REL Regional Educational Laboratory
MID-ATLANTIC at Mathematica Policy Research

Webinar on Implementing Online Report Cards: Research-Based Practices Workshop, Content

Friday, June 15, 2018

2:00–5:00 p.m. Eastern Time

Webinar transcript

[Jesse Chandler]:   This isn't something that we're going to spend an enormous amount of time on, in part because of where we think various stakeholders are in this process. But I think it's important to at least acknowledge content because when you think about how might you design a school report card, this is probably the first thing that comes to mind, right? Like, Oh, my gosh, what am I going to put in it? I have a page or a screen I have to fill up, what should go there? And there's a lot of different ways that we could think about this, particularly now, one place you might start is well, how do I comply with ESSA, right? What are the boxes I need to check off to make sure that I've reported what I need to report, right. And so just to briefly go through that the Every Student Succeeds Act requires that certain aspects of school performance are reported, right. So these include things like academic proficiency broken out by various categories, it includes the resources that are being invested in particular schools, again, broken out according to where that money is coming from, and then also whether it's being dedicated towards salaries or not, specific offerings that schools are providing, as well as a specific definition of what the accountability system is, what the metrics that are being used to inform what a school's ranking would be, and then the school's individual rankings relative to that system.

So that's one place you could start, obviously now that's an important consideration. But since everybody is going to the trouble of designing school report cards, there's also an opportunity to think about, well, what could go in beyond this, right? What additional information might we want to include in a school report card that would add value for other stakeholders that are trying to use this tool. And there's a few different approaches that you can take with that too. So one is just sort of starting as an organization or an institution, you might go through an exercise of thinking about, well, what's our mission, right? What is it that we as a school district or as educators are trying to provide to students and what is the kind of

information to collect and share with each other that reflects or gives us information about whether we're doing what we think we're trying to do?

At a very high level, this is an easy task. I don't think anybody in the room would disagree that schools are places that should be reasonably positive for the people that are there. While they're spending time in the building, they should learn something and the stuff that they learn impact them in some way that they carry once they leave the school and go out into the world. And so, in terms of positive environment, I mean things extending from very simple things like, are the schools clean and in good order? All the way up to how to students feel? Do they feel like there's adults maybe who have their back in that particular school and who will support them and are interested in their day to day life? For learning, it could mean academic proficiency, but it could be something broader than that too. It could mean things like children's emotional development do they gain the ability to sort of self-regulate and express their feelings. It could be something more complex or more contentious, like moral or civic development. So do we want to teach children that diversity is important and that they should be nice to their peers who are struggling, or is that not important. And you can see that as you start trying to define all of these concepts, they become much more contentious, particularly when you have to start evaluating and prioritizing what the various tradeoffs are.

The other thing I want you to notice, and I did this deliberately is this is kind of like operationalizing content in different ways, right? So you can think about the environment what are schools doing, or you can think about the experience of people who are in the school while it's happening, or you can think about what happens next. And you can address pretty much any topic from each of those angles. And what you decide to emphasize is again, a choice that you have to make. I think another way to think about this, aside from what should we be doing is, well what is it the parents want? This is particularly relevant if the school report cards are in fact targeted to parents, but even if they're not, and you accept that they're out there in the world, and the parents are also out there in the world. You have to pay respect to the possibility that parents will take this information and try to use it to inform their choice.

And so there's actually been a lot of research on why parents pick the particular schools that they do. And so we have some insight into the kinds of things that parents care about. This question's been addressed in a lot of different ways. Some of these will seem familiar when we come back to them later and talk about various research methods. But you can find out from parents what they want, just by asking them, what do you care about in the school? Or you can actually look at the revealed preferences. So what it is they're actually doing, what kind of schools do they actually enroll their

kids in? How do they rank different schools when they're sort of selecting schools within a unified application system.

Where are they deciding to live based on the assumption that home purchases are in some senses driven by the schools that are nearby and what are they searching for on the internet, right? What do they want to find out? We know a couple things. One thing that we know that maybe not so relevant for school report cards, but just an important consideration. Maybe if you're building a tool that has an element of a school finder kind of flavor to it is that parents really care about distance, right? Distance is a big driver of the practical experience of getting your kid to school in the morning, getting him home, how much time do they spend on the bus and all else being equal, parents prefer schools that are in their community than somewhere else. And this is so important that actually you can use distance as a metric to think about the relative importance of other attributes. So and Steve can talk about some of the specific studies that have been done that that look at this question, but you can ask questions like how much farther would you be willing to drive so your kid could play varsity sports?

Just wanted to spend a little bit of time talking about so there's been a there's an extensive conversation about how to measure academic proficiency that's well beyond what we can talk about today. And I think that everybody in the room is probably pretty far along in the process of figuring out how to report that. I want to spend a little bit of time talking about a couple different aspects of or a couple different types of information that might be relevant for school report cards, in part because people are starting to researchers are starting to appreciate the relevance for student outcomes. And also because there isn't really necessarily a lot of consensus about the right way to measure these kinds of constructs. So the first is like school climate, right? So what does it feel like to be in a school? And again, I want to emphasize that this is like more than just safety, right? This is like the feeling of is the school like an orderly kind of place where there's a sense of procedural justice and things that happen, happen for a reason. It includes relationships, right? So do kids feel like there's an adult in the school who has their back and who is looking out for them, and it also includes the physical environment too right, is the school clean? Is it well repaired are there trees in the playground? Or is it cement, right? All of these things are potentially relevant for outcomes related to climate and student experience.

There's also socio-emotional learning this is kind of a bucket term historically it's been referred to as non-cognitive skills. And it's basically anything that could potentially, you could learn or that could occur to you while you're in a school that has nothing to do with academic performance. So it's a big umbrella, there's a lot of different stuff that kind of fits into this category, but it can kind of be sub divided into like, roughly three categories

that are of particular relevance. So when a sort of interpersonal skills, right, the extent to which you can kind of get along with your peers, this is like leadership, teamwork, being nice, very globally defined, there's a growth mindset. This is something that's been shown to be very important for student outcomes in education. This is the idea that our students sort of do they have like an entitive theory of their ability like I am who I am, and this is about as good as I can get, regardless of what happens? And then self-control, which is also as it turns out, a very strong predictor of not only educational attainment, loss of success later in life, right? Can I show up and buckle down and do things I don't want to do like homework? Can I persist in the face of failure, stuff like that?

And then there's school offerings. This is something that we've talked about before, but I'm bringing it up again, because as I think we'll realize it's not exactly clear how you encapsulate the offerings of a school and report them in a way that's easily digestible. So just a couple of notes on school climate is something that is almost always measured through surveys. If you're going to go this route, you would probably want to think a lot about who you're serving this could be sometimes this is done through staff surveys sometimes researchers will survey parents or teachers or peers. There's a list maintained by self-safe supportive learning maintained at safesupportivelearning.ed.gov and if you're interested in the variety of self-report measures that are out there and the extent to which they've been validated. That's a good starting point. You'll also see that they vary tremendously in length, right? You may not want your parents to fill out 120 questions about what's going on in their school because no one will do it.

And then there's also some non-survey-based measures. One potentially low lift source of information is just administrative data. So records of suspensions, fights, violent incidents, this is with the assumption of course, that that information is recorded in more or less the same way across schools, and you feel comfortable making that kind of comparison. The other thing you can do is school climate walk, which is sort of an external review or a school effectiveness review, sorry which is sort of like an external review by third parties outside of the school just to kind of evaluate what's going on there. And one thing that Baltimore is doing I think that is kind of cool is this idea of a school climate walk and it's basically just a checklist and the thought here is that you visit the school as someone can visit the school with this checklist and it includes a number of different items. Is the hallway clean? Does somebody approached me and greet me when I walk through the door is it noisy and chaotic or reasonably quiet? And this gives you like a very moderate effort sort of environmental assessment of like what's happening in terms of the physical space of the school.

One thing I want to point out here that I think is important is that survey and non-survey measures are only moderately correlated with each other, right? So, for taking safety as an example, there's a difference between a school being safe objectively and a school feeling safe. And those two things aren't necessarily the same thing. I think you can have a conversation about which one of those things is most important for students, or which one do we want to prioritize in terms of reporting, but I think what you want to be careful with here is using one of those measures to make inferences about the other, right? Feelings of safety don't necessarily translate into objective safety and vice versa. I just wanted to come back to this notion very quickly of reference effect this is particularly true for socio-emotional Learning related questions, which are also self-report. And whenever you're asking somebody a question like are you dedicated and hardworking or something like that, the question that comes to mind is always there's an implied compared to what. And so when people are responding to surveys and evaluating themselves or their kids or their students, it's always in relationship to some sort of reference point. And for that reason, you get that you can run into issues with these kinds of survey-based measures.

So for example, very highly demanding schools will often produce better educational outcomes. But then when you survey kids about whether or not they're hard workers, they all say no. And the reason why is because there's like their peers are also very hard workers, and they're evaluating themselves against their peers. So on one level, when you're looking at individual students, people who say that they're hard workers actually do better at school. But then when you compare different schools and just look at the school level average, some of the the schools producing the best outcomes, students feel like they're not quite living up to the standards that they feel should be imposed upon themselves so that they're trying to apply it to themselves. I think again, the take home measure here is that you can also think about non-survey measures, people are working on behavioral assessments that will let you sort of compare between different schools, how long do kids persist on really hard tasks?

That's an area where there's only a little bit of work that's just starting now around things like grit and mindset and the behavioral outcomes that that produces. We're a long way off from that. And when you're using administrative data to answer these kinds of questions, it's important to keep in mind that they may not be clean measures of socio emotional learning.

So kids may not complete their homework for a lot of reasons beyond the fact that they might be lacking the will to do so, right. So very early the jury is not out yet or jury is not in yet. I think the take home from all of this is we've talked a lot about all of the different things that could go in report cards, what has to be there, heard a lot of information from people in the table about what else could be there. And the real challenge is taking all that

content and organizing it in a way that provides all the information that people want without providing too much information, right? So when people are looking at schools or trying to make any decision about anything in their life, they basically will attack the problem until they kind of run out of energy and then stop, right. And so this is true for 401K's, buying an iPod, picking a school, there's just a point where you can't evaluate it anymore. You may not have a perspective of what kind of time that looks like, because we're all kind of wonkish in like data and stuff like that. But we'll see in the web analytics that the time that people spend looking at these report cards might be less than you think.

So more measures can complicate life for consumers because they may not find what they're looking for, right? You may be hiding stuff that's actually critically important with each new element that you add in if you don't do it right. And then the other pieces that you may be providing shortcuts so if that parents will use inadvertently. So for example, if you have a value added measure of educational attainment that's really hard to understand. If you have a bunch of other information in there that looks kind of like it might be about educational quality, like maybe class size or something like that, parents might try and answer questions about say, the academic performance of the school by looking for that other those other cues and drawing all that information instead of the metric that you worked really hard on to convey to parents that piece of information. So there's tradeoffs in terms of more versus less, but that said, some of that can be mitigated through design and I think that's my cue for the switch off.

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