

8 Tips on Using Your School's Report Card

Under the No Child Left Behind law, school districts must distribute a report card on how every school and the district as a whole are performing. This report also must include data on how different groups of students are doing.

For many parents, this report card will be new. It's different from the reports you get from your child's teachers during the year. And it's different from the test score reports that parents often get toward the end of the school year. Those reports tell you how your *own child* is doing. These new school reports tell you how your child's *school* is doing — compared to last year and the year before ... and compared to other schools.

These new school reports provide a great opportunity for parents to better understand where the school is doing well and where it has challenges. Are all groups of students being well-served? Or are some lagging behind? Equipped with this information, parents can work with teachers and school staff to make improvements that will help their own child and, hopefully, all children.

Here are eight ideas for how parents can make the most of their school reports.

1

Make sure you receive a report. Districts are supposed to publish and disseminate the report cards as close to the opening of school as possible. Because of delays in getting data, some districts might not publish their reports until late fall, but wherever you live, you should expect to see something before the winter holidays. If you don't receive a report by then, talk to your principal, parent liaison or PTA/PTO leader.

2

Make sure the report has the required information. No Child Left Behind requires that school reports include reading and math test scores for different groups of students: whites, African Americans, Hispanics and other nationalities; low-income students; students with disabilities; and students with limited English language skills. The report

cards also must include information on the qualifications of the school's teachers. High schools must report on graduation rates. Elementary and middle schools must include at least one other indicator, usually attendance. The example from Kansas City, Missouri — prepared by KSA-Plus Communications and School Wise Press — shows the kind of information required.

GRADE 10		
Math		
Grade 10 students are tested, for example, on whether they can analyze data, solve problems using a system of equations, use scale drawings and determine simple probabilities.		
Percentage of students scoring at Advanced or Proficient		
	Our school	District
Total	32%	11%
Black	33%	13%
White	40%	14%
Hispanic	25%	12%
Asian	26%	11%
Other	35%	4%
Female	44%	15%
Male	30%	11%
Low Income	16%	9%
Not Yet English Proficient	18%	9%
Migrant	24%	9%
Learning Disabled	33%	17%

3

Identify strengths and weaknesses.

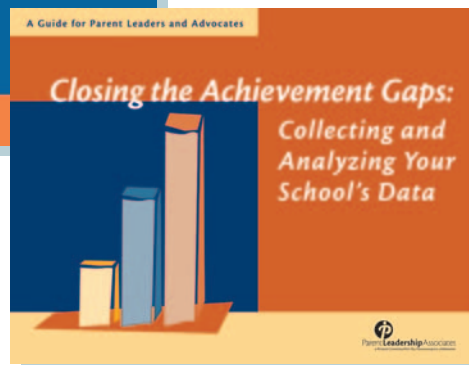
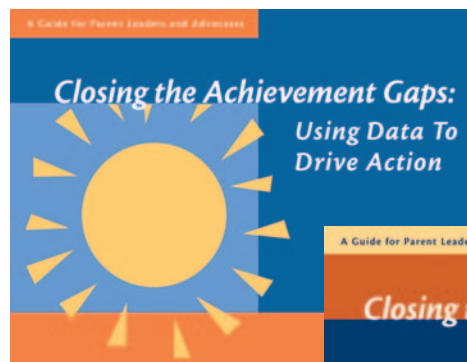
Which groups of students are doing well? Which groups are not doing so well? What are the trends from year to year? Do all students make gains, or do some groups of students stay about the same? How does the school compare to the district or state average? In some states, you also can find out how your school compares to similar schools (urban schools, suburban schools, low-income schools, etc.). With information like this, the school can better figure out how to improve.

4

Ask what is being done to address the weaknesses identified by the data.

For example, if reading scores are low, what is the school doing to improve reading instruction? If students with limited English are not making progress, how will the school modify its program for English language learners? If the school has a remedial program, how will those students catch up to the others, and when? If the percentage of teachers who are not qualified is high, what is the plan to upgrade their skills or bring in certified teachers?

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5

Have the principal schedule a meeting to explain the results.

School leaders should be willing to help parents understand the numbers ... to discuss how the school plans to improve ... why they think the plan will work ... and to ask for parents' help. This meeting also would be a good time for the principal to show parents how to interpret their children's individual reports on test results. At the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership in Kentucky, parents use tools such as these to learn how to understand school data.

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Subject	Group(s) most served by current school practices	Group(s) needing improved services
Reading		
Mathematics		
Science		
Writing		

6

Discuss what other indicators should be measured and reported.

The No Child Left Behind requirements are just a starting point. You and other parents likely want to know more about how the school is doing — extracurricular activities, parent and family involvement, awards or special programs, and so on. There is no reason why your school's report card shouldn't also cover these areas of interest. A 1999 survey by *Education Week* and KSA-Plus Communications asked parents to rank report card indicators in order of importance.

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Report Card Priorities (scale of 0–10)

School safety	9.6
Teacher qualifications	9.3
Class size	8.9
Graduation rates	8.7
Dropout rates	8.3
Statewide test scores	8.2
Parental satisfaction survey data	8.1
SAT/ACT scores	8.1
% of students promoted to next grade	8.0
Course offerings	7.8

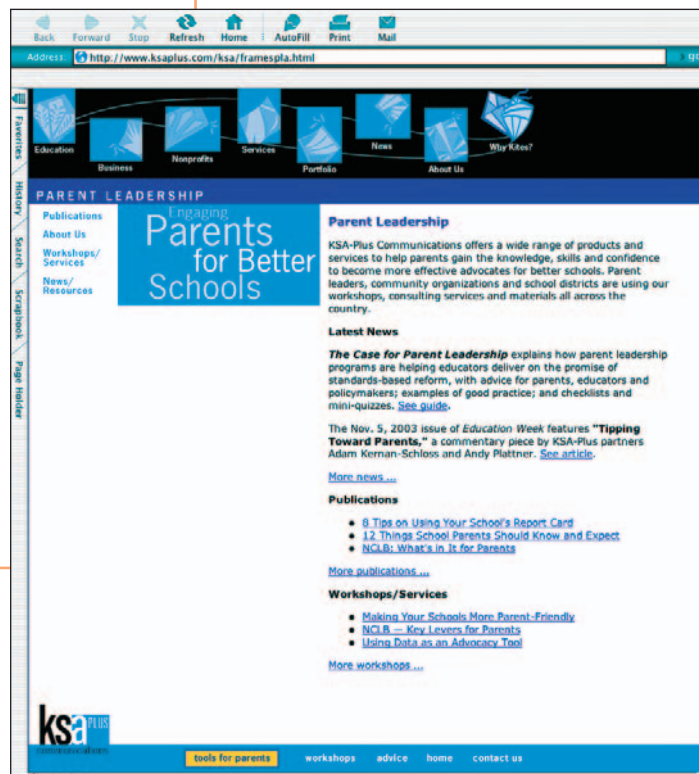
7

Keep asking questions. What is being done to improve? Which schools are doing better than ours and what can we learn from them? How can parents be most helpful — at home and in the school? What supports do teachers need to reach all students more effectively? How well are local after-school programs linked to what students are learning in class? School leaders might not have all the answers, but they should be willing to find out and to keep you informed about progress.

8

Get involved. Use the information in the school report to get more involved. Schools can't or shouldn't work on improving student achievement alone: They need dedicated parents like you to help them drive change. Again and

again, the research shows that, when parents are involved, student achievement improves. Online resources at www.ksaplus.com, www.centerforparentleadership.org, www.greatschools.net, www.schoolwisepress.com and www.pta.org feature helpful advice for parents.



At KSA-Plus Communications, we know that knowledgeable, engaged parents improve student achievement. Students win, educators win, communities win. We offer a wide range of materials, workshops and strategic advice to parent groups, community organizations, housing coops, faith-based groups, business leaders, elected officials and educators who are committed to ensuring that all American children, no matter what their background, get the kind of education they'll need to lead productive lives.

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