



# Show Me the DATA 2017

## States Can Improve Report Cards *This Year*

States can—and must—create report cards that meet the needs of parents, communities, and taxpayers. Getting people the data they need is essential because when families and communities have the right information to make decisions, students excel.

Every state is required by federal law, and sometimes state law, to produce report cards detailing the academic performance of students in each school in their state. But states must go beyond what is required by law to make report cards meaningful and useful to people.

**States are making progress in their reporting, but there's still work to be done.**

**Some states' report cards provide bright spots** that make report cards a useful tool for understanding school performance. **Most states' report cards, however, still need improvements** to be accessible, meaningful, and useful to audiences outside of education policy.

**States can build on bright spots and address challenges this year.**

The time is right for states to improve report cards because demand for information is high.

- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plans and **new accountability systems provide an urgent opportunity** to make school performance information accessible and easy to understand.
- **Parents want information.** Ninety-one percent of parents would use data about the performance of the school, such as test scores and graduation rates, to make decisions related to their child's education.
- Additionally, 89 percent of parents think that a school's overall performance rating, like an A–F letter grade, would help them make decisions related to their child's education. **Parents want information that has meaning.**

There are many opportunities to provide parents—along with communities, business leaders, and other stakeholders throughout the state—clear, useful information. While states have deficiencies in their report cards, there are some bright spots to look to and low-hanging fruit states can tackle right now.

### Data Quality Campaign's Review Process

**2016:** The Data Quality Campaign (DQC) conducted a comprehensive review of report cards, looking at the summative, statewide reports for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Based on our analysis, we reported that states were missing important opportunities to communicate about state education priorities and school quality because reports were hard to find, full of jargon, and missing important data. The findings teed up a conversation among states and partners about how to improve transparency.

**2017:** This time, DQC looked at reports for one high school and one elementary school in each state. DQC's 2017 analysis finds that the landscape of report cards is much the same—many reports are still hard to find and use. But states have made important progress in the types of information they make available. (For more information about our research methodology, see the [report webpage](#).)

**2018:** The work to improve report cards is ongoing, and states are currently in the process of getting feedback from parents and communities and updating and improving report cards. As such, DQC will conduct our review again in 2018.

# Report cards can meet information needs but don't yet.



**States' latest school-level report cards are stronger because they feature more recent and richer data.**

No state is fully meeting parent and community information needs. But states do have some of the building blocks in place for accessible, useful report cards, including adding context to test scores and giving families and communities information they want.

## Information is timelier than ever.



**48** states and the District of Columbia are reporting **student test results no older than the 2015–16 school year**, which provide a timelier, more relevant picture of school outcomes.

**18** states are reporting **2016–17 school year** data.

## States are providing a more comprehensive picture of student and school outcomes.

States have included information on school report cards beyond what is required for accountability and compliance.



**43** states report **school climate or nonacademic information**—such as chronic absence data, discipline and behavior data, and even parent or student survey results—which provides more information about what's going on in a school.



**28** states report a measure of **student growth**. Measures of student progress over time add context to proficiency data by shining a light on schools that are moving student learning further, faster.



**22** states provide context for high school graduation rates by including **postsecondary enrollment** on the report card, which provides parents and communities information they want about how students fare after high school.

**5** additional states have started including postsecondary enrollment on report cards since DQC released an analysis on the topic in May 2017.



## States also must improve their school-level report cards in several concrete ways.

The value of this timely, rich data is limited because information is often hard to find and use for a parent or community member. For school report cards to be a meaningful communications vehicle, states will have to tackle accessibility, language, and usefulness.

### Information is hard to find.



Using a basic internet search, it is often **hard to tell which link** the state intends for people to use to reach the report card website.



Once on a report card website, **navigation challenges begin again.** Users must decipher where to go from the home page to find the information they want.



Even within the report card, **information often lives on different webpages** (not unique tabs, but separate pages). For example, information about the school's general profile, student performance on assessments, and information determining state accountability may live in different reports with different links.



### Information is hard to understand.



When available, language explaining how to use and interpret a report card is written on a **postsecondary reading level** (grade 15 as measured by [Hemingwayapp.com](http://Hemingwayapp.com)), making reading this text challenging for the average consumer.



**Acronyms** are prevalent throughout state report cards and often lack explanation; acronyms that aren't familiar to the average person make the data feel out of reach and hard to understand.



**18** states **do not disaggregate student performance** by at least one legally required subgroup (including race, ethnicity, gender, English language learners, students with disabilities). In nine states performance data is not disaggregated by any subgroup, which can hide achievement gaps and the students who need more support. It also keeps schools that are doing well with traditionally underserved students from being celebrated and emulated.



**9** states translate report cards into **other languages.** In every state, at least 5 percent of the population speaks a language other than English at home, and 1 out of every 10 public school students is an English language learner. Not translating report cards into other languages makes accessing information about student and school progress challenging for parents and communities who do not easily read English.

# States Getting the Job Done

Every state has work to do to address these challenges. Other states can look to and learn from the emerging best practices in these bright spots. Learning from the strengths of their peers will allow states to address deficiencies right now.

## Which report cards provide information beyond accountability data?



### Illinois

- Illinois' school report cards include information about the school culture and learning environment that provides a fuller picture of school quality.
- Data about teacher collaboration, leader effectiveness, and family engagement is available along with academic information.
- Multiple data points provide a deeper understanding of each school.



### Virginia

- Virginia features valuable information like discipline rates, chronic absence, and the percentage of students who enrolled in two- or four-year colleges after high school.
- Each indicator has an explanation of what it means, can be disaggregated by race and gender, and includes at least two years of data that can be used for comparisons.
- Additional information and historic context show users not only how current students are doing but also how well the school has prepared students over time.

## Which report cards are easy to find?



### Louisiana

- Louisiana's report card website appears first in the results of a basic internet search for the state's school report card.
- Users can find the school they're looking for in just three clicks.
- It's clear where to find what you're looking for—users do not have to decipher confusing titles or look across multiple pages to understand a school's performance.
- There is less room for confusion or frustration because the resource the state wants the public to use is easy to find.

## Which report cards are easier for parents to understand?



### Wisconsin

- Wisconsin's report card organizes school performance within clear priorities. The state has clearly identified priorities for its schools, including student performance, student growth, closing achievement gaps, and ensuring that students are on track for postsecondary education.
- Rather than leading with large data tables, which are also included in the report card, Wisconsin leads with an at-a-glance picture of school quality that is easier to digest.
- Data that is aligned with clear priorities makes meaning out of the information and helps the public better understand the data.







### New Mexico

- New Mexico features clear summative ratings on page one that allow users to quickly get a sense of how a school performs overall across a number of indicators.
- Explanations of each indicator are in plain language and help the user understand the value of the information.
- Easy-to-find Spanish language translations mean more people can access and use the information.
- Accessible language ensures that information about school quality is useful to diverse parents and communities.

# Low-Hanging Fruit

## Opportunities exist to improve report cards right now.

-  **Simplify language.** The language in a report card should be accessible to everyone. When creating report cards state leaders should put a “parent hat” on and keep in mind that no one wants to wade through difficult-to-read text. Consider tools like [Hemingwayapp.com](https://www.hemingwayapp.com) to measure the reading level of text on school report cards. (Aiming for an eighth-grade reading level is common.)
-  **Clean up acronyms.** If acronyms are necessary, make sure that they have explanations, and define terms that aren’t part of everyday parent conversations in easy-to-understand language.
-  **Disaggregate data.** Including disaggregated information about student performance is the law. Critically, this information helps shine a light on achievement gaps among students. Make sure that disaggregated data is available, and include language that helps communities understand how to interpret the information.
-  **Use report cards to make state priorities clear.** As states implement new accountability systems and seek to use report cards as vehicles for communicating with families and communities, it is important to check with real people to see if those big ideas come across.

## Resources to Inform Action

Whether you are seeking to make small changes right away or looking to revamp your report card over time, resources are available to guide your efforts. Use these resources from the field:

- **[A State Guide to Building Online School Report Cards](#):** This tool provides leaders a month-by-month guide to creating a report card that is user friendly and meets the requirements in ESSA.
- **[Let’s Get This Conversation Started](#):** This guide provides states strategies, tools, and examples for stakeholder engagement.
- **[Communicating Performance: A Best Practices Resource for Developing State Report Cards](#):** This tool features best practices in the development and implementation of quality school reports.
- **[State Assessment Grant Funding in ESSA](#):** States may use their ESSA, Title I state assessment formula funding to design report cards in an “easily accessible and user-friendly manner.”

This report presents steps states can take right now to improve report cards. **Now is also an opportunity for state leaders—including legislators, governors, state board members, and state education chiefs—to prioritize making the improvements that are necessary for accessible, meaningful report cards.** Some states are already leading the way and are in the process of developing new reports. DQC will highlight these exemplars so that other states will be able to learn from their best practices. In our 2018 analysis, we hope to see a changed landscape in which more states are producing report cards that are providing useful, meaningful transparency about school quality.