

# Education Oversight Committee Report Cards Focus Group Study

February 2002

This report presents the findings of a focus group study conducted on behalf of the Education Oversight Committee. The study was conducted to evaluate the reactions and interpretations of school personnel and parents to the school report cards prepared as part of the committee's responsibilities.

Two focus group discussions were conducted on February 7, 2002, one among educators and one among parents who had received the report cards. Discussions were led by a professional moderator, and participants were paid an incentive to participate.

## Objectives

Objectives of the study were:

- To gauge overall reaction to the report card format and information;
- To assess perceptions of the importance and usefulness of the report card;
- To identify strengths and weaknesses in the current system of producing the report card; and
- To gather other information that can be used to improve the effectiveness of the process.

## Overview

- While there are reservations on both sides, particularly among educators, both groups see the report card as a valuable tool to improve education and have generally positive responses to what is being attempted.
- Educators and parents agree that the report card should have summary information in an easy to understand format on the first page for parents.
  - ◆ Both groups acknowledge that relatively few parents actually read and absorbed all of the information in the report card.
- Among educators, there was apparently considerable initial apprehension about the report cards.
  - ◆ Responsiveness from district officials and clear communications about expectations helped in alleviating these concerns.
  - ◆ In general, after initial misgivings, response has been positive with most seeing it as a tool to guide improvement efforts.
- Parents readily admit that almost none of them has read the report card in detail. However, most at least looked at the report card and checked whether its findings met

their expectations for their school's performance. None reacted strongly, though overall reactions are generally positive about the concept, expecting the process will help improve school performance.

- Educators reinforced this finding, noting that they received very little reaction from the community from the report cards.
- Both groups generally felt that, while it was a good thing that the report card included so much information, it would be preferable to have a simpler summary up front that clearly and simply shows how the schools perform on key issues.
  - ◆ Some parents find the “absolute” and “improving” scores to be somewhat confusing.
  - ◆ Educators, too, have problems dealing with “absolute” and “improvement” scores, seeing problems when a school has performed very well or very poorly.
- The issue of how schools are compared to each other is one that is troublesome for both parents and teachers.
- Parents are not well-informed on the EOC and its mandates, though they are very much aware of PACT and its importance to the state's current system.
- Parents are very supportive of the report card if it means that schools

that are having problems will receive more help and resources.

## Detailed Findings

### Educators Group

Educators felt they had much more stake in the report card process and are understandably more aware of a great many details and issues involved, even though occasionally they show confusion about some of the measurements.

*I think it means more to the education community than it does to me, to John Q. Public.*

While there were some comments about the early logistics and expense of the first report cards, on the whole it seems to be perceived as successful.

*Maybe it was national events with 9-11 and this kind of thing going on, too, that delayed the report card when we expected it to come out in November and it ended up coming out in December.*

*What I see as a big problem is funding and the district spent a lot of money mailing out these report cards and now we're being cut.*

*I'm thinking more of some of the narratives that were on there, and there were some schools whose names didn't appear correctly, some misinformation that was on there that we could have caught if we had proofed the boilerplate cards without the scores on them.*

*We prepared again, much like described in other districts, we worked with our people to let them know how to respond and what the issues were, helped them frame the discussion. In*

*terms of once the report cards went out, I have not had the first telephone call—*

Participants point out that their initial reactions to the process and through much of the preparation were apprehensive. They felt concerned about being publicly graded, particularly in areas where they do not always feel they have control. In general, they felt nervous.

*There was so much activity coming up when it came out. Then all of a sudden, they were just there and it was like it was an anti-climax. We began immediately looking to the next year. Already talking about, "Well, what can we do?" We did that before we even got a card.*

*I was all prepared for either way. It was wonderful to come out on top. Well, it was where we thought we should be. Had we not come out on top, I would have been looking for all sorts of rationalizations, you know, and I'm sure everybody does. What I'm looking at, I think this information is good information and you will pick what you're interested in.*

Most say, however, that public reaction was not as strong as they had expected, and they are less apprehensive now about the process. Many feel they "overprepared" for the report card.

*I really think the attitude about the report cards has changed greatly over the past two years as I hear educators talk. I think there's a much higher level of acceptability and it's much less bashing the whole concept of report cards. It's moved to, "Let's make sure the report card provides meaningful and accurate information for us."*

*Nothing blew up. Nothing fell off. You know, the concerns, I think we were more nervous, as teachers and educators, than the parents were. You know, their receiving of the information was not as critical as we thought it was going to be, their feedback to us. We kind of over-prepared for something that didn't come.*

*It was important to us as educators because it told us what we were doing, but to the general public, did they really care as much as we thought they would?*

Several noted that assistance from the EOC and the districts helped them feel more comfortable about the process.

*I know at the Summer Leadership Conference, it was mandatory for us to attend a session to get the notebook that gave all the information about factual information about the report card. That was very helpful in that some of the administrators, I know I did, opted to start special reporting sessions to parents explaining what the report card was about, facts about three special editions to answer the most frequently asked questions that parents would have, and so the information I got from the EOC, that conference session, really was helpful in disseminating that information.*

*All of our principals went to these preparation sessions that they told us, things to kind of expect and gave us some guidelines as to what to do, and we did the same kind of things that you're talking about, letting our parents know. I sent out several things and, usually, it's about what to kind of expect, on the report card and,*

*sessions at PTA meetings, that kind of thing, and so when the parents actually got the report cards, I think they knew pretty much exactly what to expect on them.*

*There was a Power Point presentation that was presented to principals that we could, I know I made it personal. The presentation was for the district to explain the report card and what you would anticipate the schools to be.*

Based on reactions they received from parents, they generally feel the report card should be simplified and present the most relevant information in simpler terms: educators felt that parents just want the basics.

*It seems very busy. As a parent, and some of my parents would look at this and it would be a total washout. I'm going to put this in the garbage because it makes no sense to me. Now my other parents who would know what was going on, they know what 's going on at the school anyway.*

*I think there's so much information on there that parents don't pay much attention to it, really. I think if they got a report card that said 'Your school's score was excellent,' they would pay more attention to it than the report card that's there. I know all the reasons why we've included the data but I think what we found in school newsletters, if they're four or five pages long and single-spaced, people don't read it. The ones that they read the most are the ones that are real quick and dirty and just have a few lines of them.*

*I think we're giving the public more information than they really know how to handle or know what to do with.*

*I don't think they read it all. I think what we do, is we scan those things and those things that we're interested in, we look for and we read it and maybe we'll glance at it and just see some things that maybe we weren't looking for and find interesting.*

Beyond the early reactions to the report card, these educators see this process as, on the whole, useful to helping them improve. Many reservations are expressed, but they also talk about the usefulness of much of the preparation. The findings of the report card have also helped some of them find areas where they can concentrate to make improvements.

*We determined that our language arts area, as I mentioned before, was not what it should be. We did better in our math than our language arts. So our focus became the language arts area and we started working on that. In fact, we brought in a course for our teachers that we are all in the process of taking.*

*You've got to keep improving. So we've got to have an initial amount of improvement to make sure that we do maintain at least the same ratings. Those schools that didn't get a good a rating are already looking at, "Okay, what is it we can do better?" and then moving on.*

*We saw some places that we were below the curve that we needed to work on. That was helpful.*

*I absolutely believe that there are things that we can do to improve. I think the most meaningful data that we have at this point in time would be to look at any district that has a low index of poverty that didn't do well or look at schools that did exceedingly well and*

*they have a high index of poverty, that's where we need to look and find out what's happening that's right and where something's not happening.*

*So all of the things that we've been trying to do to help these students get better, the funding is disappearing for these programs, and so here we're still going to be sending out this report card but our hands are kind of going to be tied to try to improve and do better because of the money issue.*

*The school that I'm in has been concentrating on Oasis and Project Breakthrough, which gives different methods for all students, but we're now turning our focus towards reading initiative and trying to do things like that that's coming through the Governor's Reading Initiative, and we have gotten more focused since the report card. I've got to say that I've come and done analysis of what we're doing, and now we're going out looking for the best practices to help the areas that we're showing up weakest in.*

Comments suggest that, even though the report card is not a perfect instrument, it is providing positive benefits in terms of giving them information they can use to improve.

Most acknowledge that teachers can be competitive, and the comparisons and measurements can spark extra efforts. In this sense, even though there are reservations on specific points, the general view about the report cards is not negative, but positive.

*I think all of us can say teachers as a whole, one thing the report card has shown is we're meek and mild and we love our kids and we'll do anything for*

*them, but we're a competitive bunch when it comes down to it.*

*I do think it was helpful information for our schools to have for them to look at the comparison of schools that were like theirs. I've heard people seem to be interested in that data. I think that's something that's more interesting to educators than it is to the general public.*

*I'm thinking, you know, as a teacher at a new school that's getting its first report card next year, I am certainly going to stay onto my students about, "Okay, let's get these basic skills. Let's get that PACT test passed. Let's work on SAT." I mean, because I'm being held accountable now. So as an educator, it means a lot to me as far as reputation.*

While these positive reactions outweigh negative reactions in most cases, there are a number of concerns these educators express about the process that merit consideration. In most cases the concerns arise out of the difficulty of measuring issues that resist clear-cut measurement. There are few cases where all can point to a single issue as a fatal flaw.

Still a number of issues leave these educators feeling somewhat uneasy.

- The issue of improvement scores for schools that have done very well on absolute scores:

*And not just schools that are average or below. Excellent schools have suffered as a result of having this improvement rating. That's right. Absolutely.*

*If you're doing your best, how can you do any better?*

*I agree with you conceptually [that improvement scores are important] but, but when you have a school like we have, a couple where they're in the ozones and they drop by just a teeny-weenie point and they get unsatisfactory because they slid and they're still at the 96<sup>th</sup> percentile or whatever. . .*

*I believe things can always be improved, but it is more difficult for schools like Ann's to show improvement than it is for schools that are at a lower percentile going in and I agree to having the two ratings, absolute and improvement and I do not like the composite, and if you have a composite, well, then the improvement should not be able to blow your head out of the water.*

- The issue of the source of the school's children. (Here, both the poverty levels and the turnover rates were mentioned as concerns). This issue boils down to feeling that their school is judged on who they are teaching rather than how they teach:

*I think the big issue to be answered is addressing the whole issue with how the report cards correlate with the index of poverty. We took every score for every district in the state and printed and rank ordered them by the index of poverty and there's almost a one-to-one correlation, and so when you do that, we pay millions of dollars and what do we have? Do we have information that is really super-meaningful or is what we have a road map to poverty?*

*Teachers feel like they're being judged based on who they teach rather than*

*what they do with the kids that they teach.*

*This school has a very high turnover rate. We have a 20 to 40% turnover rate during the year. We may have a kid that will come in and be with us for two or three weeks, be gone two or three weeks, be back for another two or three weeks, gone two or three more weeks and it's just back and forth, and when we have this type of clientele and our teachers feel like they're working just as hard as everyone else and they are really prepared. They're doing, but kids aren't here and, because of background, they don't have two professionals [at home]. They've got for parents, they've got two that probably some of them are illiterate.*

- The issue of parent flight. Several express concern over losing students from parents choosing to move their children to schools with better report cards:

*I think we've looked at our curriculum and have done some real intense work in all. . . the schools, those that did well and those that didn't do as well as we had hoped, and I think that's been good. I think the negative thing, which we want to monitor very carefully is that our number of transfer requests are up. People who are in schools that have not gotten the better grades want to move to the ones that have the better grades.*

- Concern about losing teachers who would choose to move to other schools with better report cards:

*It will make my job more difficult to find the very best teachers who will serve in the schools where there are kids who*

*need them more than maybe in the schools that are higher income, higher performance schools.*

*If we don't get these scores, we're going to lose good teachers.*

*And we already have a hard time finding teachers.*

- Professional development days being tallied in with absences:

*Sometimes when our teachers been going to professional conferences and this, that and the other, it was counted as an absence as opposed to a professional development kind of thing and so we were looking at this thing saying, "Wait a minute. You know, this is not exactly the way it was," and so this prime time instruction figure, you know, that's a little misleading.*

- Concerns about how districts are compared to each other (specifically the mechanisms for grouping like schools):

*We were compared, the districts that were in my group, some of them were small . . . like 1,000 students and, I guess by some statistical framework, they were deemed to be districts similar to ours. There were sixteen districts that were deemed to be similar to ours. We have 27,000 students and some of them had 1,000 students. The only similarity between our district and their district, and we analyzed this very thoroughly, was on free and reduced lunch. That was the only similarity.*

- Concerns about differences in measurement (for example between third grade where some materials are read by the teacher and fourth where they are written):

*For example, my Third Grade scored in the top out of the test, 88%, 89% on both areas, then the same with the core of children going to the next grade.*

*There are so many variables. The test is read. A lot of it's oral. You go in the Fourth Grade, they're on their own.*

*There's so many variables that affected the results.*

- Concerns about the relevance of some of the measures to good education:

*When the scores are measured by a test, then that test really ought to be very, very good, very reliable and give us a lot of information on what to do to help students and it does not.*

*The process is flawed. I agree with that or the criteria that's driving this, but I certainly don't want to see the improvement factor diminished because really my only contribution is what I do with kids after I have them. That's my only contribution.*

*Well, now another problem I have with this is that you're looking at gains made by one group, one year, and this is a totally different set of kids the next year and anybody that teaches knows that every different set of kids you get are totally different. I mean, they're different in abilities. They're different in socialization. They're different in their family makeup. To compare what we do with this group of kids this year to a totally different group of kids next year has never made any sense to me.*

*Okay. I think you could get rid of the schools with students like ours. I don't think that that's critical.*

While each of these concerns has likely been addressed already in the planning process, they continue to be important issues to these educators.

Despite the concerns, they see the process as generating improvements and most are working to be in better condition next year.

### Parent Group

Most parents in this group discussion readily admit that they did not go over the report card in detail, though most say they still have the card.

*Ours is probably still on the corkboard in the hall where everything else that comes from Hand is pinned up.*

*I read it. I showed it to my husband and then I stuck it in my stack of papers that I'd like to save for no particular reason but would like to have.*

*Well, I didn't receive mine in the mail. The school sent one to me because a lot of parents didn't get one and I just glimpsed at it. I didn't really read any details but I was looking at the grade of the school that my child had. I was very pleased with it, but that's about it.*

On the whole, their comments about it seem to reflect what the educators found: parents did not react strongly to the report card. This is not to suggest, however, that they do not view the schools' performance as important, and they expect to see improvements in the schools' performance.

*I didn't spend much time looking at it. I don't put a lot of faith in trying to give a one word, one grade score to a school that has 800 students. I looked at it for 30 seconds and pinned it up there with the 5,000 other things that have come in. If you are involved with your child, you have a sense of if your school's capable or not.*

*Well, they were rated good and I looked at a lot of other schools that I started to send my daughter to and they didn't do as well. It gives me some idea of what the school is doing.*

*It kind of took me by surprise when I got it and I was like, "Wow." I was like, "Well, they graded good." I was like, "She's in a very good school." I found it very informative about the school itself.*

While relatively few were aware of the details of the report card, most had looked at it briefly, primarily to see if the results matched their expectations for the school. Most feel they already know the strengths and weaknesses of their school and rely on that personal knowledge more than the grade from the state.

*So if you were really curious, if you were trying to determine why my school district did not do well, it's very well documented. If your school does what you think it's supposed to do, you're not going to go in there and tear it apart.*

*I knew Lexington High School's a good school and showed up good in the report card. I didn't detail read it, just cursory glanced at it and looked at it and it was no surprise to me. I looked for exceptions and didn't see any.*



*I've seen the one for my youngest daughter and there weren't many surprises on it.*

*I don't actually remember getting it in the mail. My wife probably did but then it comes out in the paper and I kind of looked at that and I kind of looked at the schools that my kids go to and they were pretty much where I expected as far as in the range of the other schools.*

The personal experience is important in another way. Because the report card does not deal specifically with their own child, it has less impact. They know whether their child is doing well or not, and this is more important to them than whether the school is doing well.

*They do good in school and you like their teachers and everything, then you really don't pay attention to it; if they didn't hand these things out, it wouldn't really matter to most of us how they rated, just as long as we knew that they were going to school and knowing that they were passing their grades and everything like that because I never even thought about how my school would grade and stuff like that before now.*

*My school rated excellent but see, I'm always in Amber's school so it's like I know it's a good school because I'm there all the time.*

*It's on my desk at home. The report card validated [my views]. I've had very, very good feelings about Dutch Fork High School since my son's been there.*

Most feel the report card presented a great deal of information in a way that was not simple and easy to understand. While they would not suggest that less information be included, it is clear that

they feel a more straightforward presentation of the highlights would be helpful.

*I was surprised of the depth of the measurement but, again, I think as a document for the average person it was confusing. There was so much data there it's hard for them to measure. The same information could have been presented in a much simpler format, easier for people to read.*

*I think readability could be improved. It was kind of a complex document when you get it and it was kind of imposing. You open it up and say, "Well, when I got about a half hour to digest it I might sit down and read it," but it's not exactly a snapshot type of document, which I expected.*

*I think there was like a big explanation on the front face and then some other stuff and then the stuff that really put everything into perspective, I believe, was on the back.*

*I went back to statistics class. It was like, "Okay, standard deviations plus, minus this much," it was like all the information was there. You just had to decipher through to find what you actually needed and wanted to know.*

*Well, I think if I was doing it, I would have a cover sheet like this and have the basic snapshot, it would be school grade average. If I wanted to go in deeper, I can look at something like this but if a bullet was underneath there, I want to know what these numbers mean and what they're telling us.*

Parents, too, express some confusion and concern about "absolute" and "improvement" scores.

*That's confusing by itself. You have a school grade average here and you open it up and you got good absolute and unsatisfactory improvement rating. I guess, they put it aside and say on average, I guess.*

*It's funny because I remember there was something over here that I didn't like and I don't understand, I didn't understand the difference between absolute rating and improvement rating, like it has a good absolute rating and improvement rating and I just kind of skimmed to try to find the definition. I didn't see one. There probably is one but that was confusing to me.*

*So if you were excellent last year and this year you're still excellent what's your improvement rating?*

While parents may not have looked at the report card in detail, a few of them did compare their school to other schools where they felt they had some knowledge of how the schools should compare. In general terms, however, they only checked against their expectations.

Some parents express concerns about what will happen to schools that do not get good grades. No one has a clear understanding of the state mandates in this area, but most feel that the schools are likely to receive additional help and resources. A few fear that the schools with problems will have funding taken away from them.

*You go down to . . . a school district that's in dire straits. . . you look at the numbers of free lunches and the numbers are in the 80s and 90s of*

*percents of kids who are having free or discounted lunches and the number of single parent households is an astronomical figure and giving them an unsatisfactory to me, it's obvious it's going to be unsatisfactory.*

*They'd probably give them less money and give more money to the schools that scored better, which is kind of like an oxymoron because you should give more money to the schools that need it.*

*The ones that did poorly, I was thinking they would be more needy of money pumped into them.*

*But that doesn't mean they're going to get it.*

*Yeah. It doesn't mean they're going to get it.*

A few also express concerns about schools with poor grades losing students as parents choose other schools.

*One of the concerns from some of the people that did not like the idea of voucher systems is if you combine this with a vouchering system, you're going to have flight from districts that have bad grades and the vouchers would basically be how the schools got their money from the state in the first place.*

These parents are all aware of PACT and its importance within the schools. In the course of the discussion, they noted the importance of PACT to these scores, but it seems that few if any made the connection before the group. However, they do take the PACT tests in the schools seriously and understand their importance for their own child. Some are concerned about the lack of national comparisons for PACT scores.

*I'll tell you what I would do if I was an administrator of a school and this was coming out, I would be teaching that PACT test. I would be practicing on the PACT test type questions and type of testing procedures because that seems to be one of the key, key areas where they're going to get their [grade].*

*Well, PACT testing is certainly highlighted very much, just in the coverage it gets in this document.*

*I don't know if it's in response to the report card. I mean, I think PACT testing was already getting big billings.*

*There's a lot of media attention in the state given to PACT testing. School districts and the information they send to the parents, there's a lot of information that goes out to parents about PACT testing. You hear a lot about PACT testing in this state.*

On balance, while they do not take the report card as seriously as the educators do and may see flaws in it, they feel it is a positive step that can bring improvements, provided the schools that need help to improve are given the help they need.

*It would make more strive to do better so that they would be able to compete better with the other schools because the school wants to do as good as the next school. Kind of like how they are in sports, right?*

*The overall program, as far as the state's concerned is they wanted to improve the entire rating as compared to the state as opposed to compared to internal sections of schools. That's why I say the PACT test, which is strictly a South Carolina test, is good if you're comparing that to another school. Why not use SAT tests or something, a national standardized test and see how we stand compared to North Carolina and Georgia? But right now this [thing is in its] infancy.*

## Conclusions

Though they approach it differently and though they see flaws, both educators and parents in these groups view the report card as a positive process that is helping to improve education in the state.

Simplification of the report card would help parents who are less able to follow or less interested in the details. And educator concerns about possible inequities remain. On the whole, however, the reaction is positive.