Empowering Parents and Communities through Quality Public Reporting

Executive Summary

Publicly reporting timely, actionable, and comprehensible data is one of the most powerful ways states can promote transparency, strengthen accountability, and ensure that everyone with a stake in education—parents, educators, policymakers, researchers, and members of the public and press—has access to the information they need to make good decisions. It is also one of the most visible ways states can demonstrate the tremendous value of their data systems. Currently, however, public reporting efforts in most states are geared toward compliance with state and federal laws, rather than being intentionally designed to meet people's needs. Consequently, most publicly reported data go unseen or unused, limiting their ability to promote and support improvements in student achievement and system performance.

Data are powerful tools for informing stakeholder decisions, but they are not likely to be used if they are not presented in actionable formats tailored to specific stakeholder needs. State policymakers must take a leadership role in promoting high-quality public reporting. They can support public reporting as a strategy for improving student performance by taking the following actions:

- ▶ ensuring that publicly reported data are accurate, trustworthy, and safeguarded

- ▶ maintaining coordination across P–20/workforce entities

- ▶ ensuring that publicly reported data meet the information needs of all stakeholders

- ▶ ensuring that information is easy to find, access, and understand

"Public Reporting" Defined

Public reporting makes data available to inform those with a stake in education about public schools and districts. Data can include school enrollment and finance, student performance, teacher effectiveness, and more. Publicly reported data are typically aggregate level[1] but can include individual-level data that have been de-identified[2] to protect privacy. Data can be made available in myriad ways, including through school report cards, kindergarten readiness reports, and high school feedback reports; through public-facing data portals; or as raw data sets. Regardless of their format, publicly reported data never include personally identifiable information (i.e., information that could be used to identify an individual).

1 Aggregate-level data provide information about groups of students without any identifying information.
2 De-identified data provide information about individual students but with identifying information removed.

Introduction

Making education data publicly available is a relatively new concept. Less than 15 years ago, there was no consistency in the information states reported publicly, and some states were not sharing any information with the public. The situation changed, however, in 2002 when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind Act and required every state to publicly report aggregate-level information about schools and districts in the name of accountability. The idea was to be transparent about how every school across the country was performing to ensure that all students were receiving a high-quality education.

For the first time, states were required to make school performance data publicly available and to disaggregate those data by race, ethnicity, income status, and more. Policymakers believed that by shining a light on student achievement across the country and across various demographic groups, states and districts could be held accountable—by both the federal government and the public—for the performance of every student. The idea was that access to publicly available data would promote shared responsibility for the educational growth and development of all students.

Ensuring Transparency

The notion that publicly reporting data can promote accountability and support continuous improvement rests on the assumption that simply making data available ensures transparency of information. True transparency, however, occurs only when accurate data are presented in formats that are easy to access and understand. States have a responsibility to ensure that all stakeholders receive timely, actionable, and comprehensible information about the state's public education system in formats they can easily access, understand, and use to inform their decisions.

When states are transparent and disseminate easily accessible, comprehensible, comparable information about school and district performance, stakeholders can benchmark progress across various demographic groups and at the state, district, and school levels. They then can hold their schools and districts accountable for advancing student performance. They also have the tools to advocate for and support school and district improvement. Most important,

everyone—regardless of where they live—has access to the information they need to answer critical questions about school enrollment, school climate, student performance, teacher quality, and more.

Quality public reporting has value for all stakeholders, allowing them to make informed decisions and take actions appropriate to their roles. (See Appendix B for more information on other organizations doing related work tailored to various audiences.)

Parent Actions

▶ **Make informed decisions about which school is the best fit for their child.** In places where families have choices about where to send their children to school, exploring data about public school options allows parents to make informed decisions about which school is the best fit for their child. Based on school performance, climate, the availability of special programs or services, and other information provided by the state, the best fit might be the neighborhood school, an out-of-boundary public school, a magnet school, a district charter school, or a nonpublic school option.

> **"Quality school data afford parents and families the opportunity to select the ideal learning environment for their children. Complete and factual information empowers parents to become true advocates for their children. Quality school data can renew parents' and families' trust and faith in school systems."**
>
> **—Shaton Berry, Michigan PTA**

▶ **Advocate for students at their child's school and local district.** All families can be empowered with data to advocate for students at their child's school and district. Making data publicly available in truly transparent formats engages parents in supporting school and district success and empowers them to hold school leaders accountable.

Scale and Comparability: The State Role

While some districts have their own longitudinal data systems, which makes publicly reporting data separately in those districts possible, everyone benefits when states provide this service. When states publicly report data for all of their schools and districts, they can ensure that even in districts with limited capacity, everyone with a stake in education has access to critical school performance information. They can also provide statewide comparisons of schools and districts by publishing comparable data for every school. Moreover, they can ensure that highly mobile students—those who frequently move within the state—are captured in reported data. States can do all this without collecting additional data or increasing burden on their districts. In fact, by taking responsibility for producing and disseminating high-quality information across the state, states provide a great service to their districts. However, states do not have to go it alone. Partnering with organizations with a track record of reaching and engaging various stakeholder groups can help states manage the process of getting information into the hands of stakeholders while also building credibility and trust.[1]

1   Loeb, S. & Valant, J. (2013, August 11). *Interim Report for GreatSchools-Stanford Study: Findings from YouGov Surveys on How Americans Assess School Quality.* Retrieved from: http://www.greatschools.org/catalog/pdf/How_Americans_Assess_Schools_Quality-Jon_Valant_Stanford_2013.pdf.

Administrator Actions

▶ **Effectively allocate scarce resources.** When administrators have access to robust, comparable data, they can use those data to identify areas of need and consider equity across student subgroups, schools, and districts when making decisions about teacher allocations, funding, academic and nonacademic program availability, and more.

▶ **Understand their student performance in context.** Comparable data across the state allow administrators to compare their school's or district's performance with other schools and districts in the state, putting their own performance in context.

▶ **Advocate for the needs of their school and district.** Publicly reported data allow administrators to show which programs are working and need continued support and to identify challenges to be addressed.

▶ **Empower others to be informed participants.** Administrators, for example, can use publicly reported data to create the opportunity for parents to be more engaged with their child's school. By communicating with parents and the public about school and district successes and challenges, administrators can promote and support informed public debate, community engagement, and bottom-up accountability.

Policymaker Actions

▶ **Create momentum for desired policies.** When policymakers have access to robust, comparable data, they can use those data to establish support for the difficult decisions they need to make, expose areas of weakness or inequity in the current system, and increase confidence that they are making the right decisions.

▶ **Demonstrate the progress of reforms to ensure continued support for ideas that are effective.**

▶ **Empower constituents to be informed participants and make informed decisions.** These actions can include parents choosing programs for their children or people with a stake in education providing feedback and ideas to policymakers, volunteering at local schools, voting in local elections, or participating in school board meetings.

▶ **Hold schools and districts accountable for performance via comparative results.** Comparable data across the state allow policymakers to identify areas of need as well as pockets of success. They can use that information to hold schools and districts accountable and to support continuous improvement, providing additional support where needed and promoting and scaling what works.

▶ **Provide transparency around how public dollars are spent.**

The Current Landscape

Currently, public reporting efforts in most states are geared toward compliance with state and federal laws, rather than being intentionally designed to meet people's needs. While some states have begun to think about public reporting for purposes beyond compliance, most continue to report only what is required by federal and state laws and do not publicly report data that are easily accessible, comprehensible, and useful.

Public reports often do not provide data in a way that answers important questions.

▶ While public reports provide critical data points like districtwide per-pupil spending, the data are not presented in a way that answers stakeholder questions such as "are my schools and districts spending money efficiently and effectively to improve student learning?"

▶ Stakeholders have to visit multiple sites or perform complex calculations to glean insight from the data presented.

Public reports do not provide data in a timely manner.

▶ Published data are sometimes two or more years old.

▶ Many states must undergo burdensome and time-consuming processes before data are able to be made public.

Public reports are not easily accessible by the public.

▶ Data are buried deep within state education agencies' websites, making them hard to find.

▶ Data are posted in unwieldy formats like difficult-to-download files. These formats present a substantial barrier for those who either are not computer savvy or do not have access to a computer.

Public reports do not present data in a manner that facilitates understanding and use but rather present data like research findings in long-report format.

▶ Reports are often riddled with overly technical terms, like "safe harbor," and wonky acronyms, like "AYP" (adequate yearly progress).

▶ Data visualization is complex and difficult to decipher. It is not uncommon for data to be presented in spreadsheets with unmanageable numbers of columns and rows.

Public reports do, however, protect data privacy, security, and confidentiality.

▶ Publicly reported data are typically aggregate level, and when a subgroup contains fewer students than the state's designated minimum, states do not report these subgroup data.

▶ When publicly reported data include individual-level data, the data are de-identified to protect privacy.

As a result, demand for and use of existing public reports is limited, as stakeholders remain skeptical of their ability to provide useful information.

Fortunately, states are already collecting the data they need to meet people's information needs. To move beyond compliance reporting, most states will not need to collect anything new. They can take the data districts already provide that are housed in their state longitudinal data systems (SLDS) and make the data more useful, tailoring state reporting to meet the needs of their citizens.

What Good Looks Like

As states begin to think about how best to tackle this work, having a good sense of what high-quality public reporting looks like is important. Good public reporting has the following characteristics:

▶ **Trustworthy.** If publicly reported data are to be used, they absolutely must be trustworthy. Trustworthy data are high quality—timely, longitudinal, contextual, and comparable. Most important, they are accurate and safeguarded. The reporting is unbiased and truly transparent.

Washington, DC, recognizes the importance of remaining unbiased in data presentation. In addition to information provided by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), DC's new school profiles (available at www.learndc.org*) also link to information from the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS); the Public Charter School Board; and an independent school information site,* GreatSchools.org*. In addition to providing an unbiased picture of what is happening in DC schools, making information from multiple sources available also ensures that stakeholders' information needs are met. While the OSSE school profiles share data on school performance, enrollment, and discipline, DCPS profiles tell visitors how to enroll and what facilities are available at the school. GreatSchools.org profiles provide an additional layer of detail, incorporating independent ratings, community reviews, and school photos.*

▶ **Focused on meeting people's information needs.** Parents, educators, policymakers, researchers, and members of the public and press all have questions about their local schools and districts. Good public reporting is focused on answering those questions, ensuring that everyone with a stake in education has access to the information they need to make good decisions. Remembering that different people need different information is important. Some may be interested in information on school climate and culture, while others may be more interested in postsecondary outcomes. Good public reporting recognizes that people's information needs vary according to their role. It presents data beyond test scores, taking good care to answer the myriad questions various stakeholders have. It lets those looking for general information quickly and easily access it, while allowing more sophisticated users the ability to drill deeper or download aggregate data sets. To provide a fuller picture of school and district performance over time, good public reporting includes data that are longitudinal; comparable across the state; and when appropriate, disaggregated. (See Appendix A for details on helpful comparisons and disaggregations by student subgroup.)

Ohio recognizes that different people need different data to meet their information needs. That is why the state makes data available in multiple formats with varying levels of sophistication. The state presents data in categories such as achievement, gap closing, and preparation for success, providing a high-level overview of the questions data in these categories help answer. The state also allows more sophisticated users to drill deeper by clicking "view more data," downloading aggregate data sets, or using an advanced analytics tool that allows comparisons to other districts over time.
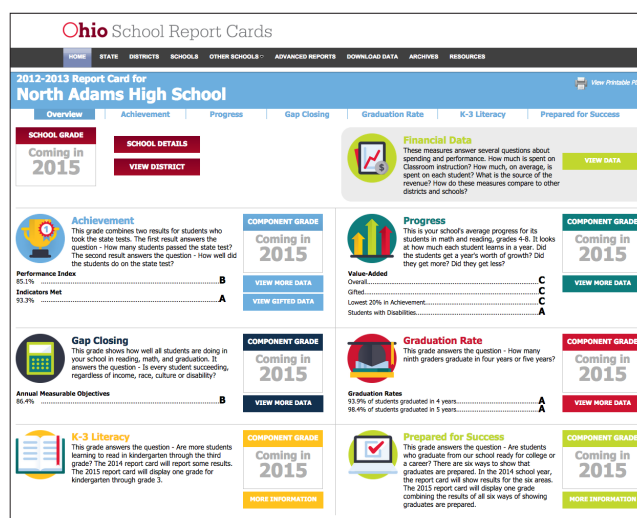
▶ **Timely and ongoing.** Data are most useful when they are made available in a timely manner. Good public reporting is updated as soon as new data are available. Data are published on a consistent timeline from year to year, letting stakeholders know when to expect new data.

Illinois Puts Purpose to Public Data

Just a few years ago, Illinois's report card was focused exclusively on compliance. There was no connection between the information, the user, and the intended outcome. It was clear to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) that the report card was not adequately informing the public and that this lack of information prevented parents and communities from doing all they could to help improve their students' education.

As a result, the state's P–20 council made a major push in 2011 for a new report card. The council convened nearly 60 focus groups with key stakeholders across the state—administrators and principals, teachers, families, and community members—to ensure that the newly designed report card would be helpful to the public. Each discussion sought feedback on the report card's content and design with the goal of putting purpose to public data.

On January 24, 2012, House Bill 605, which introduced the redesigned Illinois School Report Card, was signed into law as Public Act 097-0671 by Illinois Governor Pat Quinn. The legislation prescribed a new suite of indicators to be reported, including school characteristics, curriculum, student outcomes and predictors, and school environment, as well as methods of data display (e.g., comparisons to similar schools). It required the new report card to be made available by October 31, 2013.

While Public Act 097-0671 provided the legislative support necessary to bring Illinois's redesigned report card to fruition, ISBE went above and beyond the legislation's requirements to ensure that the newly designed report card would truly meet stakeholders' information needs. The state board developed a theory of action for the report card that addressed who the intended audience would be, what information had to be imparted, why the information would lead the audience to action, and how the action would support student outcomes. ISBE also established concrete goals for the new report card:

> **"Parents do not deal in edu-speak, acronyms, and statistics. They just want—and deserve—to know how their local schools are doing and how they can get better."**
>
> **—Christopher A. Koch, Illinois State Superintendent of Education**

- Families, educators, and the public have a shared understanding of school performance enabled by an easily accessible report card that includes multiple dimensions of school performance and environment.

- Family and community engagement improves through school leaders' use of the new report card and through additional engagement support provided to Race to the Top districts.

- Stakeholders at all levels (state, regional, and local) refer to report card measures for purposes of accountability and measuring program effectiveness, thereby improving alignment of purpose throughout the system.

To achieve these goals, ISBE was purposeful in the design, communications, and engagement of its new site. In addition to the focus groups on the report card's content and design, user testing ensured that the report card website was intuitive and easy to navigate. A strategic communications plan ensured that stakeholders across the state were familiar with the new report card, where they could find it (at the easy-to-remember website of **www.illinoisreportcard.com** and in print), and what value it offered. Recognizing the importance of effective engagement to stakeholder use, ISBE was sure to engage principals in the dissemination of report card data.

The newly designed Illinois State Report Card was released in October 2013 with much positive feedback. ISBE knows, however, that providing actionable information in user-friendly formats is an ongoing process. The state continues to evaluate the success of the report card based on the extent to which its goals have been met. It adds new information as additional data become available to better meet stakeholder needs and evaluates design functionality based on user testing and evolving best practices.
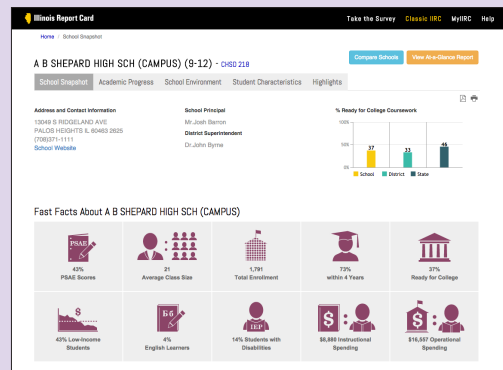
Good public reporting is also able to adapt as stakeholder questions and/or indicators evolve and as the ability to publish data closer and closer to real-time advances.

Michigan knows that timely data are useful data. That is why the state publishes data as soon as they are available—always for the prior academic year and, in many cases, for the current. The state publishes a calendar of upcoming data loads and refreshes and has metrics that are reported internally to track the speed between data availability and posting for public use.
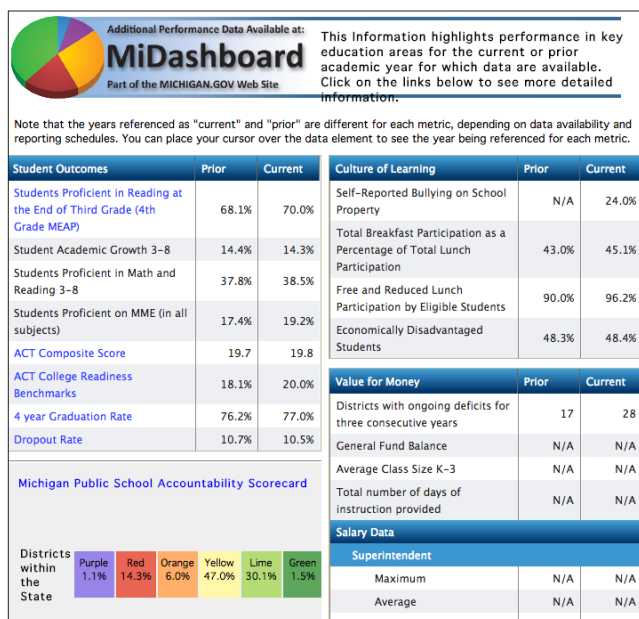
Easy to find, access, and understand. If stakeholders cannot find, access, and understand the data, there is little to be gained from making them publicly available. Good public reporting is easy to find from the homepage of a state education agency's website or via a basic search engine query. It is also made available in schools, public libraries, and other places where community members gather. Data are presented in a clear, consistent, and comparable format. A glossary of terms is provided to help users understand complex terms or calculations. Special consideration is paid to the native language and average reading level of target audiences.

Maryland understands that publicly reporting data is futile if attention is not paid to ensuring that those data are easy to find, access, and understand. That is why the state makes data available on an easy-to-find website (www.mdreportcard.org) in multiple formats with varying levels of sophistication. Parents can easily find out how their child's school performed compared with the district and state on the Maryland State Assessment, while researchers can download aggregate data on everything from teacher certification to high school completion. The state even provides tutorials alongside the data to help novice users understand, for example, how graduation rates are calculated. As an added bonus, data are made available in six languages to meet the information needs of the state's diverse population.
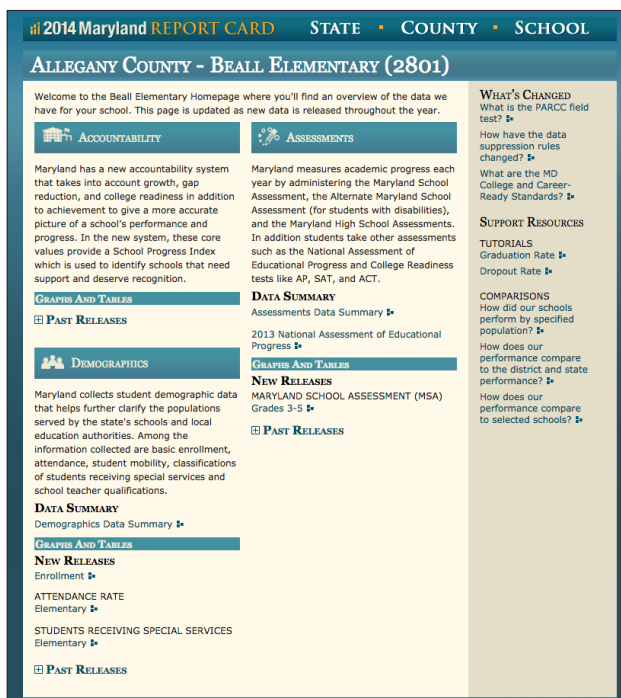
Recommendations for State Policymakers

Policymakers play a critical role in ensuring public reporting success given competing demands within state agencies and the need to coordinate across agencies to fully answer many stakeholder questions. States can take the lead by creating policies and promoting practices that support effective public reporting.

Ensure that the data are transparent and trustworthy.

▶ **Protect data privacy, security, and confidentiality.** Conversations about access to and use of data raise legitimate concerns about the privacy, security, and confidentiality of those data. Ensuring the privacy, security, and confidentiality of publicly reported data is integral to building a culture that values, trusts, and uses data. Remember, publicly reported data must always be aggregate level or de-identified individual level and can never include personally identifiable information. States must take good care to appropriately report the numbers of students in various groups so aggregate data are not identifiable.[1]

*When publicly reporting education data, **Iowa, North Dakota, Texas,** and **Wisconsin** effectively use a technique called complementary suppression that allows them to protect student privacy by hiding certain numbers when any cells contain very small counts of students. When states use complementary suppression, they suppress (i.e., do not report) the number of students in any cell with fewer students than the state's designated minimum cell size, as well as the number of students in the majority (or next largest subgroup). When the combined size of the suppressed subgroups is greater than the state's designated minimum cell size, this practice ensures that disclosure is prevented for small groups.*

▶ **Ensure accuracy by supporting district quality checks before data are released.** Data that are inaccurate are not trustworthy. If publicly reported data are to be trusted and used, states must ensure that the data are accurate before publishing them. States can ensure the accuracy of publicly reported data by supporting district quality checks before data are released. Doing so will go a long way toward not only ensuring data accuracy but also building trust and good will with district stakeholders. It is important to keep in mind, however, that conducting district quality checks should neither be burdensome for districts nor stand in the way of releasing data in a timely manner. States must work to develop processes that provide districts the supports they need to ensure that publicly reported data are both accurate and timely enough to be useful.

*Before releasing information publicly, **Nebraska** provides districts multiple opportunities to review and confirm their data. To ensure that its robust review process does not impede timely data releases, the state launched the "Deadlines are Deadlines" initiative, aimed at identifying a point in time after which there would be no more changes in the data the state collects and reports. The deadline for submission is followed by a typical 14-day audit window during which stakeholders work together to ensure that data are accurate. The audit window provides districts an opportunity to reconcile issues that may have been created by other district submissions. By enforcing a strict data "due date," the state generated a sense of momentum around ensuring data accuracy in a timely manner. Districts now know that the numbers they report to the state will be reported publicly according to a specified—and firm—timeline. Because of this, there is a much greater focus on getting the data right, right away, as opposed to just getting them in. As a result, Nebraska has seen changes in the personnel assigned to data collection and entry, ensuring that quality checks are in place far before data reach the state. Now, not only are publicly reported data more accurate, but data used daily by educators also are more accurate and trustworthy.*

Maintain coordination across P–20/ workforce (P–20W) entities.

▶ **Maintain a P–20W data governance body, and make being the steward of public reporting one of its roles.** This body could be newly formed, tasked solely

Federal policymakers can promote, support, and incentivize states to tackle this important work. For Data Quality Campaign's federal policymaker recommendations, see **www.dataqualitycampaign.org/FederalPublicReporting**.

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1 For guidance on disclosure avoidance, see **this resource** from the US Department of Education's Privacy Technical Assistance Center.

with P–20W data governance, or an existing cross-agency body. When states have a P–20W governance body, that body can be responsible for publicly reporting the official numbers for the state, ensuring consistency across sectors. It can also ensure that public reporting is tightly connected to the state's overall student performance goals and reform priorities. Moreover, a P–20W body can ensure that publicly reported data address questions of transition readiness that require data from multiple agencies. For example, when publicly reporting kindergarten readiness data, states need both early childhood data and K–12 data. States should use this coordination to engage constituents across the P–20W spectrum to make sure that public reporting meets stakeholder needs.

Data Quality Campaign's (DQC) annual Data for Action *survey of all 50 states and Washington, DC, tracks the number of states that have a cross-agency data governance committee or council (e.g., early childhood, K–12, postsecondary, workforce, other agency). Find the latest survey results on the* DQC website.

Ensure that publicly reported data meet the information needs of all stakeholders.

▶ **Engage stakeholders to identify the questions they want answered.** (See Appendix A for a list of potential stakeholder questions.) To get a better sense of the questions various stakeholders have that can be answered by publicly reported data, states should consider convening stakeholder focus groups or soliciting feedback in a similar manner. They should also consider reporting data based on stakeholder questions rather than by identifying specific indicators for states to report. While indicators may change over time as data analytics become more sophisticated, stakeholder questions like

"what happens to students after they leave the district?" will remain relatively unchanged. Reporting data based on stakeholder questions rather than indicators will help ensure that publicly reported data continue to meet people's information needs over time.

To determine the questions various local stakeholders have that can be answered by publicly reported data, **Illinois** *and* **Washington, DC,** *convened focus groups. By asking parents, community members, and others what they wanted to know, these states were able to ensure that their publicly reported data met the specific information needs of their constituents. As a result of these focus groups,* **Illinois,** *for example, learned that residents really wanted to see information about school programs and services. In response, the state developed a portal that allows school principals to contribute site-specific data to their Illinois State Report Card profiles.*

▶ **Make raw aggregate data available to the public.** Despite their best efforts, states will not be able to anticipate all stakeholder questions in advance, especially as data evolve. For example, afterschool programs serving communities may have unique questions the state has not yet considered. Likewise, community-based organizations may need to see data broken down in unconventional ways to address emerging questions of policy and practice. Making raw aggregate data publicly available will help ensure that all stakeholders can answer their questions. It also promises to reduce burden on states. When states make data available in manipulable formats that can answer people's questions, ad hoc data requests from community-based organizations and others will likely decline. In making raw aggregate data publicly available, states should consider releasing data in machine-readable formats that allow sophisticated users to more easily analyze the information and put it to new uses.

Consider This: The Power of De-Identified Data

In addition to making raw aggregate data publicly available, states should consider releasing raw de-identified data (i.e., information about individuals, but with identifying information removed). When states make raw de-identified data available, particularly in machine-readable formats, they can tap into the power of public insight and innovation, supporting the development of useful applications, action research, and more. Not only does releasing raw de-identified data make data more accessible to researchers, community-based organizations, and data-minded citizens, but it also increases transparency. By making raw de-identified data publicly available, **Washington, DC,** allowed Code for DC, a group of volunteer civic hackers working to solve local issues and help people engage with the city, to create tools, information, and experiences that serve the District. One tool is Our DC Schools, an online resource that helps the public personalize and visualize changes in school district boundaries within the District of Columbia.

*Maryland; Ohio; Washington, DC; Michigan; and **other states** all make raw aggregate data available to the public. **Michigan** publishes the **School Data File**, which provides users a single data file that is the joined product of several data tables that have historically been published separately. The School Data File helps users, mostly policy researchers, see several key metrics reported by school or district entity. To generate value from the aggregate data that **Virginia** makes available, the state launched a software application development program, Apps4VA. The program reaches far beyond the education community to challenge the general public—including a special competition for high school students—to use the state's K–12 data in new and innovative applications (apps).*

▶ **Structure the SLDS infrastructure to allow maximum flexibility.** When the SLDS infrastructure is flexible, states are able to respond quickly and nimbly to changes in policy and practice. States should continue to enhance SLDS capacity to provide more robust answers to stakeholder questions and to provide those answers in an ever-more-timely manner. To better answer stakeholder questions—particularly those of parents and local community members—states should consider developing a mechanism by which individual districts and/or schools can contribute local information to state reporting.

*Wisconsin has partnered with postsecondary institutions in the state to establish a federated data system, allowing more efficient and timely data exchanges. **Illinois** allows school principals to contribute additional site-specific data to their Illinois State Report Card profiles using a portal developed specifically for this purpose. This portal ensures that principals are able to share school programs and other highlights not captured by the state data system. It also generates buy-in from this critical stakeholder group—the key disseminators of information to parents and community members.*

Ensure that information is easy for stakeholders to find, access, and understand.

▶ **Engage stakeholders in the development and continuous improvement of all publicly reported information.** To truly meet the information needs of stakeholders, states must have a deep understanding of the ways in which stakeholders find, access, and interpret publicly reported data. When developing public-facing websites or reports, states should consider convening stakeholders to provide feedback on the user experience. They should continue to refine their websites and/or reports to ensure that they are easily navigable and facilitate stakeholder understanding. Identifying metrics to evaluate the impact of public reporting efforts will help states ensure that they are on track to meet their goals.

*To ensure that their publicly reported data are easy to find, access, and understand, **Illinois; Washington, DC;** and **Wisconsin** convened stakeholders to provide feedback on the user experience. By watching how different users navigated and interacted with their sites, these states were able to make improvements in functionality to facilitate understanding and use. **Illinois** established concrete goals for its new report card and continues to evaluate the success of the report card based on the extent to which its goals have been met.*

▶ **Provide resources for stakeholders to know how to interpret the information and use the data to inform decisionmaking.** To ensure that stakeholders can fully understand and use publicly reported data, states should develop tailored resources to guide stakeholders in accessing, interpreting, and using those data, recognizing that different stakeholders use publicly reported data for different purposes. Resources can include a glossary of terms, explanations of complex calculations, connections to policy and practice, or suggested actions stakeholders can take in response to reported data.

*To help stakeholders know how to interpret the information provided in school profiles, **Washington, DC,** developed a glossary of terms, explaining important terms or concepts that appear in its school profiles in 100 characters or less. Each 100-character definition is accompanied by a "Learn more" button linking it to longer articles that explain the term or concept in more detail. **Illinois** includes an explanation of every data display it provides, along with contextual information on why those data matter and additional resources for those who want to learn more. Both states communicate this information at a reading level that ensures maximum comprehension. **Wisconsin's** public reporting, while complex, is accompanied by interpretive guides for various audiences: a technical guide for those interested in the intricacies of the system, an interpretive guide for those interested in how the measures were developed and what to look for in the report cards, and a brief parent guide highlighting key aspects of the reports.*

▶ **Prioritize expertise in data analysis, visualization, and communication.** To ensure that data are easily accessible and comprehensible, states must prioritize expertise in data analysis, visualization, and communication, including web design. States can do this either by building internal state education agency / P–20W capacity or by seeking external partnerships.

*Lacking internal capacity to develop and implement a user-friendly public reporting site in a timely manner, **Washington, DC,** engaged a communications firm specializing in education to bring its vision for www.learndc.org to life.*

Additional Ideas for State Staff Doing the Work

As state education agency staff begin to tackle this important work, they will surely need guidance on where to begin. The following best practices and considerations can serve as a guide as staff begin to redesign their public reporting efforts for maximum impact.

- For web-based reporting, **ensure that each user type** (e.g., parents, administrators, educators) **has to access only one site** to find the answers to their questions.

- **Engage school principals and district leadership in the dissemination of publicly reported data.** School principals are much better able to communicate with parents than states are. Likewise, district leaders are better able to communicate with community members and the press. Engaging principals and district leaders is a critical component in ensuring broad stakeholder access and use.

- **Ensure that target audiences can easily find the data.** Make sure publicly reported data are easy to find from a basic search engine query, using terms an average person might use.

- **Make data available in a variety of ways**—paper, web-based, and mobile—**and in multiple languages,** remembering that not all stakeholders have easy access to the web and not all have facility with the English language.

- **Be deliberate about data visualizations to enable understanding and use.** Data displays should offer sufficient information that any reasonably informed user could understand them without having to look elsewhere. Design should be consistent across the site, so users become familiar with display types, the meaning of colors used, and comparisons available.

- **Include basic** (i.e., concise, 8th grade reading level or lower) **definitions** of data and related terms as close to data displays as possible.

- **Supply links to external resources** about the data when appropriate.

Conclusion

All states make education data publicly available in one format or another. While some do this solely to meet the requirements of state and federal legislation, others are starting to be more thoughtful about presenting data in ways that promote transparency, strengthen accountability, and ensure that everyone with a stake in education has access to the information they need to make decisions in the best interest of students.

States have the data and authority to meet people's information needs. The challenge now is prioritizing access and display—making sure data are made available in easily accessible, comprehensible formats that facilitate understanding and use.

When states shift their public reporting practices to focus on meeting stakeholder needs, they will increase the effectiveness of their public reporting efforts as part of an overall strategy to improve student achievement and system performance.

Appendix A: Stakeholder Questions

In February 2014, the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) convened a public reporting working group (comprising 14 national, state, and local experts) to build consensus around the most important questions various stakeholder groups want answered by publicly reported information. The full list of questions generated by the working group follows. This list can be used as a guide but should not be a substitute for state-specific stakeholder engagement. States beginning to tackle this work should take great care to ensure that the data they report publicly meet the information needs of their own local constituents.

> **Legend**
> - **Student subgroups** can include race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, individuals with disabilities, gifted and talented, gender, migrant, highly mobile, and English language learners.
> - **Comparisons** can include other schools and districts with similar demographics or similar per-pupil expenditures; other schools within the district; other districts; the region; the state; the nation; and comparisons over time.
>
> *Note: In most cases, the questions below omit judgment about how to contextualize the answers through comparisons and disaggregation by student subgroups.*

Funding

▶ Is funding adequate to meet the district's strategic goals?

▶ Are my schools and district spending money efficiently and effectively to improve student learning?

▶ Are there appropriate resources (e.g., staff, money, available coursework) at my school and district to support student learning?

▶ Are resources being allocated equitably based on school and district needs according to student enrollment and subgroups?

Enrollment

▶ Do all students have access to a high-quality public school located within a reasonable distance from their home?

▶ How do I enroll my student in school?

▶ What is total enrollment, by student subgroup, at each school type in relation to academic performance?

▶ Are students showing up for class?

Student Performance

Inputs

▶ Does every student in my school have access to appropriate academic coursework (e.g., Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, bilingual, special education, virtual learning, dual credit) and differentiated learning opportunities to meet his or her individual needs?

▶ Are student subgroups proportionally represented within the various learning opportunities offered at or through my schools?

▶ Does each and every student in my school have access to nonacademic programs that meet his or her individual needs (e.g., before/after care, transportation, sports, career and technical education, the arts, languages, clubs, uniforms, English language learner, special education)?

Outputs

▶ Is each and every student mastering content standards at the rate necessary to prepare that student for success?

▶ Is each and every student prepared for each transition (e.g., kindergarten readiness, middle school and high school readiness, college and careers)?

▶ What happens to students after they leave the district? Are they successful?

▶ Is student performance in my school and district improving, decreasing, or staying the same?

Educator Effectiveness

Inputs

▶ Are teachers in my school prepared to teach and effective teachers of their assigned grades/subjects?

▶ Does each and every student have equal access to effective teachers?

▶ What schools of education produce the most effective teachers for students of varying subgroups?

▶ Are there enough graduates with the right skill sets to meet the workforce needs of the district (e.g., teachers, administrators)?

▶ What is being done to recruit, develop, and retain highly effective educators?

▶ Are my schools and district led by strong leaders?

▶ What are educators paid in the district, and what is the benefits package?

Outputs

▶ Are teachers in my school and district effective at improving student learning?

▶ How does educator effectiveness vary across teacher characteristics (e.g., degrees attained, years of experience, teacher preparation program)?

▶ Is the effectiveness of educators in my school and district improving, decreasing, or staying the same?

School Climate, Safety, and Discipline

▶ Are my schools productive learning environments for all students?

▶ How do parents, students, and educators view the school and district?

▶ Are families and the community engaged in my school's activities?

▶ Does each and every student feel safe in my schools and en route to school?

▶ Are students being treated equitably?

Appendix B: Related Organizational Work

DQC is not alone in this work to encourage states to improve their public reporting efforts, and many of the organizations doing related work served on DQC's public reporting task force. The organizational efforts described below reinforce the need for quality public reporting.

Achieve

In July 2013, **Achieve** released a **policy brief** meant to be a guide for state policymakers to use in selecting and prioritizing college- and career-ready (CCR) student performance indicators to be used in the aggregate for public reporting and accountability as well as at the student level in early warning systems. Achieve has also published a **sample CCR section** of a state high school report card to give states a visual prototype of what it might look like to report all of their CCR indicators in one place. To accompany the sample report card, the organization issued a **guidance document** for states, offering suggestions not only for what indicators report cards should include but also for how those indicators should be displayed to facilitate understanding and action.

Achieve is currently working to update its sample report card to include key indicators of K–8 student performance with the predictive measures of future college and career readiness outlined in its most recent policy brief.

America Achieves

America Achieves is embarking on a scope of work that will seek to identify metrics of student knowledge (e.g., content knowledge and college knowledge), student skills (e.g., critical thinking, collaboration, interpersonal skills), and character traits (e.g., grit, self-control, mindset) that can be reported in the aggregate to give parents a better sense of how well their schools are doing at meeting these indicators of student success.

Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE)

To better understand the enabling conditions and barriers that make school choice work (or not work), **CRPE** researchers surveyed 4,000 parents in eight cities with high degrees of school choice. It also conducted interviews with government officials, choice advocates, and community leaders in four cities and looked at the ways different agencies oversee schools in 35 cities. In July 2014, CRPE published the results of this study in its *Making School Choice Work* report. One of the report's key findings was that parents face significant barriers to choosing schools, including inadequate information. This fall, CRPE will publish city-specific survey results that examine how investments in parent information, enrollment, transportation, and quality affect the ways parents experience school choice.

Education Commission of the States (ECS)

Created by **ECS**, the **State School Accountability "Report Card" Database** documents the metrics used by states to measure school performance, the information and metrics schools must report to the public on their report cards, and the type of system used to rate the schools. As follow-up to this work, ECS convened a panel of national experts to think about what states should consider around accountability and what metrics should be measured and reported through state report cards. ECS engaged parents, researchers, and accountability/public reporting experts in this work. In June 2014, ECS published a **policy brief** compiling its learning.

The Education Trust

In 2010, **Ed Trust** gathered a group of stakeholders and advocates to compile key indicators, categorized into six topic areas, on which parents and communities need more and better information. Those topic areas include the following:

▶ student achievement

▶ climate

▶ funding

▶ high schools

▶ school districts

▶ teachers

This work was synthesized into Ed Trust's **"Parents Want to Know"** campaign, in which Ed Trust worked to raise awareness around why public reporting matters and build demand for better public reporting. The **accompanying brochure** outlines how data collection required by

current federal law fails to meet the needs of parents and communities. In conjunction with the "Parents Want to Know" campaign, Ed Trust compiled 26 **jurisdiction-specific fact sheets** to identify the types of information parents in select states and districts lack but still need to be informed about how well schools are serving all children.

Foundation for Excellence in Education

In September 2014 the Foundation for Excellence in Education launched the **My School Information Design Challenge** to rethink and redesign the way in which school performance data are presented so that they are more accessible and more actionable for parents, policymakers, and the public. The national competition offers prizes for designers who employ the latest strategies in data visualization to effectively reimagine the appearance, presentation, and usability of school report cards.

Great Schools Partnership

Created by the **Great Schools Partnership**, the **Glossary of Education Reform** is a comprehensive online resource that describes widely used school improvement terms, concepts, and strategies to help journalists, parents, and community members—anyone with an interest or investment in public schools—understand some of the major reform concepts being discussed by educators, researchers, and policymakers.

GreatSchools

To help parents get the school information they need, **GreatSchools** is working directly with city and state departments of education. In addition, GreatSchools has collaborated with researchers on numerous projects to inform its work in different areas, including the following:

▶ parent focus groups in communities in Delaware; Indianapolis; Milwaukee; Washington, DC; and other cities looking at how parents choose schools and use data and information to support their choice process

▶ a randomized control trial experiment by Stanford University researchers measuring the impact of school information and guidance on the schools that parents apply to and select for their children

▶ a national survey conducted by Stanford researchers assessing how the presentation of school information affects perceptions of school quality among adults

▶ a national survey on parents' preference for various ratings designs (i.e., 1–10 versus A–F versus a star rating system)

▶ ongoing evaluation of **GreatSchools.org** website traffic, comparing how different user segments navigate through presentations of qualitative and quantitative school information on various digital channels (e.g., desktop, mobile, etc.)

National Governors Association (NGA)

NGA is working to develop an online dashboard for governors and their staff to more easily visualize and act on their P–20W data.

Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink (PNI)

The PNI supports communities across the country working to wrap children in a pipeline of health, social, and educational supports from birth through college and career. Each of these communities is working toward a set of **10 common results** and is tracking their progress through **15 academic and community indicators**. In its efforts to assist these communities, PNI has established data infrastructure in the form of a data dashboard called the **Promise Scorecard** and free licenses for a longitudinal case management system, **Efforts to Outcomes**, as well as a system of technical assistance and support that facilitates each community's transparent and responsible use of data.

StudentsFirst

In January 2013, **StudentsFirst** released a **policy brief** on the importance of parent access to transparent and useful information on schools and school districts. In the brief, StudentsFirst makes recommendations for the types of information public report cards should include (student performance, student growth, school progress in closing achievement gaps, and fiscal efficiency) and the ways that information should be displayed (letter grades, comprehensive school and district ranking).
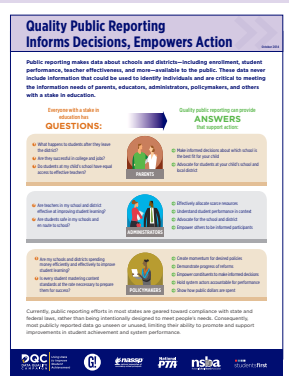
To see the Data Quality Campaign's full suite of public reporting materials, including the infographic summary; the federal spotlight; and resources for parents, administrators, and local school board members, go to **www.dataqualitycampaign.org/PublicReporting**.

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Using Data to Improve Student Achievement

For more information visit www.dataqualitycampaign.org and follow us on Facebook and Twitter (@EdDataCampaign).

The **Data Quality Campaign (DQC)** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, national advocacy organization committed to realizing an education system in which all stakeholders—from parents to policymakers—are empowered with high-quality data from the early childhood, K–12, postsecondary, and workforce systems. To achieve this vision, DQC supports policymakers and other key leaders to promote effective data use to ensure students graduate from high school prepared for success in college and the workplace.

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