Taking Control of What Counts in Accountability: The Context-Enriched Report Card

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During the last two decades concerns about the quality of education have resulted in widespread calls for educational improvement and reform in many nations (McGinn, 1999). In the United States, this call has been accompanied by state accountability measures focused largely on student achievement as measured by a standardized test. Forty-nine states in the United States assess students as part of their accountability system. Most of them use results of standardized achievement and/or state-sponsored tests as the primary tool for judging school success (Franklin & Crane, 1993).

Thirty-six of these states share test results with the public through the use of a report card, which is distributed to parents of school children and reported in local and state newspapers. Many state report cards provide useful information, but in terms that are difficult to understand for most parents and community members. This information is typically brief and statistical in nature. A letter grade is often assigned to schools based on these statistical results. Thus, the public receives "sound bytes" about their schools – snippets of information that are often reported without a means to interpret them in a contextually relevant way. The reductionist nature of most state mandated reports limits the information available to parents and community members from which judgments can be made about the quality of the education offered. An over-emphasis on standardized tests has raised issues and concerns. These issues include the narrowness in defining success; ignoring the diverse needs of children and creating additional barriers to success and opportunities, particularly among those from poor, low-income environments; and deprofessionalizing educators (Levinson ,2000; Kohn, 2000; Whitford & Jones, 2000).

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This goal of increased communication has become increasingly important with the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). This act claims that one of its purposes is to offer parents more information about the quality of schooling that their children receive and to offer more choices to parents in schools that do not perform adequately on high stakes standardized tests. As part of this effort, schools are now required to report disaggregated data for type of education (general or special education), race/ethnicity, primary language, socioeconomic status (free or reduced lunch), and gender. Disaggregated data can offer new insights about how a district or school is doing, but there are also areas of caution. For example, we know that low-income children typically score lower on standardized tests. In many areas of the country, a disproportionate number of Black students are poor. Consequently, a disproportionate number of Black students do not score well on these tests. It is important that such statistics are provided to the general public with an explanation of what they do and do not mean so that misinterpretation does not occur.

The purpose of this article is to describe a supplemental reporting mechanism that augments current reports based on high stakes tests. Our goal has been to create a way to provide additional information to the public so that the criteria used to judge a school's educational quality is broadened. The article outlines the processes used in developing a school-based report card as well as the fundamental beliefs and purposes that underlie it. This type of reporting mechanism gives parents and community members a wider array of information with which to make judgments about the educational success of schools.

Problems and Criticisms of High Stakes Accountability Measures

Limited Interpretations of Success

The use of a single outcome measure (standardized or state sponsored tests) to assess school quality is a simplistic approach to assessing a complex environment. This approach is "grounded in the notion that only outcomes matter," and ignores the "daily life and culture of the school and district context" (Wheelock, 2000, 180). Using such a narrow means to measure success and rank schools limits the types of data available for decision-making and while making this type of assessment a major determinant in what is taught and valued in our society (Gipps, 1999). It is a summative evaluation approach that overlooks the potential of innovative programs in progress which may positively affect student outcomes over time (Guskey, 1996).

Ignoring Contextual Realities

Most state accountability systems focus on comparing schools rather than on the gains a school or group of schools has made toward meeting educational goals or standards. Thus, state accountability procedures create a system in which schools can be perceived in terms of winners and losers (Frank & Cook, 1995). Often schools with high percentages of poor and minority students are seen as "deficient" since it is these schools that usually end up with low scores and consequently with report cards that label them as failures (Whitford & Jones, 2000).

Although there is evidence that these tests can be biased, making the stakes even higher for students from low-income, under-resourced areas, test results are often viewed by the public as reasonable assessments of success and a valued method for determining outcomes (Cochran-Smith, 2000). At the same time, the student population in the United States is becoming increasingly culturally diverse,

requiring varied instructional and assessment approaches. In addition, the use of standardized tests as the single measure of school and student success undermines the concept of local control and consideration of context.

Thus, many school systems are in a quandary as to whether they should address the needs of their students in multiple ways or concentrate efforts on external mandates. For example, when examining the impact of the Kentucky reform system (KERA) which ultimately placed a major emphasis on the use of quantitative data and a "single number... to measure the school's total educational performance, schools with high numbers of low income students that had already instituted reform practices aimed at supporting the social, emotional, and academic aspects of learning were more likely to fall 'in decline' or 'in crisis.' and revert to old methods of instruction and operations" (Hohmann, 2000, 221).

Other unintended outcomes that have occurred as a result of the high stakes testing environment, particularly in high poverty schools, include retention of low-achieving students, encouraging students to drop-out of school, and placing students in special education classes to avoid having them tested (Darling-Hammond, 1991). Thus, the espoused purpose of accountability measures – improving schools – may, in fact, be leading to negative consequences for those students most at-risk (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Kohn, 2000).

Disenfranchising and Deprofessionalizing Educators

A third criticism of the "outcomes only" approach to accountability is that it negates the role of professionals in teaching and learning and places them in the role of technician. Today it is common for principals and teachers in low performing schools to be villainized by politicians and the media. In a recent study conducted on issues of empowerment for principals participating in the South Florida Annenberg Challenge, a school reform initiative that emphasizes local innovation, many principals indicated that there was too much emphasis on high stakes testing. This, in turn, encouraged teaching to the test, increased stress for principals and teachers, decreased morale, and curriculum and forced instructional changes geared toward improving test scores rather than improving teaching and learning (Reed & Gorrell, 2000; Reed et al., 2001). Hohmann (2002) found that top-down reforms, such as mandated testing, often "seriously compromise" the leadership of the principal trying to create meaningful reform and shift the "locus of control" from teachers and principals to a "higher governmental agency," thus limiting the essential role of these professionals in fostering student and school success (p. 221). When dealing with the impact of the situation on teachers, Hillard (2000) writes, "Many teachers whom I see have become depressed and terrorized by the mindless demands for inappropriate standardization not only in testing but in teaching as well" (p. 302).

Likewise the system of rewards and punishments imposed upon educational professionals and schools, which is intended to motivate them to excel, may have the opposite effect. As Kohn (2000) notes, "[S]ubstantial research literature has demonstrated that the more rewards or punishments are used as a way of inducing people to engage in an activity [or to improve their performance], the more these individuals tend to lose interest in whatever had to be done to receive the reward or escape the punishment" (p. 319). The No Child Left Behind Act carries with it the threat of closing schools and encouraging parents to move their children to other schools if their school is classified as underperforming. While no child should be subjected to a poor education, the reality is that many children and their families

do not have the social capital needed to negotiate district bureaucracy and switch schools. Consequently, those who need increased opportunities the most are those least likely to access them. By cutting back the resources available to poor performing schools, the poor and disenfranchised are once again the ones who lose out, even though the federal legislation claims to be concerned about their needs.

Accountability Within Our Context

The situation in Alabama is not very different from that in many other states. In 1995, the Alabama legislature passed the Education Accountability Plan, which mandated that accountability reports be made to the public 90 days after the beginning of the fiscal year. Under this plan, all public school students in grades three through eleven were administered the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT), a norm-referenced, multiple-choice test. As of spring 2002, only students in grades three through nine must take the SAT. Grades ten through twelve are assessed by an exit exam. The exit exam is a new test, implemented in 1999, that has been designed to ìraise the standardsî of education in the state.

Since 1996, the state superintendent of education has issued report cards for public schools, based on the results of standardized tests. Test results are summarized in a school report card that is sent home to parents and distributed to the media. The report card includes numerical ratings and letter grades from "A" through "F". They also provide information that can be used to compare a school with other schools in the state. Simplified portions of these report cards are printed in local newspapers and are publicized widely through other media.

Recent research on the factors related to high and low performance on these tests in Alabama indicates that low achieving schools had a higher percentage of students eligible for free/reduced lunch and fewer teachers with advanced degrees than high achieving schools. Additionally, schools with greater percentages of high socioeconomic status students receive more local revenue than schools with high percentages of low socioeconomic status students (Nelson, 2000). This is consistent with results in other states, which indicate that failing schools educate a disproportionate number of disadvantaged students (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Young & Smith, 1997). Thus, in Alabama, as in other states, schools that have high percentages of students classified as low income are being publicly labeled as failures with the blame for their failure being placed on teachers, administrators, and often the students themselves.

Creating Partnerships for Change

In 1998, Auburn University formed a Professional Development School Partnership with Loachapoka Elementary School to address educational needs and improvement. This is a rural school of approximately 350 students in grades K–5 of which 90% are African American and receive free or reduced price lunches. In 1997, the school was placed on "academic caution" by the state, based on standardized achievement test scores. Thus, the partnership team's initial focus was on working with teachers to better prepare students to score well on the standardized achievement tests and to develop motivational programs to encourage and reward successful student achievement on the tests. The school's standardized achievement test scores improved from the 36th percentile in the 1997–98 school year to the 50th percentile in the 1998–99. Although we were pleased with these results, we wanted to address issues of improved teaching and learning in a broader context, not one focused solely on standardized test results. This

led to discussions about the state accountability system, its negative impact on the school and community, and our responsibility to take control over keeping the community informed in a meaningful way about the quality of education in their school.

Rationale for Our Work

While we believe that the accountability system in our state must be re-examined and revised, we also believe that while it is in place, steps must be taken to minimize the negative impact it is having on schools. As our partnership and the relationships within it have grown, we have become keenly aware of the effect of the public labeling of this school as being "unsatisfactory."

As faculty members who place their undergraduate students in this school as a part of university class activities, we consistently have to deal with misplaced apprehension and inaccurate perceptions of this school as being a "bad" place. Yet, once college students enter the elementary school, work with the children, and become engaged with the community, their beliefs and understandings have changed. As one student noted in her journal, "I was somewhat apprehensive when you sent me to Loachapoka, but after working there for this quarter, I love those children. I can honestly say I think they are the most well-behaved, most wonderful children in the school system."

Having worked in many of these schools, we have found some of the most competent and dedicated professionals we have ever met. Thus, for us and for those in this school, changing perceptions of those within and outside the school became a deep concern. We also feel that as researchers and practitioners we have a responsibility to help educate others about more realistic means of assessing a school's educational opportunities and successes.

As our partnership members engaged in conversations about how to improve the educational environment for the students and teachers in this school, we decided it was imperative that we take immediate steps to rebuild internal confidence and external credibility in the value and performance of the school. Thus, we began our journey toward the creation of a school-based accountability and reporting system which resulted in the development of a "context-enriched report card."

Developing the Context-Enriched Report Card

Foundational Beliefs

Olson (1999) states that "both parents and taxpayers believe they can improve education with the right information, but they do not now think they are getting it" (p. 28). Olson observed that parents and other stakeholders want more than statistical information about schools. They also want "information about the quality of life in the school, school leadership, different program offerings, parent and student satisfaction rates, and the levels of parent involvement" (p. 33). Henry (1996) advocates a "community accountability system" that "relies on an open flow of information between public schools and the public" (p. 87). We agree and believe that what is of value in schools and education should be determined by the professionals and local stakeholders within the context in which it occurs. This

Table 1
Sample Framework for Value-Added, Context-Enriched Report Card

Assessment Categories	Specific Indicators	Sources for Data	Who is Responsible?
Student Performance	Product - Performance based outcomes - Value-added indices Process - Test taking programs Progress - New academic programs	- Promotion rates - Grades - Comparisons of standardized test scores across time - Preparations for test taking - Tutoring - New academic programs	Vice Principal Teachers Principal Resource Teacher Teachers Teachers
Teaching for Understanding*	Product - Authentic assessments - Test emphasis on complex thinking Process - Inquiry-based learning in classes Progress - Use of cooperative learning - Problem based learning	- Professional development activities - Administrative observations - Student surveys	University Professor Principal Vice Principal
Classrooms and Schools as Learning Communities*	Product - Student and teacher involvement in developing curriculum/learning Process - Action research Progress - Team teaching activities	- Coordinated planning time for science units - Insights from teacher work teams - Student comments	Teachers

*Based on *Guiding Principles of the Holmes Group* (Holmes Group, 1990).

assertion is based on the assumption that educators represent a source of professional judgment that others cannot offer and that, because of their personal and contextual knowledge, local stakeholders can also make judgments about the worth or quality of educational programs or schools (Reed & Ross, 2002).

Although we have to live with the existing state accountability and reporting system, we could also begin to take some control of information shared with the public by also distributing our own locally developed report card. We began by working to define what counts as quality and by collecting, analyzing, and reporting on a wide range of information. Our efforts turned to facilitating discussions about purposes, format, distribution, content, development, and assessment procedures we would use in creating and distributing this accountability mechanism. (See Table 1 for a sample framework.)

Purposes

We began by establishing four purposes for our report card. First we wanted it to be something that would encourage our team members and other educators to take a proactive stance in framing and responding to the concept and process of accountability. Second, we wanted to develop a tool that would help all of us focus on the improvement of teaching and learning. Our third goal was to inform the public about the quality of the education at this school in a comprehensive, yet understandable way. Our fourth purpose was to provide stakeholders with the opportunity to provide feedback about what is important to them and to share their perceptions about the quality of education that was being provided to children in the community.

Format and Distribution

We wanted to ensure that enough information would be reported to allow our stakeholders to make informed decisions about the quality of education provided. At the same time we wanted the information to be concise and easily understood.

We also wanted to report our information in a format that would be non-threatening, particularly to parents, for whom "report card"and "statistics" might be intimidating. Thus, we decided to share school data in a format similar to a newsletter. To distinguish it from a newsletter, we chose the title *Evaluator*, emphasizing its function as a means of judging the school's effectiveness. The content focuses on quality indicators which are emphasized in all issues. The partnership team decided that the *Evaluator* would be sent to parents with the first student report card of the year and again with the results of the end-of-year standardized tests. Parents could then judge the worth of the school based on both state standards and those the school and community deemed important.

Content

One of the first steps we took after deciding to develop the context-enriched report card was to create a framework to systematically collect, discuss, synthesize, and report meaningful data. We wanted the accountability system to be comprehensive and to report on a wide range of quality indicators. Thus, we decided to report, not only on products, but also the processes, and progress of education within the school (Guskey, 1996). We believe that we have a responsibility to provide our readers with a wide array of information from which they can draw their own conclusions about the effectiveness and value of the school and the extent to which children are receiving a quality education.

Product indicators. Scriven (1979) suggests that we enter the evaluation process open to assessing any and all effects of a program. Therefore, we decided to include a variety of instructional elements and curricular outcomes in the *Evaluator*. Since the state accountability system judgements are based on standardized test scores, the implications for ignoring perceptions about these tests can spell trouble for the administrators, teachers, and students at a school. Consequently, in issues of the *Evaluator*, we are careful to discuss standardized testing with an eye toward educating the public about what such test scores do and do not mean. To provide a balance, numerous other outcomes of student learning are highlighted. For example, in one issue featured a piece about student skill mastery through participation in an integrated physical education/academic content program.

Process indicators. The *Evaluator* also reports on process indicators. In an article on conveying school performance, Reed et al. (2000) state that to the public, accountability "means that a complete portrait should be painted." To paint a complete portrait, the public needs more than numbers that compare schools. Rather, they need to know what schools are doing to educate students, or, in Guskey's (1996) terms, the "hows" of education. Smylie and Tuermer (1995) suggest that "organizational antecedents to meaningful, long-term programmatic change and increased student learning" should be an early focus of evaluation. Such information affords readers the opportunity to evaluate the "means"as well as the "ends" of education.

Indicators of progress. Gains made toward learning goals are termed progress variables (Guskey 1996). Efforts toward improving education and indications that students are learning or making progress, regardless of what standardized assessment scores, should play a large role in defining school success and effectiveness.

Categories reflecting product, process, and product indicators. We based our selection of categories to reflect the product, process, and product indicators on two types of standards. First, since the partnership is a direct outgrowth of the Holmes Group, it seemed appropriate to adopt Holmes Group principles (Holmes Group 1990, vii) as follows:

(a) teaching for understanding;
(b) organizing classrooms and schools as learning communities;
(c) setting ambitious goals for everybody's children;
(d) establishing an environment that supports continuous learning for all adults as well as for children;
(e) making reflection and inquiry the central feature of the school;
(f) inventing a new organization.

Second, we considered elements of effective schools, including leadership, high expectations, effective teaching practices, and school climate (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1993).

Finally, considering both the Holmes Group principles and the literature on effective schools, we developed eleven assessment categories for which we would consistently collect data in terms of product, process, and progress. The assessment categories include: (1) student performance; (2) teaching for understanding; (3) making reflection and inquiry a central feature of the school; (4) thinking of classrooms and schools as learning communities; (5) setting ambitious goals for all children; (6) considering health and safety; (7) stimulating continuous learning for adults as well as children; (8) creating a positive school climate; (9) developing community partnerships; (10) inventing a new

organization; and (11) help wanted. Our last category was included to offer avenues for parents and others to become actively involved in shaping the school. These categories are reflective of the goals at this school and of the Professional Development School relationship. As such, they are contextually meaningful indicators of success and learning opportunities.

Collecting data for the report card. After deciding on these categories, we created a design framework to use for organizing and using our data. We discussed and listed specific items or activities in each category related to products, processes and progress. Next, we identified potential sources of data to be collected or analyzed. Third, we identified who would be responsible for collecting the data. Last, we established a timeline for completion. Once data are collected and organized, we reflect on the data and what it means in relationship to our progress toward meeting identified goals.

Reflections on Our Work

Impact on the School

Although the state report card summarizing the standardized test results does provide valuable information to the school and, to an extent, the community, we argue that these statistical reports do not provide nearly enough information or explanation to the community. For impoverished schools making a serious effort to improve student learning, a "context-enriched" report card can help parents and others understand that schools are more than test results. They are places that help young people grow and develop. Parents' and community members' comments support the contention that the school's image can be affected by a context-enriched report card. The following comments are representative of the responses we received: "I like [the] *Evaluator* because it tell[s] of all the thing[s] that are going on to improve our school for the better education of our children" and "I can see a change in the whole school, K–6 – a very good change – and I'm proud of it."

Impact on Our Partnership

The accountability system we have created and the reporting mechanism we have employed have been an important part of our work in creating a powerful PDS partnership. We have spent time examining the extent to which our work together has been collaborative and enriching for partners. We have been careful to assure that all members of each partnership group have had some responsibilities for developing and enacting the evaluative process and that we have held one another accountable for the tasks to be performed. The process of determining what to report, how to report it, and what to consider as evidence has fostered a co-mentoring atmosphere in the school (Stover & Reed, 2002) that holds teachers accountable to each other while offering job-embedded professional development opportunities.

The experience of working together on this effort has impacted us and others in a variety of ways. The organizational format of the context-enriched report card facilitates open and honest assessment of school-wide strengths and areas for growth. The deliberative manner for selecting articles for publication in the *Evaluator* fosters inquiry about what is occurring and why, as well as reflection about the consequences of those actions. By systematically addressing each of the categories and the products, process, and progress indicators we have engaged in a continuous process of school improvement and have been able to identify key areas of concern and growth.

Continuous Improvement

Although we have received positive responses to the *Evaluator*, we have also continued to improve it. The last few issues of the *Evaluator* were reformatted such that the categories of success indicators were more explicitly stated. Each category addressed was used as a heading for a section. We have added a feedback section asking parents and community members to help evaluate the quality of the school and its programs as this appears be an avenue to increase parental involvement in the evaluation of the school and school improvement. We are also eager to reach a wider audience. Toward this end, we plan to distribute the next edition of the *Evaluator* to more local businesses and organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce.

Summary

We have developed a school quality reporting system that promotes proactive accountability, fosters on-going inquiry and reflection, and informs the public in a comprehensive and understandable way. The Evaluator provides a way for the teachers and other school personnel to decide what should be reported to the parents and community about the school. Through the process of gathering and reporting data, reflection on the functioning of the school and the quality of its programs is facilitated. The report card does not rely solely on statistics but gives concise descriptions of the process and progress made by teachers and students as well as the results of their efforts (products). Educators use their professional judgment to determine areas of strength, processes in place, and progress being made, as well as areas needing greater attention.

A primary goal of all school improvement should be the enhancement of teaching and learning conditions (Hillard, 2000). As a part of the process of improvement, a broad concept of student learning, not just improved achievement test scores, needs to be measured and reported to the public so that informed decisions can be made about the quality of education. Further, ongoing inquiry and reflection about the best content and means for educating our nation's young people should occur on a regular basis. We believe that our locally-based accountability system offers one means of accomplishing these goals. It is important for all educators to become proactive in accountability and reporting processes. Such action is particularly important for those schools considered to have children "at risk" since these schools appear to have the most to lose in today's present "rewards and punishments" environment.

Three schools in this school district now use the context-enriched reporting process. Through evaluative tools such as the context-enriched report card we can work toward helping the public to be well-informed participants, not just consumers of our educational systems. In this way, we can begin to reframe the educational and political agenda that is overwhelming many schools, educators, and children. Rather than reacting to state reported information, members of the professional school community reviewed their school in an honest and systematic manner and then reported their findings to the greater school community. This process helped to redirect some of the power away from the state and return it to educators and the communities in which they live and work. The context-enriched report card appears to be one strategy for engaging in meaningful accountability in an age of educational reform.

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