

In a Year Like No Other, Report Cards Remained the Same

During a time of education disruption, students and families need to be equipped with the most up-to-date information. As states' most-public education information resource, report cards have the potential to serve as a central location for families to find the information they need. But in 2020, states did not act on the opportunity to use report cards as a way to help families and the public understand and evaluate how the pandemic was affecting student learning.

While states were issued waivers and did not conduct statewide assessments in 2020, they also failed to report on chronic absence, graduation rates, and some teacher data—which they had access to and should have made available to the public. Without information for the 2019–20 school year, understanding how student progress changed over time will be more difficult. States took steps backward this year in communicating student progress; they must now look forward to expand transparency and use their report cards as tools that help families and communities, not only as compliance documents.

What We Looked For in 2021

In fall 2020, the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) released our annual review of report cards. In that report, we highlighted that states had taken two approaches to their report cards—either they were focused on making required data available, or they were going beyond that to make report cards a tool for meaningful transparency. Both approaches have been a success over the past several years, as states have improved and increased access to information about how

well schools are supporting students. In that report, DQC concluded that we were eager to see how states used the investments they had made in their report cards to respond to the disruption of in-person schooling and the transition to remote learning.

In short, they didn't. In this year's review, conducted in January 2021, DQC reviewed report cards from all 50 states and the District of Columbia looking for evidence of whether states continued to build momentum toward increased transparency and whether they used report cards as a way to communicate how the state and schools responded to disruptions to in-person learning. We looked for evidence of new information that states provided to focus on how COVID-19 affected learning, as well as whether states were missing any information beyond test scores. **States did not take the next step to use report cards as meaningful communications tools during this time of disruption.**





COVID-19 disrupted tests, but context data should still be available.

Schools experienced unprecedented closures that changed the classroom environment and altered which data was collected and how. States did not administer statewide assessments. States also chose not to collect attendance data in the same way they had before, nor did they provide schools and districts with guidance on how to do so—leaving districts with a patchwork of methods for how attendance data was collected. However, states still collected data that rounds out the picture of student experiences in school and that remains valuable, even in the absence of test scores.



35 STATES reported chronic absence data on their most recent report cards, but only NINE STATES had the data for the 2019–20 school year. Chronic absence has always been essential context for student performance, and it goes without saying that education leaders will need to deeply examine student attendance patterns going forward.



While **28 STATES reported participation in advanced coursework** (i.e., Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate) and **25 STATES reported completion of advanced coursework**, only **16 STATES provided information on both participation and completion.**



24 STATES did not include all required teacher data (inexperienced teachers, teachers with emergency or provisional credentials, or out-of-field teachers) on their report cards. Understanding teacher qualifications adds context to student experiences and outcomes.



Disaggregated data was mostly missing but must come back.

Many states were missing student performance data broken down by different groups of students. On the previous year's report cards, before assessments were disrupted, 26 states were still missing data on how well schools served at least one group of students. This data has always mattered, but states must not shy away from reporting it as communities seek to learn which students may have been hit hardest by disruption and remote learning.



Absent student assessment data, graduation rate was the only comparable, disaggregated indicator that all states could report. However, **only 32 STATES reported graduation rates for each federally required group of students.**



When compared to the previous year's report cards, **SIX NEW STATES reported graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness, and SIX NEW STATES reported graduation rates for students in foster care** this year. Data disaggregated by student group is the only way that leaders can understand how policies and practices affect individual student groups. Every state needs to close the gap and report the performance of *all* required groups of students.



States acknowledged COVID-19 but did not report new information about its impact.

Most states opted not to add to their report cards new data that is specific to remote learning during the pandemic, such as access to high-speed internet or devices. When report cards did mention COVID-19, it was an explanation of how the data was affected and why states weren't able to report all measures.

Not every state chose to communicate about COVID-19 specifically, but those that did took one or more of the following approaches to communicate the impact on data:

BOILERPLATE TEXT AND

BANNERS: Boilerplate language was included on the search, home, or welcome pages that indicated data was affected by COVID-19 and accountability waivers. Another option was a banner, which followed the user as they navigated the report card.


INDICATOR-SPECIFIC TEXT:

Text that accompanied individual indicators showed how the pandemic affected that indicator. These indicator-specific explanations provided more detail about how states decided to use data from previous school years or exclude the indicator altogether.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Additional resources—including tables of which data were affected and how or links to the state's waivers and waiver applications—appeared on report cards in addition to one of the other methods of communication.



Pennsylvania used commonly understood warning symbols  to indicate which data was affected by school closures and what year the supplemented data was from. Clearly labeling each indicator makes it easy for any user to understand the school year reflected in the report card.



Iowa provided a chart of each indicator included on its report card describing the availability of that data and notes on changes to reporting due to COVID-19. Visitors could clearly read which data was affected and how.

ONLY ONE STATE used its report card to share how school closures affected student learning with current data.



North Dakota included a COVID-19 responses page for each school with data on the number and percentage of students utilizing in-person learning, hybrid learning, and virtual learning. The reported numbers and percentages are updated every few days, giving families the most up-to-date information on the school learning environment. The report card also links to each school's health and safety plan and distance learning plan.



Inching forward: States made progress on key indicators.

Despite largely missing the opportunity to use report cards as a communications tool, there was small, but notable, progress on the data that states made available. These increases are promising, and states still must make progress toward reporting all the required information.

As state leaders and communities assess the economic impact of the pandemic, they need information that helps them make the best education resource allocation decisions.



36 STATES included school-level per-pupil expenditures on their report cards, up from 19 states the previous year. Providing per-pupil expenditure data alongside student outcomes data on report cards empowers leaders to better understand how resources are being allocated, answer important questions about the students being served by schools, and make more targeted education investments.

Students and families need information on college and career readiness and postsecondary outcomes to make the best decisions for their education. Communities and leaders will be watching postsecondary success information closely as they seek to understand how the education and economic impact of the pandemic affected students' transition to college and career.



29 STATES reported career and technical education (CTE) enrollment or completion, a net increase of four states from the previous year. CTE enrollment and participation data gives families and individuals information on potential pathways and allows them to make decisions for their futures.



37 STATES reported postsecondary enrollment; of those, only 14 states reported on postsecondary enrollment in two-year institutions.



FIVE STATES reported military enlistment, and **FIVE STATES reported workforce participation after high school**. States should continue to expand their reporting on data about options after high school to encompass the many pathways students can take.



Arizona provided a direct link to the Arizona Board of Regents high school feedback report that includes college performance statistics for each high school. The report shows college enrollment and completion and how they compare to the state and national average. For students at Arizona State University, University of Arizona, and Northern Arizona University, the feedback report indicates the percentage of students earning a C or higher in college-level math and English courses compared to the state average.



Mississippi included a wide range of postsecondary outcomes that show how soon students enroll in postsecondary education after graduating high school, where students enroll, how well they are doing academically, and their career fields.



Now What? Where States Should Go From Here

In 2020, states faced both unpredicted and unprecedented obstacles in educating students. Families and individuals were also asked to make major changes to cope with the pandemic.

Report cards are an opportunity to communicate and share necessary information with families and communities in one central location. States must continue to improve their report cards by providing access to available data in a way that is easy to navigate and understand for all users. To continue to improve and increase transparency, states should focus on the following areas:



Seize the moment to improve and increase transparency, rather than hold back. The full extent to which COVID-19 and school closures have affected students is still emerging. States' report cards must provide data to contextualize the public's understanding of the impact of school closures. States may be hesitant to release data about disrupted education, but they must focus on ensuring that the public understands the context for the data provided.



Use longitudinal data to demonstrate progress over time. States should maximize investments in longitudinal data to take report cards beyond valuable annual snapshots to resources that help users see how schools have progressed. Longitudinal data that demonstrates how a school is serving students over several years can help families see whether their schools are improving and can ensure that decisionmakers have the information they need to better support students.



Ensure that report cards are easy to use and understand. Many states have improvements to make to ensure that users can navigate and understand their report cards. These improvements include visual changes like investing in platforms that are user friendly or that are mobile responsive. Necessary improvements also include translation for commonly spoken languages.

Federal funding is [available](#) to aid states with their report cards, including new recovery funds. Families and communities need information on how schools are serving their students to make the best decisions for themselves, but they must be able to find and use the information provided.