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Educational Quality Improvement Program
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Are School Report Cards Effective?

Education decentralization requires that substantial information be 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 assess school performance and status. Several countries have successfully piloted school-level information systems known as ‘school report cards’ to promote best practices and involve community members in the reform process.

Despite considerable discussion around the idea of school report cards, there are relatively few examples of such methods in practice to disseminate information. The exceptions include the school report card required under the No Child Left Behind Act in the United States, often considered the gold standard of report cards, and report cards from a very small eight-school, three-country field test sponsored by the Civic Engagement for Education Reform in Central America (CERCA) Project. Methodologies range from inexpensive low-resource formats like the one previously used in Paraná State, Brazil, where an Education Management Information System (EMIS) already existed, to school self-assessments in Namibia, where community members evaluate their own schools for a management committee of parents, teachers, and administrators. Other examples include Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, India, and Guinea.

The purpose and audience for the report card are major determinants of content and are linked to a school’s level of decentralization or degree of autonomy. The type of school report card, therefore, depends on the education system’s configuration, stage of evolution, support received, and flow of information. Report cards targeting parents and the community are also often used by a sub-national or central authority to mobilize involvement at the local level through improved information channels.

School report cards also represent an effective reporting tool for the participatory process that links the allocation of funds and delegation of management authority to accountability requirements. For example, the Virginia Standards of Learning sets minimum pass rates for the purposes of accreditation. Results are processed and used by the state for its annual accreditation of schools, and state law requires that test results, along with specified indicators, be provided to parents.

The factors that appear to most affect sustainability of school report cards include:

- The capacity of an audience to effectively use the information;
- The capacity of an information system to produce accurate and timely information that is understood by its audience and provides useful comparative information; and
- Political will.

EQUIP2 is funded by the
United States Agency for
International Development

Cooperative Agreement
No. GDG-A-00-03-00008-00



Although there is evidence of school report cards' effectiveness, considerably more research is required. The technical feasibility, cost, and scalability of these efforts are all critical. These costs include not only the production and dissemination of the reports, but also the cost of building stakeholders' capacity to use school report cards. In countries where communities and sub-national authorities are unaccustomed to active participation in the decision making process and inexperienced in receiving and using information to make more informed decisions, the costs of such capacity building remain unclear.

Acknowledgements

This paper was written for EQUIP2 by Laurie Cameron, Kurt D. Moses, and John Gillies (FHI 360), with input from Jon Herstein (Research Triangle Institute), 2006. The full EQUIP2 Working Paper version is also available.

EQUIP2: Educational Policy, Systems Development, and Management is one of three USAID-funded Leader with Associates Cooperative Agreements under the umbrella heading Educational Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP). As a Leader with Associates mechanism, EQUIP2 accommodates buy-in awards from USAID bureaus and missions to support the goal of building education quality at the national, sub-national, and cross-community levels.

FHI 360 is the lead organization for the global EQUIP2 partnership of education and development organizations, universities, and research institutions. The partnership includes fifteen major organizations and an expanding network of regional and national associates throughout the world: Aga Khan Foundation, American Institutes for Research, CARE, Center for Collaboration and the Future of Schooling, East-West Center, Education Development Center, International Rescue Committee, Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation, Michigan State University, Mississippi Consortium for International Development, ORC Macro, Research Triangle Institute, University of Minnesota, University of Pittsburgh Institute of International Studies in Education, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.

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