

Reporting Results



WHAT THE PUBLIC WANTS TO KNOW

A companion report to *Education Week's Quality Counts '99*

by A-Plus Communications

What We Did

In partnership with *Education Week* and two public opinion research firms, A-Plus Communications set out to learn what parents, taxpayers and educators feel they need to know about schools in order to hold them accountable for making improvements. We asked two basic questions: What information do people want to know? And how do they want that information presented?

Education Week collected the reports that states and districts now provide, and together we culled a sample of reports to test with citizens.

Belden, Russonello & Stewart conducted four small focus groups — two in Baltimore, Md., and two in Austin, Texas. One group in each city consisted exclusively of parents, the other exclusively of taxpayers who did not have children or did not have children of school age. Each group included about 10 people.

Research/Strategy/Management then conducted three community focus groups in Charlotte, N.C.; Colorado Springs, Colo.; and Worcester, Mass., with parents, taxpayers and educators (teachers, counselors and principals). These community groups were much larger — between 79 and 97 people — and all participants were given an electronic dial to signal their reactions to our presentation. This

technology allowed us to tabulate their responses instantly.

In each location, we offered participants a variety of perspectives on accountability and showed them multiple accountability reports, including an “ideal” prototype we developed for this project. Participants in all seven groups were selected carefully to provide an appropriate demographic mix, and all of them were paid for their time.

Our work was qualitative research. The findings provide considerable insight into how key audiences feel about accountability reports. The community focus groups generated a rich array of data as our 260 participants responded to specific questions or rated what they saw. But we cannot claim that these data, unlike a national survey, would turn out exactly the same with a much larger sample that is representative of the nation; however, a new poll by Public Agenda, also conducted as part of *Education Week's Quality Counts* project, asks several similar questions and finds almost identical responses.

We offer the research for its insights and not as the definitive predictor of all Americans' views on accountability.

Using This Research

Reporting Results is a companion piece to the 1999 issue of *Quality Counts*, published by *Education Week*. Several other project materials also are available:

- An electronic guidebook for preparing accountability reports. This guide offers additional advice to policymakers, educators, newspaper editors and others who develop school accountability reports. Free.
- A complete research report produced by the two public opinion firms that conducted the focus groups — Belden, Russonello & Stewart of Washington, D.C., and Research/Strategy/Management of Rockville, Md. \$15.
- A short video of highlights from the small focus groups and larger community groups. \$15.
- The “prototype” accountability report shown to participants in the larger community focus groups. Free.

Information about all of these materials may be found on the World Wide Web at www.edweek.org or www.aplus-communications.com. To order any of these materials, call A-Plus Communications at (703) 524-7325 or e-mail Adam Kernan-Schloss at adam@ksagroup.com.

OVERVIEW



Pushed by a political process demanding accountability for better schools, states and school districts are reporting an unprecedented amount of information to the public.

And parents and taxpayers are saying, “What is this stuff?”

These accountability reports range in length from a page or two of numbers to dense reports of 12 pages or more. The content varies, too. Virtually all reports feature basic demographic data about students. Most include student test results. Some attempt more sophisticated comparisons of schools, such as comparing only schools that have similar student populations. But few of these reports contain what the public wants to know, and few actually are getting through to parents and taxpayers.

As *Education Week* wrote in the 1999 edition of *Quality Counts*, “Despite the tens of thousands of dollars states spend on school report cards, it’s often hard to tell who the primary audience is or what purpose they were designed to serve. And there’s been little research on their content, format or usefulness.”

Parents and taxpayers are saying, “What is this stuff?”



A Golden Opportunity

Our goal in working with *Education Week* was to provide some of that research. Educators often complain that the public doesn't understand how schools really are doing and that parents and taxpayers get a distorted view from the media, which generally concentrates on bad news. Report cards on schools represent an opportunity for educators to communicate directly with people about how schools are performing.

Just as report cards for students tend to grab the attention of parents, report cards for schools have an audience that is ready to listen. Poll after poll shows that improving education is the public's top priority. Accountability reports that

document these improvements provide education leaders with a magic moment to communicate with their community. The challenge is to take advantage of the moment.



This new research offers solutions to both educators and policymakers — governors, legislators, mayors and board members — who are pushing schools to report more data. Policymakers are investing a lot of time, resources and political capital in new standards, new tests and new accountability systems. Our message: Protect that investment by making sure the accountability reports are done well, that they provide parents and taxpayers with the information they want, in clear language and easy-to-read formats.

Key Research Findings

- People want performance data, such as test scores or promotion rates. But they also want a more detailed picture of what is happening inside our schools, such as indicators about safety and the qualifications of teachers (section 1, page 4).
- Parents and taxpayers want to see how their schools and students compare to other schools and students within the district and state, as well as to a fixed standard. But the public is uncomfort-

able with too much reliance on test scores (section 2, page 7).

- The public prefers that these accountability reports be short and well designed. But the public, parents particularly, also wants access to more detailed information (section 3, page 9).
- There is considerable dissonance between what is included in many current school and district report cards and what parents and taxpayers actually want to know for holding schools accountable (section 4, page 13).

COMMUNITY CHOICES:

Comparisons to Standards or Other Students

Which do you think is more important, knowing how a child is doing against a set standard or knowing how a child is doing relative to other children?

	Set Standard	Other Children
Parents	45%	41%
Taxpayers	41%	43%
Educators	31%	47%

On a 0 to 10 scale, do you think it is a good idea to do both?

Parents	8.1
Taxpayers	7.6
Educators	7.3

The public wants performance data and comparisons.



While test scores and other quantitative measures such as graduation rates are very important to the public, they are not the only indicators that parents and taxpayers want to see on a report card. Indeed, in the small focus groups, test scores did not even come up in initial discussions of what people wanted to know.

As the full research report put it: “Parents and taxpayers are looking for a range of measures that will paint a picture for them of schools where there are caring teachers and enthusiastic students and where learning is taking place.”

Safety First

We tested a list of 21 items that the public might use in holding schools accountable. We developed this list after looking at the range of existing reports and listening to parents and taxpayers in our small focus groups. Then, participants in the larger community groups prioritized the list, rating each item on a scale of 0 to 10 (figure 1, page 6).

Parents, taxpayers and educators alike said safety is the top issue, but they



differ on how to measure it. Indeed, indicators are likely to vary within the same region. For example, in one of the small focus groups in Baltimore, Md., one suburban mother said, “I don’t want my child to go to a school that has a metal detector in the front door.” But another mother who lives in the city said, “I would want my kids to be in a school with a metal detector. I’d feel a little safer because of the way things are now.”

Teacher Qualifications

People believe that having quality teachers is a critical factor in the success of schools and students, and they want information about a school’s teachers, such as average number of years of experience, certification status and whether they are trained to teach what they are teaching. A smaller number of people also would prefer that teachers be tested regularly.

Safety and teacher qualifications clearly rate high with the public but so does the desire for information about academic performance, which the public says includes more than just test scores. Whenever the large community groups heard about performance, they responded very favorably. And when par-

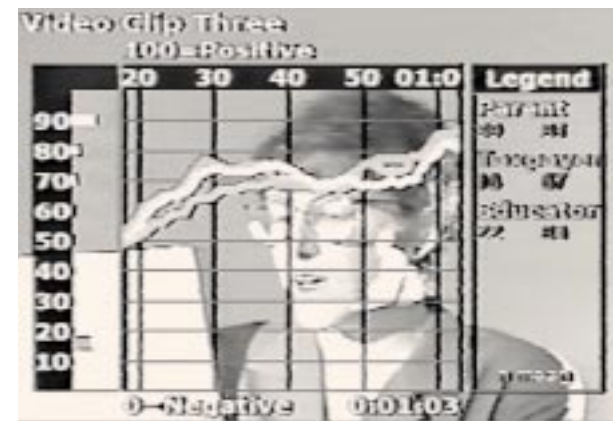
ticipants were shown the prototype report card, the performance section generated the highest ratings; it included indicators such as test scores, attendance rates and promotion rates.

Performance Indicators

Some performance indicators — graduation rates, dropout rates and test scores — seem to be more popular than others, such as student grades or the percentage of graduates attending four-year colleges.

Although demographic data about students (race, primary language, the percentage receiving free- or reduced-price lunch) are a prominent staple on almost all report cards, they were ranked lowest by all three groups in our research. Many educators and researchers say that such information provides an important context for judging student performance — that an impoverished student likely will have a harder time reaching high standards than an upper-middle-class student, for example.

But many members of the public see this “context setting” either as an excuse for lower performance or as an inappropriate label for schools and students.



“Who cares about this demographic information?” asked one Austin, Texas, father.

“Who cares about this demographic information?” asked one Austin, Texas, father. “It shouldn’t even be in here.”

When demographic data were presented in the Colorado Springs, Colo., community focus group, for example, there was a visceral and negative reaction in the room that went even beyond the negative responses that participants signaled with their electronic dial pads.

Generally, parents, taxpayers and educators concurred in their relative rankings of the accountability indicators, although educators found performance indicators to be less important than either parents or taxpayers did. And educators gave higher rankings to indicators that reported “inputs” — such as per-pupil spending and student demographics.

As the researchers put it: “Parents and taxpayers want the students to be safe and have qualified teachers. After these basic conditions are met, they want performance. Educators, on the other hand, extend the environmental concerns beyond safety and qualified teachers to how much is being spent on the pupils and on them. Performance, especially test scores, is less important.”

This chart shows how parents, taxpayers and educators rated 21 possible indicators that could be reported to hold schools accountable. They rated these indicators on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 being most important. The indicators are arranged according to what parents say is most important (top) to least important (bottom).

FIGURE 1

Scale of 0–10

CATEGORY	PARENTS	TAXPAYERS	EDUCATORS
School safety	9.6	9.4	9.3
Teacher qualifications	9.3	9.2	8.3
Class size	8.9	7.9	8.8
Graduation rates	8.7	8.2	8.3
Dropout rates	8.3	8.1	7.4
Statewide test scores	8.2	8.0	7.1
Parental satisfaction survey data	8.1	8.0	7.0
SAT/ACT scores	8.1	7.9	6.9
% of students promoted to next grade	8.0	8.1	7.0
Course offerings	7.8	7.9	7.3
Attendance rates	7.8	8.0	7.6
Per-pupil spending	7.6	7.6	8.0
Student satisfaction survey data	7.5	7.0	7.1
Teacher salaries	7.3	7.8	7.6
Hours of homework per week	7.2	7.3	6.3
Number of students	7.2	7.2	6.7
Percent of students who go on to a four-year college	7.0	6.9	6.8
Percent of students with an “A” or “B” average	7.0	6.5	5.8
Number of students per computer	6.9	6.4	6.1
Percent of parents who attend parent-teacher conferences	6.4	6.6	6.3
Demographics of students	4.5	4.6	5.0

“I have questions about what the tests actually measure,” said one Maryland taxpayer. “What have the kids learned beyond checking the box on one test?”

2: REPORTING TEST SCORES



Many state and district accountability systems rely heavily on the results of some form of standardized test. They may be overdoing it. While the public wants performance data, they're uncomfortable with relying solely on tests.

Only about a third of parents and a quarter of educators thought that it makes sense to use test scores as the main measure to hold schools accountable. And even that low level of support decreased significantly after participants in the large community groups heard arguments for and against relying on tests.

In addition, about a third of parents in the large groups felt that schools were spending too much time "teaching to the test," while only about one in 10 thought schools were spending about the right amount of time doing so.

Comparisons Are Essential

The public demands reports that make comparisons among schools, although educators are considerably less comfortable with such comparisons. Parents and taxpayers want to know how

"We need comparisons because children will be competing against each other when they reach college, so you have to get some sort of accountability between the different districts and different schools."

– Baltimore, Md., taxpayer



COMMUNITY CHOICES:

Reliance on Tests?

Does it make sense to rely on test scores as the main accountability measure?

Percentage saying yes:

Parents	36%
Taxpayers	50%
Educators	25%

“their” school compares to others within the district and the state.

A few states compare only “similar” schools, those with common characteristics such as size and percentage of poor children. In our smaller focus groups, parents and taxpayers were not enthusiastic about this kind of measure. As one Texas father said: “A kid graduates from school. Is he just going to be competing against kids who went to similar-sized schools? No, he’s going to be competing against everyone in the state or nation.”

In the larger community groups, parents were split on the question of comparing similar schools, taxpayers opposed the idea and educators strongly favored it.

Standards and Norms

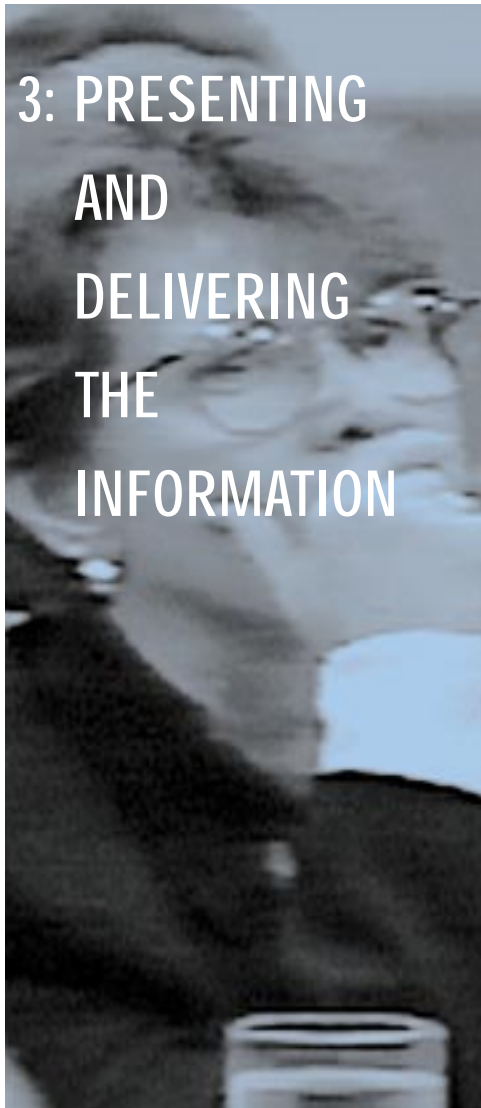
The public also divides fairly evenly over the relative importance of measuring students against one another or against a fixed standard. Parents, taxpayers and, to a lesser degree, educators would prefer both — comparing students to a standard as well as to other students. This is what some states, such as Delaware, are beginning to do with new hybrid tests.

We learned that people want student performance information that includes trend data over several years, not just a single-year snapshot.

In the larger community groups, participants were asked how they would feel about testing students in the fall and comparing the results to tests that the same students would take the following spring, rather than the more typical comparisons among different groups of students (last year’s fourth-graders vs. this year’s, for example). Very strong majorities of the participants preferred the fall/spring testing of the same students, and those majorities stayed strong even after participants were told that this kind of testing would cost more.

Several states have begun assigning labels (e.g., “exemplary,” “adequate” or “low performing”) to schools based on academic performance. By significant margins, participants in our large community groups did not like these labels. If schools were to get such an overall score, parents and taxpayers would strongly prefer assigning letter grades such as “A,” “B” or “F” as an alternative. Educators were strongly opposed to the use of either labels or grades.

3: PRESENTING AND DELIVERING THE INFORMATION



The research provides a generic recipe for accountability reports, although each state and community will need to adjust that recipe for its own report cards.

According to the full research report, “It appears that the essential ingredients for a report card to be well received are: how students are performing, what they are doing, whether they are safe and how the money is being spent.”

These elements can be presented in a variety of ways. We used a mix of good existing reports and the conversations in the small focus groups to design a prototype that presents these elements clearly and concisely (see pages 10–11).

People prefer short reports that are easy to understand. For example, we showed participants a short report used in Connecticut and a much longer report used in New York. Participants in the small focus groups preferred the shorter reports. Participants in the large community groups responded favorably to the New York report’s various ele-

ments, such as test data, school comparisons and sample test questions. But when they learned of its 11-page length, support dropped significantly.

We also tested what we call an “onion-peel” strategy of providing a short, clear report to everyone and offering more detailed reports to those who want more information; this gives the right amount of information to everyone. Overwhelming majorities preferred this solution.

The investment in graphic design pays dividends; people are more likely to read a report that’s attractive and well organized. People also would prefer the use of color, but the majorities that would prefer color are smaller than those who want good design.

People also said they appreciated the short narrative explanations that accompanied the data in most sections; they said this information provided helpful context.



Reactions to Prototype Accountability Report

We developed the prototype report card to the right based on comments from the small focus groups. It was designed to condense a significant amount of information into a simple format. There are no pictures or complicated charts, the art is readily available clip art, and there is plenty of white space and clear type.

We tested all six sections of the prototype for a fictitious “Jefferson Elementary School” in the larger focus groups. We asked participants to rate them as we presented each section. After each section was presented, participants also rated each section on a 0 to 10 scale.

The following pages show how people reacted to each section. As a

whole, the prototype was well received, with ratings of 8.1 from parents, 8.0 from taxpayers and 7.8 from educators (on a scale from 0 to 10). These figures along with the open-ended responses during the presentation led the research team to conclude that the essential ingredients are performance, spending, time and environment.

In addition, participants received a printed copy of the prototype to take home, and 73 of them sent back a comment form on which they again used a 0 to 10 scale. Their responses also were quite positive; they found the prototype useful (8.4), clear (8.3) and sufficiently detailed (7.4). Many of them wrote that the one element they might not include was the demographic information on the number of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.



COMMUNITY CHOICES:

Short Report With More Available?

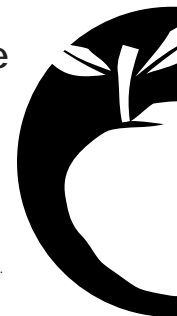
What if you knew that you could get a shorter report but could also get a longer version if you wanted more information? Would this be a good solution or not?

Percentage saying yes:

Parents	80%
Taxpayers	85%
Educators	85%

School Performance Report

Jefferson
Elementary School
1997–98



Our school mission

Higher achievement for all students.

What we look like

Kindergarten–6th grade

Enrollment	Our School	District Average
Students	461	504
Teachers	27	26
Administrator	1	1
Classroom support*	4	4
School support**	6	3

*May include librarians, counselors and reading specialists.
**May include office support, clerical support and cafeteria workers.

Many factors, such as preschool attendance and English language experience, influence school achievement. Measuring these characteristics helps us understand our students' needs.

Percent of students	Our School	District	State
Who attended preschool	34%	46%	69%
With a home language other than English	9%	13%	12%
Who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch	27%	43%	29%

- **What we look like**, which included enrollment and staffing information as well as the number of students who attended preschool or who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Rated the least useful section by parents (6.0), taxpayers (5.7) and educators (6.5).

How we spend our money

Per-pupil spending is only one way to show how we spend our money. Other types of spending, such as the number of students per teacher and the number of computers per student, also are important. Critical spending choices also involve teachers' professional experience. For example, some schools choose to invest more in teachers who bring greater experience and training into the classroom; those teachers generally receive higher salaries.

Important ratios

	Our School	District	State
Number of students per teacher			
Kindergarten	17.3	21.6	19.6
Grade 2	22.0	20.7	20.6
Grade 5	19.3	22.1	21.9

	Our School	District	State
Number of students per counselor or psychologist	419.0	474.0	405.0
Number of students per computer	18.0	30.0	10.0

Professional experience

	Our School	District	State
Teachers' average years of experience	18	17	14
Percent of teachers with a master's degree	68%	72%	80%
Percent of teachers trained as mentors	22%	22%	21%
Number of certified teachers	24	25	NA
Number of trainee teachers	3	1	NA

■ **How we spend our money**, which included ratios of students to teachers at three grade levels, the qualifications of teachers and detailed per-pupil spending. Rated as the third most useful of the six sections by parents (7.8), taxpayers (7.5) and educators (7.4).

■ **How our students perform**, which included results on statewide tests, trend data, and attendance and promotion rates. Rated as the most useful section by parents (8.4), taxpayers (8.3) and educators (8.1). The 1996-98 trend data were especially well received, as were comparisons with the district and state scores.

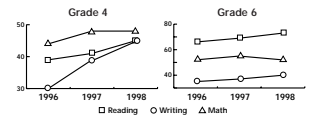
How our students perform

Student performance includes skills measured on the State Mastery Tests, which student in grades 4, 6 and 8 take each fall. These tests measure reading, writing and math skills. Student attendance and promotion rates also indicate student performance.

Percent of students who met goals on State Mastery Tests in 1998

	Our School	District	State
Grade 4			
Reading	45%	34%	48%
Writing	46%	39%	46%
Math	48%	46%	59%
Grade 6			
Reading	73%	56%	60%
Writing	40%	40%	40%
Math	52%	43%	48%

Our students' progress, 1996-98



	Our School	District	State
Student attendance*	97%	96%	96%
Percent of 6th-graders promoted to 7th grade	85%	91%	95%

*Percent of students who missed fewer than eight days in 1997-98

Our focus for improvement

- Increase teacher training in math instruction
- Encourage more students to participate in reading incentive programs
- Encourage more parents to participate in teacher conferences
- Improve the promotion rate for 6th-graders

Our celebrations

- Sylvia Soholt named State Teacher of the Year, 1997-98
- Student performance in reading and writing improved in both grade 4 and grade 6
- All classrooms are using portfolios
- Our students read 2 million pages this year

Keeping you informed

This report provides information about how well your school is doing — where it is succeeding and where there is room for improvement.

While it cannot tell you everything about our performance, the report is a good starting point for discussions with our teachers, administrators and school board members.

For more information about Jefferson Elementary School, call (555) 123-4567. To receive copies of reports from other schools, call (555) 123-4567.

Our school's environment

	Our School	District	State
Safety and discipline			
Number of suspensions per 100 students this year	4.0	4.3	3.8
Number of violent incidents per 100 students this year	0.7	1.1	1.0
Parent involvement			
Percent of students whose parent(s) attended a parent-teacher conference this year	65%	43%	70%
Percent of students whose parent(s) volunteered in our school this year	10%	8%	14%

■ **How we spend our time**, which included the numbers of annual hours of instruction for various subjects and the portion of students who participate in special programs, such as gifted and talented or special education. Rated as the second most useful of the six sections by parents (7.9), taxpayers (7.5) and educators (7.4).

How we spend our time

	Our School	District	State
Estimated hours of instruction per year — Grade 5			
Art & music	72	72	62
Computer education	25	19	22
Health & physical ed	66	65	67
Language arts	357	369	410
Mathematics	180	178	175
Science	120	120	96
Social studies	120	120	102
Percent of students who participate in special programs			
Bilingual/ESL*	2%	3%	5%
Gifted/talented	5%	3%	2%
Special education	15%	15%	14%

*Programs that help students learn English

■ **Our school's environment**, which included data on safety and discipline and on parental involvement. Rated as the fourth most useful of the six sections by parents (7.7), taxpayers (7.5) and educators (7.3).

■ **What we are doing to improve**, which included how the school is focused on improvement, what the school can celebrate and where people can get more information. Rated as the fifth most useful of the six sections by parents (7.0), taxpayers (6.5) and educators (6.7). Discussions in the small groups, however, suggest that people value this kind of "soft data."

Delivering Credible Information

Beyond developing an easy-to-read, relevant accountability report, states and school districts need to do a better job of delivering them to the right people. In many places, it seems, accountability reports are not actually getting to key audiences.

Despite the proliferation of state and school district accountability reports, our research found that the majority of parents and taxpayers have never seen one, and only half of educators say they have seen or received such a report. A new poll by Public Agenda for *Education Week's Quality Counts* project mirrors our qualitative research. Public Agenda found that fewer than one-third (31 percent) of parents and only half (52 percent) of teachers have seen such a report.

It appears that in many communities these reports will have to develop credibility over time. We tested the credibility of possible sources of these reports. An accountability report that came from a nonprofit watchdog group would be by far the most credible. Participants rated the next most credible sources — considerably lower — to be their state education department or the local school district. They rated their local media at the bottom of the scale of credible sources.

COMMUNITY CHOICES:

Received a School Report Card?
Have you actually seen or received such a school report card?

Percentage saying yes:

Parents	39%
Taxpayers	24%
Educators	51%

FIGURE 2

Scale of 0–10

SOURCE	PARENTS	TAXPAYERS	EDUCATORS
Nonprofit watchdog organization	8.0	7.4	6.3
State education department	5.7	6.2	5.5
Local school district	5.5	5.3	6.6
Private, for-profit company	5.4	5.4	5.3
Federal education department	5.0	5.6	4.3
Principal of local school	4.7	4.7	5.8
Chamber of commerce	4.7	4.9	4.3
Local television and radio	4.5	4.8	4.1
Local newspaper	4.1	4.3	3.1



4: CROSS TALK AMONG EDUCATORS AND THE PUBLIC

Over the past several years, Public Agenda and other researchers have issued a number of reports that show how the views of educators are significantly different from those of the public. Our research on accountability amplifies those findings.

As the previous sections discussed, what education leaders and policymakers want to tell the public in these accountability reports is not necessarily what the public wants to know. And what the public wants to know is not necessarily what school districts and state education departments want to provide.

Educators rated the performance of schools to be much higher than did either parents or taxpayers. And they were decidedly more skeptical to begin with about the benefits of these accountability reports.

Motivation and Incentives

Within the community focus groups, about 9 out of 10 taxpayers said they believe that making accountability information widely available motivates teachers to work harder and improve

student performance. This belief was shared by three-quarters of the parents and two-thirds of the educators in the community groups. (Public Agenda found nearly identical numbers in its new poll — 74 percent of parents believe this publicity motivates teachers and principals to work harder, while only 60 percent of teachers feel this way.) Although a majority of educators share the public's view, the important point is the relative difference among the viewpoints.

Similarly, parents and taxpayers, by a margin of two to one, think it is a good idea to tie financial rewards for educators to the academic performance of their students. Educators, on the other hand, think this is a bad idea, by a margin of three to two.

And parents and taxpayers think it is a good idea to overhaul persistently failing schools by replacing teachers and principals. A majority of educators think this is a bad idea. (Again, our numbers were mirrored nearly exactly in Public Agenda's national sample — 62 percent of parents think it is a good idea, while 68 percent of teachers think the idea is a bad one.)

What the public wants to know is not necessarily what school districts and state education departments want to provide.

Student Consequences

Educators, like the public, feel that students will do better if standards are raised; if more is expected of students, they will deliver. But educators are far less likely than parents or taxpayers to believe that students should not be promoted or graduate unless they meet standards or that students should be forced to attend summer school or Saturday classes if standards have not been met.

Understanding these different views is critical for states and school districts in deciding what information to include on accountability reports. This is particularly true if they are producing only one report rather than separate reports for different key audiences.

It is equally important for policy-makers to understand these differences as they design accountability systems that will be implemented by education professionals.

COMMUNITY CHOICES:

Replace Staff at Failing Schools?
Another proposal would overhaul persistently failing schools by replacing the teachers and principals with new staff and keeping them under strict observation. Do you think this is a good idea or a bad idea?

Percentage saying it is a good idea:

Parents	59%
Taxpayers	63%
Educators	31%



5: RECOMMENDATIONS AND RED FLAGS



Accountability reports provide states and school districts with wonderful communications opportunities. But our research with *Education Week* indicates that few states or districts have invested the necessary resources and time to capitalize on these opportunities.

Making accountability reports shorter and easier to read takes time. And it requires focus: Policymakers need to make choices about what will go in the report and what won't.

Creating meaningful, effective reports means putting communications planning at the heart of report planning. Communications planning should begin when the accountability systems themselves are being designed — not at the tail end of the process, when policymakers and education leaders are scrambling to figure out how best to “spin” the results.

That planning needs to include how to make sure accountability reports get in the hands of parents. Neither sending reports home with students nor expecting parents to pick them up at meetings at school is enough. A much better approach is a mix of mailing them directly home, making them easily avail-

able at a wide range of locations in the community, and presenting the information at meetings at school and elsewhere.

Although many states have adopted new, higher academic standards, few have communicated about those standards clearly or persistently enough for them to have sunk in with parents or even with teachers. When new accountability reports begin describing how students are performing relative to the standards, parents and others tend to ask, “What standards?”

One size does not fit all communities. Educators and policymakers would do well to have conversations in their communities about what their publics want to know to hold schools accountable. What counts? As the national research suggests, the public and educators in every community are likely to have different views.

The concept of public engagement is increasingly understood as being essential to improving public schools. One of the most powerful ways that education leaders can engage their many publics is by asking them this question: *What would you need to see to believe schools are improving?*

The question is simple, but it creates a powerful discussion that every community should have.

What would you need to see to believe schools are improving?



Red Flags

Our research suggests at least four areas where policymakers should be cautious:

- **Scholarships.** Many states have created scholarships for students who get “A” or “B” grades. But the research shows that the public does not put much faith in the consistency of these grades — many people believe an “A” in one school or district can be very different from an “A” elsewhere. We would suggest that other states considering such a scholarship policy examine the attitudes of their publics before putting it in place.
- **Setting the Bar.** Some states label every school based on test results. For example, in North Carolina in 1998, approximately two-thirds of elementary and middle schools were given ratings of “exemplary.” We presented this fact to participants in the larger community groups. Parents and taxpayers, by margins exceeding two to one, believed that if two-thirds of schools were reported to be “exemplary,” it would present them with a credibility problem.

- **Demographics.** Most accountability reports include some form of demographic data. But given the negative reactions in this research, we suggest that policymakers and education leaders probe this issue within their own communities before deciding to include student demographics on school accountability reports.
- **Inspiring Action.** Many policymakers and education leaders assume that the public will use the accountability reports to force schools to improve. We’re not sure. In the small focus groups, parents said that even with good information, they feel powerless to insist upon changes. In the large community groups, however, a majority indicated they did feel empowered to make changes. A majority indicated they would use the information to “insist that the system improve” instead of to “choose a different school or neighborhood.” We think additional research is needed in this area. Meanwhile, educators may want to include in school report cards practical suggestions for how the public can use the information.

The question remains whether people will use the information to “insist that the system improve.”

6: LESSONS FOR PREPARING GOOD REPORTS



Based on the research findings, here are 10 lessons to consider:

- Don't assume that anyone has seen school accountability reports.
- Make student performance prominent ...
- ... but report a lot more than test scores, such as data about safety and teacher qualifications.
- Compare schools and students to each other — and to fixed standards.
- Be cautious about the labels assigned to schools.
- Don't overdo demographic data.
- Make reports short and easy to read.
- Help people understand how to use the information.
- Understand that educators and the public sometimes have different priorities.
- Ask people in your own community what counts to them.

We have tried to include the most important findings of the research in this report. We also have prepared a more prescriptive guidebook for creating accountability reports. That guidebook, a video companion to this report and other parts of the research are available through the World Wide Web at www.apluscommunications.com and at www.edweek.org.



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