

School Report Cards: Some Recent Experiences

Introduction

Decentralization and an increased emphasis on community and parent participation represent significant education reform trends over the past decade. These reforms take place in the context of increased emphasis within Education for All (EFA) on improving education quality and outcomes and on strengthening accountability for results. They require that substantial information be available to local and regional stakeholders, school officials, and communities in order to increase transparency, establish a basis for accountability, and provide tools for effective management at the local level. Parents, teachers, school officials, and other stakeholders must be able to assess school performance and status.

A number of countries are experimenting with school-level information systems known as 'school report cards' to increase accountability and transparency. These systems have different formats and purposes, ranging from strict accountability systems that measure student performance to participatory diagnostic and management tools that support school managers. Efforts are relatively novel, and substantial evaluation information is not yet available. The purpose of this report is to present the various types of school report cards and information systems currently being used and establish a typology for understanding the range of audiences and purposes for such systems, as well as the continuum of cost and sophistication involved.

Definition

The term report card, in its broadest sense, refers to a report at any level in the education system—from the student report cards familiar to parents in the United States to school-level report cards to national reports such as the Partnership for Education Revitalization in the Americas' (PREAL's) education report cards in Latin America. For the purposes of this brief, discussion will be confined to only reports providing data at the school level, including simple school profiles and the type of school report cards used in the United States under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In order to cast the net more widely, reports providing data at a broader geographic level, such as a district, and contain data for individual schools are considered, as well.

The following table shows the identified report cards. Despite considerable discussion around the idea of school report cards, there are few examples of countries using such methods to disseminate information. The exceptions include the school report card required under the NCLB 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. Note that some of these countries use reports that contain school-



level information. These reporting instruments are each intended for a different audience and may or may not have different purposes. To clarify issues surrounding their use, each report is treated separately.

School Report Cards by Country and Type

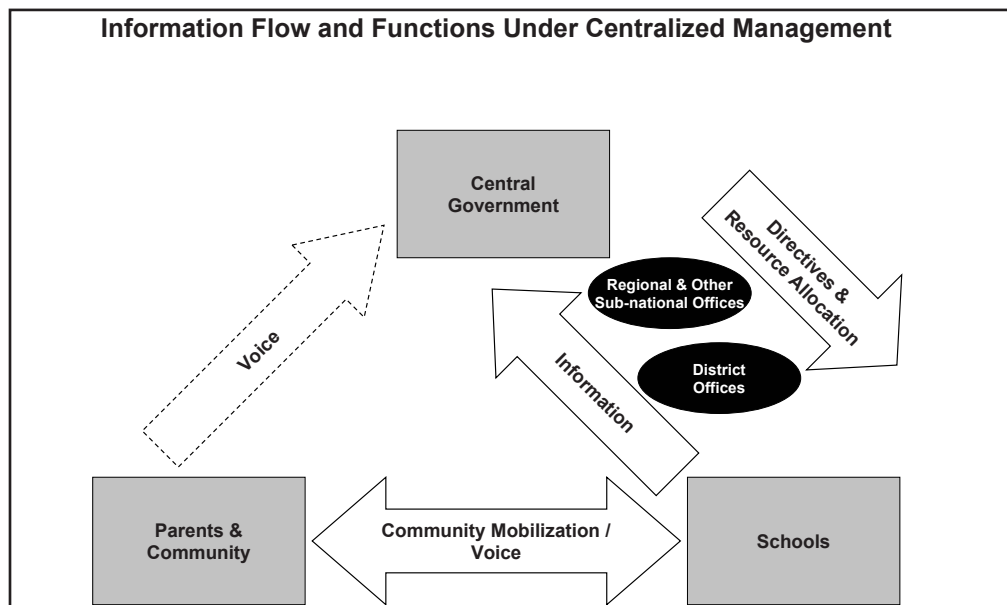
Country or Organization	Report Type
Brazil	Paraná State School Report Card
CERCA	School Report Cards Field Test in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua
Ghana	School Performance Appraisal Meeting (SPAM)
Guinea	School Assessment Worksheet
India	Bangalore Citizen Assessment
Namibia	School Self-Assessment System, The School Report
	School Self-Assessment System, The School Comparative Report
	School Self-Assessment System, The Regional Summary
Nigeria	Fundamental Quality Report
Uganda	School Profiles
UNICEF	Quality School Grid
NCLB	State Report Cards
	School Report Cards
United States	Virginia Standards of Learning Report to State Report Card
	Virginia School Performance Report Card

Purpose and Audience

The purpose and audience for the report card are major determinants of content. These two factors are in turn intimately linked with a school’s level of decentralization or degree of autonomy. Whereas many developing country education systems have been managed centrally, there have been recent efforts to decentralize some or all decision making and financial functions to sub-national levels, according to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Secretariat’s 2004 “Final Research Report on Decentralization of Education Delivery.” The purpose and audience for the school report card, therefore, depends on the education system’s configuration, stage of evolution, support received, and flow of information.

The following diagram illustrates the information and authority relationships in a centralized system. Central governments may deconcentrate their own staff to carry out their regular functions closer to the people they serve but, for all intents and purposes, authority originates at the center. Thus, the diagram shows district and other sub-national education offices through which information and directives pass. Resources, deployment of teachers and administrators, and directives typically emanate from the

central government and flow to the schools. Information about students and schools flows from the school to the central government for the principle purpose of management. There is often little informational feedback to the schools.



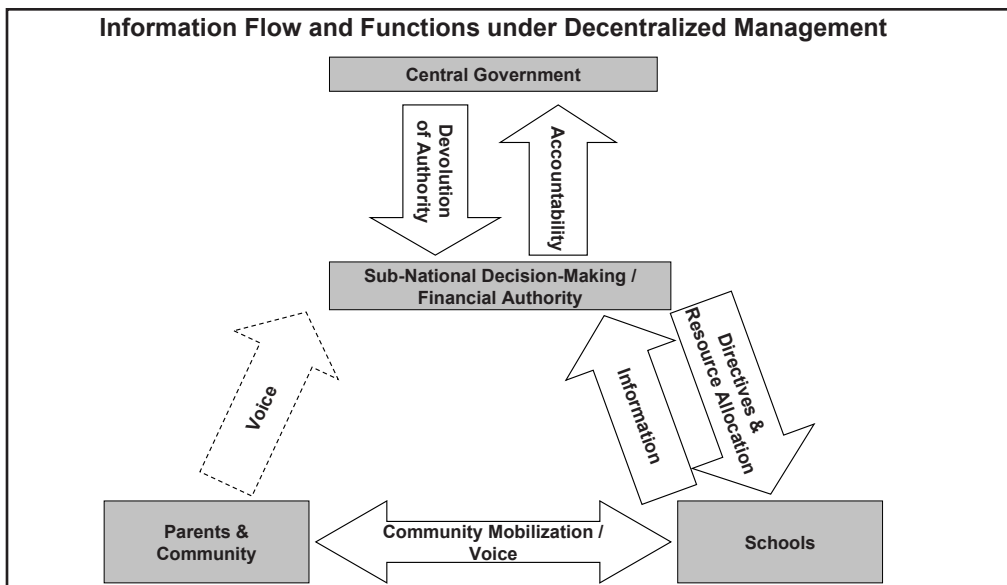
Typically, central decision-makers in this configuration are not directly accountable to the school’s clients—parents and the community. Hence, information from the center often does not flow to this group. In principle, the clients’ voice reaches the central government through some form of political process. However, this linkage is often weak in practice. Thus, the diagram shows this function with a broken line from parents and the community to the central government.

There may be some flow of information between schools and parents or the community, resulting in local mobilization and voice. However, as Winkler and Herstein wrote on the first page of the 2005 EQUIP2 Policy Brief, *Information Use and Decentralized Education*, a “lack of knowledge about school performance causes parents to inaccurately believe or be convinced that performance is adequate and prohibits clients from demanding school improvements from local or national authorities and from holding service providers accountable” in many countries.

Where some form of management and financial authority devolution to the sub-national level has occurred, the relationship between information flows and function may be depicted as in the following diagram. Although this diagram is only one simplistic representation of an education structure and information flows, it illustrates some of the purposes and audiences for which a report card may be designed. Namely, school report cards may become an effective reporting tool for the participatory process that links the allocation of funds and delegation of management authority to accountability requirements. Report cards may also increase basic information sharing and



transparency between and across schools within a school district, resulting in improved management at this level.



Efforts to mobilize communities to provide resources in the form of participation in school management, school construction and improvement, or other volunteer services may use school report cards as a tool for mobilization. In turn, schools may solicit feedback from parents and the community, enhancing their collective voice.

It is important to note that report cards targeting parents and the community are often used by a sub-national or central authority to mobilize involvement at the local level through improved information channels. The requirement that such reports be produced and disseminated may be linked to monetary benefits (i.e., grants) or other legal requirements. Thus, although the report cards carry with them a form of accountability, the audience for whom schools are held accountable is not necessarily the local community. For example, the Virginia Standards of Learning sets minimum pass rates in its core academic areas for the purposes of accreditation. Results are processed and used by the state for its annual accreditation of schools. Additionally, law requires the test results, along with specified indicators, to be provided to parents.

The following table shows the intended audience and purpose of the report cards covered in this paper. A brief description of audience and the function of selected report cards are discussed later.

Purpose and Audience of School Report Cards

Country or Report	Principal Audience	Primary Purpose	Underlying Motivation
Uganda School Profiles	School	Feedback from central level	Central Ministry of Education acknowledgement; Improve information provided by schools
Namibia School Self-Assessment System	School	School management	Promoted by the Minister of Education
UNICEF	School	School management	Unknown
Virginia Standards of Learning School Performance Report Cards	Community	Transparency	State legislated for annual school accreditation
India Bangalore Citizen Assessment	Community	Community voice	Local civics group
CERCA School Report Cards Field Test in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua	Community	Community voice/mobilization	Donor-supported experiment in civic participation
Guinea School Assessment Worksheet	Community	Community voice/mobilization	Decentralization
U.S. No Child Left Behind School Report Card	Community	Community accountability	Legislated to meet eligibility requirements for federal funding
Brazil Paraná State School Report Card	Community	Community accountability and mobilization	Promoted by the State Secretary of Education
Nigeria Fundamental Quality Report	Community and sub-national	Community voice/mobilization and sub-national management	Decentralization
Ghana School Performance Appraisal Meeting (SPAM)	Sub-national education authority	Management	Decentralization
Virginia Standards of Learning Report to State Report Card	Sub-national education authority	Accountability	Standards for state accreditation of schools
U.S. No Child Left Behind State Report Card	Sub-national education authority	Accountability	Legislated to meet eligibility requirements federal funding



Uganda: School Profiles

Uganda's school profiles principally provide a feedback loop to schools. Under the centralized management of education system typical in most African countries, schools are required to provide school level data to the central ministry every year, where it is processed and analyzed for policymaking and decision making. In the past, this flow of information has been one-way. As part of Uganda's effort over the past five years to overhaul its education management information system (EMIS), the central ministry provides feedback to the schools in the form of school profiles generated from data provided by the schools. These reports have been extremely well received by headmasters over the last several years and used so-called 'official reports' on their schools. These profiles have helped to give headmasters voice with parent-teacher associations, elected officials, and visitors.

Namibia: School Self-Assessment System

Namibia's school self-assessment system has multiple audiences, from the school and community to the regional education offices. The audience for the school report card is the school management team comprised of teachers, parents, and supervisors. The report card encourages collaboration and develops and sustains "schools with norms of continuous improvement," according to Gillies on the second page of the 2004 EQUIP2 Policy Brief, *Strengthening Accountability and Participation: School Self-Assessment in Namibia*. Findings from the school assessment are summarized at the circuit and regional levels and used as a diagnostic tool for management at these levels.

Ghana: School Performance Appraisal Meeting (SPAM)

Ghana's SPAM brings together major stakeholders at various levels in the delivery of quality education. The meetings are organized to discuss results of nation-wide assessments of Math and English as well as tests of literacy and numeracy. Problems affecting the delivery of quality education are collectively analyzed, strategies to address them are identified, and realistic targets are set to improve school performance for the next academic year.

Brazil: Paraná State School Report Card

Brazil's school report card was used in the Brazilian state of Paraná during Alcyone Vasconcelos Saliba's term as State Secretary of Education, 1999-2002. According to Winkler's 2005 EQUIP2 Policy Brief, *Increasing Accountability in Education in Paraná State*, its primary purpose was to mobilize communities around school issues by stimulating parental involvement and citizen demand for school performance. The provision of information was expected to promote transparency and accountability at all levels: school, community, region, and nation. The effort was terminated shortly after Ms. Vasconcelos's departure from office.

India: Bangalore Citizen Report Card

In Bangalore, India, three report cards assessed community satisfaction with an array of public services, including schools, over a period of 10 years. The information came from surveys conducted by a market research group and financed by local donations. The

first report card gave very low ratings to all major services within the city. The second report card showed partial improvement in some services. The third showed substantial improvement for almost all of the service providers. The improvement in services is attributed to the report cards and the “public glare and media publicity they created,” according to Paul on page three of the 2005 World Bank Public Affairs Centre paper, “Citizen Report Cards: A Case Study,” as well as the political support and commitment of the state’s chief minister.

United States: NCLB School, District, and State Report Cards

The NCLB legislation mandated the production and distribution of reports, including individual reports cards for each of a district’s schools, as well as a state report card that incorporates data from district and school levels, also disaggregated by student type. The primary purpose of these report cards is enhanced public accountability. “No Child Left Behind provides both a legal and a technical requirement for the collection and dissemination of performance information. Not only is accountability enhanced through disclosure and dialogue on improving education, but these powerful reporting tools have the force of law,” according to page one of the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory’s 2002 Topical Summary, “School, District, and State Report Cards: Living Documents for Public Discourse.”

Nigeria: Kano State School Report Card and Data Management System

In Kano state in Nigeria, multidimensional reports are generated targeting different issues and different users, as designed by the end-users themselves, according to Winkler and Herstein in the 2005 EQUIP2 Policy Brief, *Information Use and Decentralized Education*. School communities receive school report cards that show basic information about their schools in easily assimilated graphic format that shows school indicators with comparisons to the local government areas and the state. Not only are reports provided in paper format, but education information is provided to the general public via radio shows that not only discuss the measures and implications of various indicators, but also inform stakeholders about the availability of information from the EMIS.

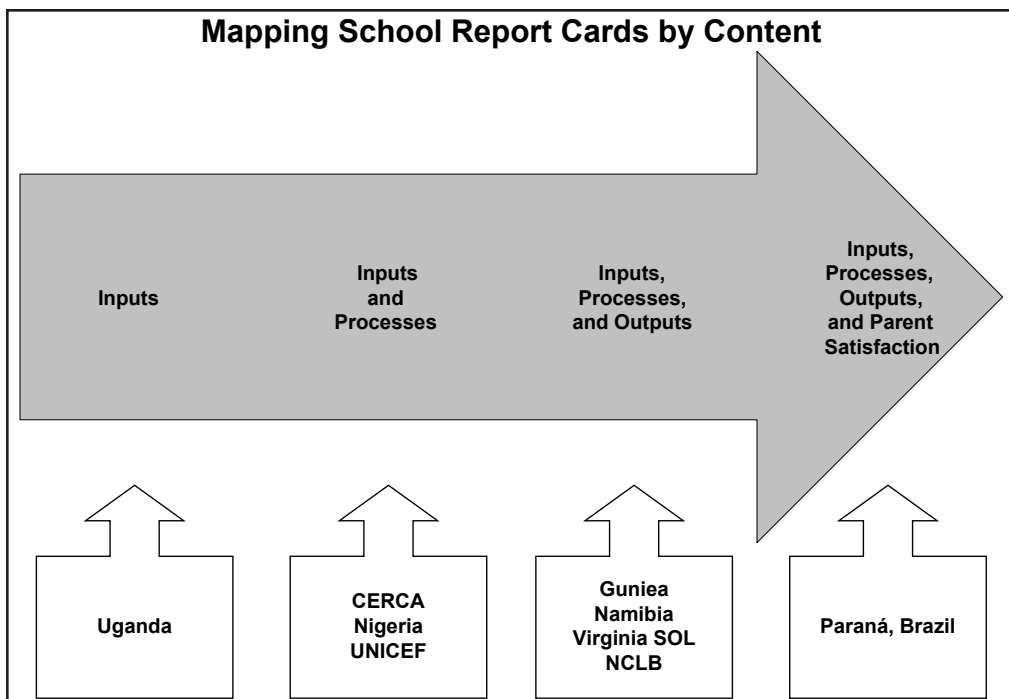
Analytic Content and Data Sources

The content of report cards varies considerably from country to country and is best represented along a continuum. At the lower end of this continuum, the report card includes basic school inputs: the number of students, teachers, textbooks, classrooms, and expenditures. At the next level are measures of efficiency and the inclusion of processes: repetition and dropout rates, the presence of school calendars, parental and community involvement, and school safety. Data on educational outputs comprise a third level along the continuum and include promotion and graduation rates or test scores. Finally, school report cards may also contain information about student and parental satisfaction with the school—effectively, a user satisfaction index.

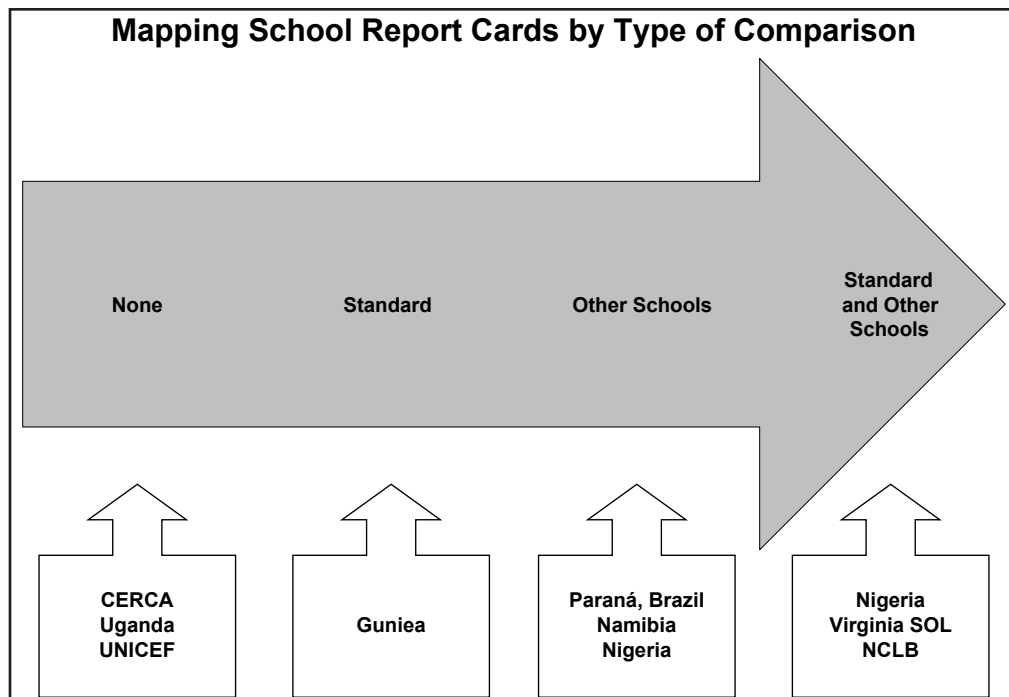
Analytical sophistication also varies widely. At the lower end of the spectrum, such reports provide data about an individual school with no normative or standards-based comparisons. In the middle of the spectrum, schools may be measured against past



performance, an internally or externally set standard, or other schools—those in close proximity and/or those falling within the same sub-national level. More than one kind of comparison is made at the highest end of the spectrum, depending on the indicator and intent of the report. For example, where a school, community, or district is concerned about the allocation of resources, a normative comparison of such resources with neighboring schools and across a district may be most useful. Where a school is interested in improving student performance, a comparison against past performance may be most appropriate. Where high stakes accountability is an issue, a comparison against a criterion-based standard is generally used, either explicitly in the report or implicitly through guidelines or mandates.



The following diagram shows the location of report cards on these continuums. In theory, the choice of comparison depends on the question being addressed. In practice, the capacity of the education system to collect, process, and analyze data may limit such comparisons. In particular, the comparison of indicators across schools requires a stable, rigorous, and partially centralized management information system.



The following table shows the data sources and the types of processes used to produce the reports. In the UNICEF model, for example, participants from a local intervention group complete a worksheet concerning perceived adequacy of a number of inputs and processes and compile the results; this type of report card has the lowest cost. In Guinea and Namibia, existing data collected by schools were used to produce the report. Additionally, a thoughtful self-assessment process involving teachers, principals, and parents provided a venue for articulating strengths and weakness as well as strategies for improvement. This bottom-up style of report card may be all that is feasible in countries lacking an EMIS that can produce accurate, stable, timely data.



Data Sources and Processes for Report Cards

Process	Country	Data Sources
Bottom-Up	CERCA: School Report Cards field tested in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua	Routinely collected school-level data, results from participatory meeting
	Guinea: School Assessment Worksheet	Routinely collected school-level data, results from participatory meeting
	India: Bangalore Citizen Assessment	Parent and community survey results
	Namibia: School Self-Assessment System	Routinely collected school-level data, results from participatory meeting
	UNICEF: Quality School Grid	Routinely collected school-level data, results from participatory meeting
Top-Down	Brazil: Paraná State School Report Card	Test results, education administrative data system, contractor-collected survey results
	Ghana: School Performance Appraisal Meeting	Standardized testing system
	Nigeria: Fundamental Quality Report	Education administrative data system
	Uganda: School Profiles	Education administrative data system
	United States: No Child Left Behind	Education administrative data system, standardized testing system
	Virginia Standards of Learning	Standardized testing system

Report cards that take advantage of existing information systems, as found in the United States and Paraná State in Brazil, are at the other end of the spectrum. Those in the United States have evolved out of the general management information environment as schools have come to rely on their districts to capture, process, and report on their indicators. The advent of standardized testing and its increased acceptance at the state level made mandating the school report card under NCLB possible with minimal additional resource requirements. In Paraná, a state-level EMIS already existed in addition to a standardized national testing system. Additional information about parental opinion was collected at parent council meetings and processed by the State Education Secretariat.

Report Card Effectiveness: Initial Thoughts

Anecdotal information on the effectiveness of school report cards is available for some of the examples in this paper, as follows:

Uganda: School Profiles

The dissemination of Uganda’s school profiles back to schools was initially intended to show the schools what the central government knew about them. It was simply a feedback loop, reaffirming the actual impact of the central government. As with many African countries, the central government managed the education system and information historically only flowed in one direction. Schools were wholly

unaccustomed to receiving information in return. This acknowledgement from the center and from 56 districts has become increasingly important to altering the schools' and communities' mindset towards both access to information and its potential utility. Gradual increase in accuracy of reporting and more frequent information updates are intended side effect of such public dissemination of school profiles and their distribution to visiting donors.

Namibia: School Self-Assessment System

Namibia's self assessment system appears to have succeeded in mobilizing parents, communities, and schools to participate in the work and management of their schools. This goal was achieved with support from the circuit support teams who facilitated the development of school improvement plans and provided teacher training.

CERCA: Pilot Test of School Report Cards

The school report cards pilot test intended to develop local knowledge and promote options for community engagement and action in education. Like in many developing countries, the local community knew little about the status of schools and much less about how parents might participate in their children's learning.

The school report card process generated a great deal of interest. An average of 300 individuals per school participated in the community dialogue session. Participants gave overwhelmingly positive feedback, describing the dialogue activity as highly successful in empowering local community members to collect and analyze school-related data. In just two months, analysis groups were formed, a number of action strategies were proposed in each community, and data were collected, analyzed, and presented to the local community. Parent-teacher dialogues produced strategies for parents who had not realized that they could participate in their children's learning, even if they could not read or write.

Brazil: Paraná State School Report Card

Efforts in Paraná to improve the quality of education were led by State Secretary of Education Vasconcelos Saliba, who focused on community mobilization to promote local accountability and involvement. She used a three-pronged strategy of:

- Giving parents greater influence with education policymakers through creation of Parent Councils at the school, region, and state level;
- Producing and disseminating school report cards to parents; and
- Giving greater visibility to parents' opinions by including the results of a parent survey in the school report card.

The creation of the Parent Councils increased the number of stakeholders engaging in policy debates at the state level and, most importantly, gave parents a prominent voice in those debates for the first time. The school report card focused teachers' and parents' attention on learning outcomes and questioning how they might improve their own school's performance.



Secretary Saliba left office at the end of 2002. Her replacement has not continued the production and dissemination of school report cards and, so far, has not met with representatives of the regional Parent Councils.

United States: NCLB School, District, and State Report Cards

School report cards have been in existence in one form or another in parts of the United States for up to 15 years. NCLB legislation has raised the stakes for their production and dissemination, even if report cards were already the norm in most public schools systems. According to a recent report on United States school, district, and state report cards, fewer than one-third of parents and a little more than half of teachers polled had ever seen a school report card, according to the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory's 2002 Topical Summary on "School, District, and State Report Cards: Living Documents for Public Discourse."

Anecdotal evidence and an increasing number of academic research papers suggest that the school report cards raise public awareness and civic involvement when schools fall into one of the several so-called 'watch list' categories. This happens not as a result of the report card, per se, but because the status of such schools is made public. This publicity, coupled with a new legal framework, creates a new level of attention to performance and a focus on sub-school level outputs.

Nigeria: Kano State School Report Card and Data Management System

School report cards in Kano, Nigeria have been an effective tool for rationing scarce resources by providing information at the district and school level of resources across all schools in the local government areas and the state. Information is now being used by stakeholders to insure transparency in system management and create accountability between the school and the community and between the central and local governments. The school report card provided a baseline measure upon which system goals and standards will be developed.

Lessons Learned: Factors Affecting Sustainability

There are several factors that appear to affect sustainability of school report cards. These include, but are not limited to:

- The capacity of audiences 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.

Efforts to implement a school report card system in most of the cases reviewed here use either a top-down or a bottom-up approach. One interesting exception is the effort in Kano, Nigeria, where the school received objective, quantifiable data from districts that were used together with school-specific information to promote local school management. If the intent of the school report card is to strengthen community decision making and/or local accountability, a bottom-up approach is likely to be more

effective. The capacity of the audience to effectively use the information is a constraint recognized in nearly every effort, with the possible exception of the Paraná region of Brazil and the United States. As noted above, countries that have historically relied on the provision of education services through the central government typically lack the mindset to demand, understand, and put to use educational information. This lack of an information culture extends not only to the community but also to the education administrators at sub-national levels of the education system. Therefore, all of the efforts developed in such environments include a large element of training and capacity building for all stakeholders.

Producers of information also require the capacity to present the information in a format that is understandable to its audience. The CERCA pilot study found that the most useful information was presented in very simple formats that generated in-depth discussion. Whether presented as tables, graphs, or illustrations, a limited number of items that made clear the status of the school in a given area were most successful in generating discussion and action proposals. This same concept applies to the United States experience. A recent report in the United States advocates for clear, easy-to-read report cards with graphs, charts, and guidelines for interpreting data.

Two major weaknesses of the bottom-up approach are the level of resources and technical capacity to produce and disseminate the reports and the lack of objective, comparative data from other schools in the area. The last table indicated the process for the production of school report cards. Those involving a top-down process typically developed where there already existed systems for collecting and processing quantifiable indicators, in particular where standardized assessment systems were already developed or being developed. Where the report card emanates from a bottom-up strategy, data tends to be simplistic, with little opportunity for comparison with other schools, either in terms of resources or performance. Performance data and cross-school comparisons are strong motivators for communities and school management committees.

A third factor is political will. Most report cards in this study were either championed by a political figure or necessitated because of political change. The Paraná experience is the most obvious example: the energetic force of the state secretary of education promoted civic involvement in education. Interestingly, one factor that made the effort politically feasible was the low stakes nature of the accountability reforms—a high stakes report card would have generated fierce opposition from the teachers union. This may also explain why the effort was not pursued under the new administration.

In the CERCA test pilot, school directors were identified as key element in the success of the school report card process where the high level of participation and ownership taken by them in the pretest was directly responsible for the success of the effort. In the United States, both state and federal legislation mandates report cards' production and dissemination to the community, districts, and the state for the purposes of accountability and transparency.



Political change was the other major impetus for the implementation of a report card system. Countries undergoing decentralization require information about their schools at the sub-national level. As decentralization places more responsibility in the hands of lower units of government, hence closer to the actual outcome, parents begin to realize they need information and that they can actually affect changes in their children's schools. One response to this devolution/deconcentration or decentralization of responsibility and authority has been the implementation of a school-level reporting system.

Whether the benefits of implementing a school report card system outweigh its costs remains unclear. There is little quantitative or qualitative information about the extent of community participation and ownership or the extent to which the school reports factored directly in the decision-making process at the sub-national level. In addition, more information is required about the cost of training and capacity building in order to use the information at the school, community, and sub-national levels. Initial work is just now being done to understand the costs of producing and disseminating sufficient reports to meet rising parental demand.

Conclusions

The intention of this paper is to describe the emerging landscape of existing school report cards—their audiences, purposes, and analytical content—as well as very preliminary findings concerning their effectiveness and lessons learned, where available. The most frequently cited audience for school report cards was the community either within or independent of a school management committee. Sub-national education offices comprised a second common audience for the report cards. The purposes of the reports ranged from feedback from the central government to school management to community mobilization to accountability.

The content of the reports cards and level of analytical sophistication were extremely varied. At their simplest, report cards noted school inputs with no analytical comparisons. At their most complex, report cards presented inputs, processes, and outputs with multiple kinds of comparisons.

Although there is some evidence of school report cards' effectiveness, considerably more research is required. Examples of success have been found in Namibia, the CERCA pilot study, and Uganda. The experience in Paraná has been much publicized and lauded; the sustainability of this ambitious effort creates considerable concern. In effect, 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 capacity building of the stakeholders in their use of 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.

However, it is clear that the worldwide drive for decentralization of responsibility in all facets of public service coupled with the drive for democracy—one of the great information demanders of all political systems—will increase the demand for accountability, transparency, and clarity of outcomes. Report cards will surely play a definitive role in this evolution.

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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
Web: www.equip123.net

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