



Their Report Card - and Ours

How do we know if schools are doing a good job? And how can we make them better?

According to Oregon's Department of Education, state-mandated standardization of curriculum and increased testing will inspire - or frighten - educators and students to perform at higher levels. This strategy emphasizes measurable objectives and scores that can be compared from student to student, school to school, community to community. It emphasizes the necessity of holding all students to "high standards." In practice, this strategy increasingly turns schools into test-prep academies. Test-led reform sucks joy out of learning and discourages both teacher and student creativity. What is not measured on the tests - for example, critical thinking, discussion skills, the arts - is more and more neglected. Of course, equating student achievement with higher test scores may, in fact, raise test scores. But it will not help nurture more knowledgeable, motivated, or caring students.

The Department of Education's recent school "report cards" exemplify the hollowness of this reform strategy. The state judged "student performance" strictly in terms of standardized test results; "school characteristics" were assessed based on one criterion: the percentage of a school's students taking state tests. We're reminded of the saying, Not everything that matters can be measured and not everything that can be measured matters. If one aim of school reform is to make schools more "accountable," then surely we need to capture a fuller portrait of school life.

Portland Area Rethinking Schools proposes an alternative school reform strategy. Unlike state testing that is premised on a belief that learning can and should be quantified, and assessment results used to compare, reward and punish, we believe that assessments should be collaborative endeavors, grounded in school communities. We believe that school life and student achievement can only be assessed - and improved - with participatory inquiries that offer rich descriptions of a school's educational practice.

Below is a draft of our alternative "report card." In important respects, the process of collecting data for the report card is itself an essential part of the product. Real school reform must be democratic, drawing on the collective efforts of teachers, students, administrators, parents and the broader community. We encourage school communities to use the questions below as the basis of discussions to assess and improve school life.

Curriculum

1. How is the content of the curriculum meaningful, interdisciplinary, multicultural, and academically rigorous for all students?

- a. How are high academic expectations communicated to and maintained for all students?
- b. How are reading, writing, math, discussion skills, and the arts taught across the curriculum?
- c. How are historic, artistic, and scientific contributions of diverse cultures, families, social classes, and genders represented in each content area?
- d. How does the curriculum encourage all students to see themselves as social and environmental problem-solvers capable of making the world a better place? Does the curriculum have real life links?
- e. How are students encouraged to take initiative in choosing directions in their learning? How are the needs, dreams, and interests of individual students incorporated into the curriculum?

2. Are there sufficient resources available to meet the curricular mission of the school?

- a. Are sufficient high quality materials available to meet the needs of all students?
- b. What is the range of actual class sizes?
- c. Do students have access to mentors and tutors?

- d. Is the library welcoming and accessible to all students and staff?
- e. Are reading, writing, math, and/or other specialists available for students and staff?
- f. What elective opportunities are available to students?
- g. What technology resources are available to all students? With what frequency are they available? Are students penalized for not having access to technology at home?
- h. What school time is scheduled for teachers to plan, develop, and discuss curriculum?
- i. How does professional development support the curriculum and instruction outlined above?
- j. Do new and struggling teachers have access to mentors?
- k. What is the number of courses taught by teachers not teaching in their certificated area?

Student Assessment

1. How is assessment used to promote student learning?

- a. How do assessment results influence subsequent instruction in the classroom and program modification in the school?
- b. What actions are taken to avoid misapplication of assessment results through tracking or stigmatization?
- c. How is it ensured that the frequent use of feedback from assessments offers students the opportunity to grow?

2. How is it ensured that assessment complements the curriculum and desired outcomes?

- a. How is it ensured that assessment allows students multiple ways to demonstrate their learning?
- b. How is it ensured that self-reflection and self-evaluation are part of the assessment system?
- c. How is it ensured that students are aware of the learning goals on which they will be assessed and the assessment process that will be used?
- d. How are accommodations made for ESL and other students with special needs?

Equity for All Students

1. Historically, so-called ability grouping has discriminated against poor, working class, and students of color by offering educational programs of unequal quality to different students. How does the school group its students (e.g., honors, advanced, remedial, scholars, International Baccalaureate)? How does the school know that these grouping practices do not result in unequal educational experiences?

- a. Describe the rationale and practice for your grouping.
- b. How are students placed in these classes?
- c. What impact does grouping have on equity for students of color and students with learning or physical disabilities, as well as on gender equity?
- d. If inequity in placement exists, what procedures are in place to review curriculum and placement practices?
- e. If students are grouped for short term educational purposes, what records are available to demonstrate individual progress and movement from group to group? How often are students reassessed? How many students move? How often?

2. What accommodations are made for the needs of students with attendance and tardy problems: students who work to support their families, travel to home countries, take care of younger or older family members?

3. Is there evidence of historical, literary, artistic, and scientific contributions of diverse cultures represented in each content area? in teachers' lesson plans? in the bookroom? on bulletin boards? during assemblies?

4. Who is represented and honored in the school? Consider the hallways, library, and overall school environment. Does the racial, ethnic, linguistic and class composition of extra-curricular leadership and special academic programs reflect the student body? How are low-income, minority, or second language students encouraged to participate?

5. What measures does the school take to ensure that students with physical disabilities are fully integrated into school life?

6. How does the school equalize opportunities for success by ensuring that all students have access to computers, field trips, materials for projects, supplies, and electronic equipment?

7. Describe how each class demonstrates high expectations for all students. How does the school present academic, professional, and trade options to students?

8. Does the staff reflect a range of cultures? What recruitment strategies are in place to hire teachers of color and second language speakers?

Health and Safety

1. Describe your discipline policies and programs that promote respect and conflict intervention and resolution. Specifically, how are students involved in these programs?

2. How does the school promote the physical safety and the emotional well being of students? Are programs built into the curriculum addressing such needs as violence and sexual harassment prevention, suicide intervention, sex education and prevention of drug and alcohol abuse?

3. How are marginalized students identified and protected at your school? What policies and strategies are used to counter racist, sexist or homophobic language and put-downs? How is respect taught in the school curriculum?

4. How accessible are mental health and crisis services at the school? Is nursing staff provided? Describe safe places students can go during personal distress. Describe any formal or informal mental health services available to students.

5. What is the selection and quality of cafeteria food? Are restricted or organic diets available? What are the school policies about serving milk and meat products from hormone-injected animals or other genetically-modified foods? How often and under what criteria is the water tested in the school? Do students have access to pure water?

6. How is the student environment protected from other chemical ingredients of unknown or potentially harmful effects - e.g., in cleaning solutions, herbicides, pesticides, or airborne contaminants?

Parents and Community in the Life of the School

1. How does the school include parents, students and community in decision making?

a. What adaptation and/or encouragement is made for working, non-English speaking, reluctant, marginalized parents and/or parents of color?

b. What power does the community have in decisionmaking?

c. Does the site council accurately reflect the social class, racial, ethnic, linguistic diversity of the community?

2. When and how are parents informed and included regarding student progress (e.g., academic assessments, absences, tardiness and misconduct)?

a. How does school insure parents understand their students progress?

3. How do school and community interact for mutual benefit?

a. Is there broad representation of community organizations in the life of the school: unions, women's

organizations, religious institutions, senior centers, environmental and social justice organizations, businesses, etc.?

- b. What community service projects are in place?
- c. How is school networked to other community services? How does the school facilitate connecting students and families to community and governmental resources?
- d. How are community members invited to contribute?
- e. How does school include and coordinate volunteers?
- f. How are families/community members who cannot volunteer during the school day included in direct support of the school?
- g. How are the school facilities and people utilized as a resource of the community?

4. How does school and community help students make the transition between schools?

- a. How does the school reach out to the community during transition points - i.e., from pre-school into kindergarten or first grade? from elementary to middle school? from middle school to high school? from high school to college?
- b. How effective are these efforts?

5. What audiences beyond the classroom do students have for their work and ideas?

- a. In the school, how are parents and/or community members invited to give feedback on student work or portfolios? Are there student author presentations, science fairs, gallery displays, etc.?
- b. Outside the school, are there readings in the community, projects that connect the generations, student research and input to community boards or committees, etc.?

6. What informational events does the school hold?

- a. Describe the events (open houses, parent conference, etc.), who attends, and the percentage of the various groups attending.
- b. What adaptation and/or encouragement is made for working, non-English speaking, reluctant, marginalized parents and/or parents of color?
- c. How does the school accommodate parents special needs - for example, day care?

District and State Support

1. In what ways do the school district and state support the school community in achieving the above aims?

2. In what ways do the school district and state hinder the school community in achieving the above aims?

3. What strategies are being pursued by the school community to challenge any policies or practices that hinder efforts to provide all students with quality education?

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