

Increasing Accountability in Education in Paraná State, Brazil

Introduction

Education decentralization offers schools the potential to respond more effectively to parents and communities. Whether decentralization efforts realize this potential depends on parents' information about school performance and the mechanisms available to express opinions to responsible decision makers. Brazil's 1988 Constitution assigns responsibility for primary school finance and education delivery to municipalities and assigns responsibility for secondary school finance and education delivery to states. State governments also oversee such responsibilities as establishment of policies to ensure primary education quality and equality.

From 1999 to 2002, Paraná State's new, energetic State Secretary of Education, Alcyone Vasconcelos Saliba, initiated an important education decentralization experiment. Paraná created school report cards (SRCs) to inform school communities and stimulate greater involvement in the school improvement process. At the same time, Paraná encouraged the creation of new education stakeholder associations to increase community voice at the state policymaking level and to break the state government and teachers' union monopoly of the education policy debate.

Paraná State, Brazil

Paraná is a state of 9.5 million inhabitants, located in southern Brazil. Relative to the country as a whole, the population of Paraná has above-average income and education. Still, about one-third of children leave primary school without mastering the basics of reading and writing. Basic education is divided into two cycles: primary first through fourth grade and secondary fifth through eleventh grade. Primary education is the responsibility of municipal governments, while the state government is responsible for directly delivering secondary education. At the secondary level, 1.5 million students are enrolled in 2,000 schools with a staff of 70,000 and a budget of about US\$500 million. The state's secretary of education, who is appointed by the state governor, is directly responsible for the management of the secondary schools. In practice, the secretary's priorities are to placate the powerful teachers' union and avoid politically costly strikes, satisfy the demands of legislators and other politicians, gain appointments for supporters as school directors or directors of regional education offices, and manage the politics of new school construction.

The Problem

Secretary Saliba's first course of action in office was to visit the public secondary schools for which she was responsible by traveling throughout the state, meeting with school principals, teachers, students, and parents. She found an alarming degree of complacency about instructional quality—principals and teachers rarely considered low education quality a serious problem. They also rarely knew much about their own schools, despite the existence of a well-functioning education management information system (EMIS).

Although every school had a parent-teacher association (PTA), parents were by and large ignorant about the quality of instruction in schools. Although Paraná's assessment system tested children at selected grades in every school each year, the results were poorly disseminated. In addition to being uninformed, the Secretary found parents did not feel empowered to hold teachers, principals, or the state accountable for poor education quality.

Secretary Saliba quickly concluded that Paraná's public schools had to improve performance and that quality improvements could not be sustained if schools did not recognize their own problems and if parents did not acknowledge their own responsibilities and potential role. She supported programs to improve classroom instruction and developed a strategy to mobilize passive parents.

The Strategy

The Secretary commenced a single-minded focus on improving learning outcomes. A results-oriented management system focused on learning required everyone—from the secretariat down to schools and parents—to become aware of their performance as measured by Paraná's standardized achievement tests. Brainstorming sessions led to the idea of an SRC information tool, further refined through meetings with school directors, parents, and external consultants.

While more effective dissemination of student achievement shines a light on learning outcomes, it does not itself inspire parents to more actively demand better education. Again, the education secretariat brainstormed, consulted widely, and came up with a proposal, informed in part by the success of handicapped children's parents in influencing public policy at the state level. It was clear that highly motivated and well-organized parents could make a difference.

The secretariat's proposal included two parts. First, it proposed inclusion of the results of a parents' survey in the SRC, increasing their visibility. Second, it proposed creation of parents' councils at the school, region, and state levels to improve influence on policymaking. Parents already had some voice at the school level through their participation in PTAs, but the education secretariat wanted to give them an unstifled voice that would reach all the way to the state. Thus, school-level parents' councils sent representatives to one of 10 regional parents' councils, and each of those regional councils sent two representatives to a consultative group, which also included representatives from the teachers' and principals' associations. Under the proposal, the consultative group would personally meet with Secretary Saliba and her team on a regular basis.

Alcyone Vasconcelos Saliba

In December 1998, the governor of Paraná asked Alcyone Vasconcelos Saliba to assume the post of State Secretary of Education. Saliba, a native of Brasília, was a graduate of the University of Brasília and completed graduate studies in education at the University of Illinois. At the time of the governor's offer, Saliba had been working at The World Bank's Brasilia office. She resigned her position to assume the post of State Education Secretary and, in January 1999, moved to Curitiba, Paraná. She spent four very productive years leading Paraná's education secretariat, concluding her term at the end of 2002. In early 2004, she was invited to discuss Paraná's SRC at The World Bank Conference on Social Sector Decentralization in Washington, D.C. Subsequently, she and Research Triangle Institute Senior Research Economist Donald R. Winkler held extended conversations about her Paraná experience, resulting in this EQUIP2 Policy Brief.

Constructing the School Report Card

The SRC's design required explicit consideration of its target audience of parents and teachers, with a mind for what information to provide, how to convey technically complex information (e.g., criterion-referenced test scores), and what information could be reconciled from multiple databases (e.g., school censuses, achievement tests, parent surveys). Two pieces of information—parents' opinions and fourth and eighth grade test scores—became the SRC's anchors. The secretariat added to those student flow data (e.g., promotion, retention, dropout), school characteristics (e.g., average class size, percentage of teachers with university degrees) from the annual school census, student information (e.g., family social status, opinions about the school) from questionnaires attached to statewide achievement tests, and principals' statements about their own management styles.

Collection of parents’ opinions about their children’s school was the most controversial element of SRC. The survey was not designed to be statistically representative of all parents. Instead, each school’s council invited parents attending its meetings to fill out surveys, which were then sent to the education secretariat. Thus, the results only reflected the views of those parents motivated enough to attend meetings. However, the process empowered the parents’ panels and provided parents an incentive to participate if they wanted their voices heard.

Special attention was paid to the way information was reported. Whenever possible, information on a specific school, such as class size, and student achievement information was compared with the municipal and state averages. Each school’s distribution across performance levels was reported in addition to its average performance. Schools were also reported as performing below, at, or above their expected level, controlling for the students’ socioeconomic profile.

SRC production required a small, dedicated full-time team. The various stages included mapping out and assessing the quality of available datasets, reconciling datasets with different school identifiers, assessing the reliability and validity of background questionnaires, and entering new data from parent surveys.

Dissemination of the School Report Card

SRCs were distributed to schools, PTAs, municipal education authorities, and all 70,000 state education employees, two-thirds of whom are teachers. Overall results were reported in the state education secretariat’s monthly newsletter, used in teacher and PTA workshops, disseminated via press releases and press conferences, and communicated via the parents’ councils, which served the dual function of providing a means for parents to express their views to regional secretariat officials and state-level policymakers and disseminating information on school performance.

Conclusions

While no systematic evaluation has yet been done of the accountability reforms introduced during Secretary Saliba’s tenure, experience to date provides several working hypotheses:

- The accountability reforms—the development of SRC and parents’ councils—represent the first steps toward the difficult task of creating a culture of accountability focused on results.
- The low-stakes nature of accountability reforms made them politically feasible. A high-stakes SRC would have generated fierce opposition from teachers’ unions. The school principals’ perspective that they held the secretariat accountable also contributed to their acceptability.
- An important side-effect of the SRC is that by giving school-level data high visibility, school and parents’ councils became a small army of quality controllers, reporting discrepancies in state and national databases.
- Another important side-effect of the creation of regional and statewide parents’ councils is that the number of actors engaging in policy debates at the state level increased and, more importantly, parents have a prominent voice in those debates for the first time.
- While the principal objective of the accountability reforms was to empower parents and give them the information needed to more effectively engage in public discourse, the SRC also focused teachers and parents on learning outcomes and questioned how they might improve their own schools’ performance.
- The SRC is not a perfect instrument. It does not include information on school budgets or teacher and student absenteeism, usefully monitored in other countries. Some of the information could also be presented graphically or in ways more easily understood by parents. However, improvements can be made on the basis of these experiences.

Postscript

Secretary Saliba left office at the end of 2002. Her replacement did not continue the SRC and, so far, has refused to meet with regional parents' council representatives. However, the SRC idea has taken hold elsewhere. In Brazil, São Paulo has already begun using internally oriented report cards, and Ceara is developing report cards for all municipal services. In India, Karnataka State is considering adopting SRCs. Uganda is also experimenting with the use of report cards for public health clinics.

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