communities must have the capacity to collect and analyze information regarding the status of their schools. Building local capacity, however, takes time, respect, and trust. Ongoing mentorship to these communities by those supporting the implementation and use of report cards is important to reinforce and consolidate its and ensure that local implementers have developed the capability to sustain the effort and teach others to implement the use of school report cards.

The development of school report cards to mobilize communities should involve teachers, parents, and students working collaboratively. Students, teachers, and parents make valuable contributions when they are engaged in report card efforts. Evidence showed that students made particularly important contributions to issues related to classroom processes and interactions, and they took active roles in data collection, community presentations, and action plan implementation.

Information is relevant if data are understood and used. Producers of information require the capacity to present the information in a format that is understandable to its audience. The most useful information presented in a simple way (i.e., using graphs, maps, colors, and pictures) generates in-depth discussions. Citizens become interested in information that offers the opportunity to act. In many developing countries, where parents and caregivers have not been in schools themselves or are illiterate, school report card efforts should center on helping and empower them to understand what their children need to improve their levels of learning, whether their children are meeting standards, and what they, as parents, can do to help. This support to parents should be done using simple indicators that focus on education quality so that parents, teachers, and students can jointly discuss educational opportunities and challenges together.

> **Local communities can successfully plan and monitor actions to improve educational quality.**
>
> The CERCA School Report Card process was successful in Central America in building the capacity of community members to collect and analyze school-related data within a relatively short time. The SRC effort also led to the planning of a number of school-related actions formalized in an action plan to improve the quality of education that included timelines, the identification of individuals responsible for implementing activities, and a monitoring plan. The transfer of knowledge gained in planning and monitoring of these school-related actions was demonstrated in the subsequent ability of school personnel to adapt their School Report Card action plans to 2006 school management plans. (CERCA, 2006)

Promote civil society to monitor progress. National level school report cards (placing schools in a broader context and measuring against standard criteria) that come from outside observers can be more objective than self-assessments done by governments. These national reports are generally well-suited for transparency and accountability goals because they are easier to compare performance among schools, and the broader education system. For example, the national level school report cards created by PREAL in Latin-America make it possible for educational advocates to make the case for changing (or continuing) a particular policy or practice beyond the local level (PREAL, 2006). The challenge is still to link these national level report cards with school report cards efforts to create a consistent reporting methodology at the broader

education system that values and promote parental and community participation.

Follow-up is a must. Producing a report card will have limited effects unless producers make a concerted effort to ensure that the report cards are useful beyond an initial launch. Producers should think strategically about ways to use report card information to provide feedback to the educational system and to help improve educational quality within their own country's context.

Conduct continuous monitoring. An initial assessment of the situation and conditions of the beneficiaries before implementation can provide clues for the design of the monitoring phase. Regular monitoring should be an integral component of any report card effort. Periodic monitoring can provide opportunities to modify and make corrections. The process of monitoring should include the progress of the report card development and the progress of the communities collecting and analyzing school-related information that will lead them to act upon their report cards. Care should also be taken to have sufficient resources to evaluate the program during the implementation process and after the implementation ends. An important step should be to determine the relative cost of program results in these school report card interventions, as few of those presented in Table 1 have available data on cost-effectiveness.

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