Holding Schools Accountable Toolkit

A Guide for People Working in Neighborhoods

Prepared by Public Impact
under a grant from
the Annie E. Casey Foundation

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Public Impact is an education policy and management consulting firm in North Carolina with expertise in school accountability, professional development, teacher quality, and charter schools. The N.C. Charter School Resource Center provided administrative support for the distribution of this toolkit.

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Holding Schools Accountable Toolkit

tool \ tül \ *n* : an instrument used for hands-on work

The "Holding Schools Accountable Toolkit" is a collection of instruments, materials, stories, tips, and references from pioneering community-based efforts to hold schools accountable. Transforming institutions requires hands-on work, and this is certainly the case when working to improve schools. This toolkit offers assistance to community leaders who want to involve neighborhoods and families in efforts to create better schools and increase academic outcomes for children.

Developed as a resource for communities involved in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* initiative, the toolkit should also be useful to other community-based school reformers nationwide.

This toolkit is available online at:

www.publicimpact.com/hsat

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INTRODUCTION

Holding Schools Accountable

Introduction

In the United States, education is widely recognized as the great equalizer. Historically, public schools have proved a significant force in improving conditions for our country's immigrants, minorities, and poor. But today in many neighborhoods the promise of public education goes unfulfilled. Across the country, fragile neighborhoods are grappling with chronic failure in public schools. As a result, far too many children are being robbed of bright and hopeful futures.

Without the asset of strong schools – where academic standards are high – children from high poverty neighborhoods confront a lifetime of closed doors and locked opportunities. Our neighborhoods, and country as a whole, cannot afford to squander the promise of public schools. Children are entitled to, and must reap the full potential of, a strong public education to unlock their minds and futures.

State lawmakers and district administrators are placing increased pressure on schools to raise student achievement. Pressure, as well as assistance, also must come from those closer to the school in order to reach ambitious achievement goals.

In the neighborhoods that house schools, residents and families must recognize that considerable responsibility falls on their shoulders. They, too, must take action to hold schools accountable.

Communities working to transform their own public schools are, in the process, recognizing the power of their work to transform families and neighborhoods as well. Improving schools helps address many of the crises threatening neighborhoods, families, and children. Engaging families in school reform efforts has a reinforcing effect: it builds skills and confidence among residents, brings new resources and pride to neighborhoods, and increases opportunities for children.

As you will see in this toolkit, many concerned communities have taken action to improve public schools, and their experiences hold lessons for us all.

OVERVIEW

Why Neighborhoods and Families Need To Hold Schools Accountable

The unique access of neighbors and families

Schools — their leaders and staff — are accountable for results when there are real consequences for how well schools meet expectations for student learning. Neighbors and families can play a critical role in defining the student learning results they want and ensuring that schools feel pressures to improve student performance.

The people who live and work in neighborhoods with schools are physically "close to the action." Parents of children attending schools are even more directly connected. Both groups are in a unique position to set and reinforce high expectations for schools through contact with school principals and teachers, and with each other. Knowing that parents and neighbors expect strong student learning and will take action based on results is the first step towards excellence.

How to use this toolkit

Too often neighborhood leaders and families recognize that their schools are failing to adequately educate students, but they lack the know-how to change things for the better. The "Holding Schools Accountable Toolkit" will help groups move beyond being worried or angry – to actually using effective strategies and taking action that will make positive, significant, and lasting changes in schools. It offers helpful information, in straightforward terms and with concrete examples, on how to make changes. The toolkit also indexes other sources of information so local groups can access the abundant research and literature on school reform, school-family partnerships, and community organizing. The suggestions offered and examples cited are based on the real experiences of communities across the country.

Who Can Use This Toolkit

Parents, family members, and caregivers of public school students
Groups of families
Neighborhood groups and associations
Community development organizations
Concerned citizens
Educators
A partnership or coalition involving all of the above

The toolkit is organized around five main stages that are common to effective neighborhood-family-school efforts to hold schools accountable.

Getting Organized and Setting a Vision: suggests how to move beyond the undesirable realities of schools today, to a jointly-created description of and plan for creating the schools your neighborhood needs and desires.

Identifying Academic Standards and Setting Goals: offers ideas about how to determine what is most important for local students to know or be able to do at each stage of their education and in life beyond public schools.

Gathering Information: lists resources to learn the facts about schools and student performance, and suggests how to engage families and neighborhood residents in identifying needs and finding solutions for local educational issues.

Taking Action: presents ideas on what to do to bring about positive change in schools.

Reflecting, Evaluating, and Learning from Experiences: outlines ways to measure progress and ensure a successful effort.

As it is often said, school reform offers no quick fixes or magic wands for turning schools in crisis into overnight success stories. Changing schools, like changing any organization, takes strong commitment over time. But communities across the US are successfully turning the tide and making significant gains in student achievement. You can help make meaningful change occur in your community too.

Today's efforts can benefit from the trails blazed by others farther ahead in the journey. Although there are no canned solutions or one-size-fits-all models, the experiences and the tools that helped bring success to others can offer insight and direction on what may work to meet the needs of your neighborhood.

This toolkit offers such resources from communities that are experiencing success in bringing positive change to schools. Inside you will find a set of materials and resources aimed at helping neighborhood residents hold schools accountable for student achievement.

The toolkit serves as a companion to the guide, *Building More Effective Community Schools,* also funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The "guide" examines issues and trends in school reform and seeks to build a broad base of knowledge from which to begin the work of change. This toolkit identifies specific steps and tools from other communities to make schools more responsive to the educational needs of local children. ▶

"Poor parents are a lot more concerned about their children's education than suggested by society and the media."

School choice advocate
Washington, DC

With the exception of the final "stage," which is mostly integrated throughout the document's other sections, the toolkit's sections are divided into four parts:

- An **INTRODUCTION** to the topic
- Specific **STEPS** and sample **TOOLS** to use in carrying out the work
- **QUESTIONS** to pose while reflecting on your progress
- **RESOURCES** for getting more information

You will find embedded in these sections brief accounts of pioneering efforts across the country and quotations from successful community organizers.

These five stages are not necessarily sequential, and none stands alone. Examine all five stages, noting key elements of each, and determine where your efforts should begin. Beginning with a comprehensive understanding of neighborhood-family-school efforts will make each stage of development go more smoothly. For example, gathering information or reviewing possible actions to take may help you establish a compelling vision. Once you start, it will be equally useful to glance back at previous stages to make sure your work is still on track.

Learn from others, but tailor your efforts

No two communities face identical circumstances. Schools differ, leadership varies, and communities are diverse. Thus the approaches to school reform within and across cities will not be exactly the same. But we all are people seeking the same end-result – high student achievement – and there are lessons to be learned from others undertaking similar work. Keep this in mind as you read and use materials from the toolkit. Apply appropriate elements and adjust your approaches in response to the challenges and context of your neighborhood and schools.

> **"Public education is a major tool for poor and minority parents."**
>
> **Parent trainer**
> **San Antonio, TX**

Staying focused

Improving schools can include many elements: setting high standards, adopting a challenging curriculum aligned with those standards, testing and assessing results, improving professional development, using technology, enhancing family involvement, offering new choices to families, and making schools safer. While it is important to use multiple strategies, it is also easy for efforts to become diffuse. You can quickly find yourself dabbling in lots of issues, exhausted by the effort and producing few results. Keep sight of the vision and goals you establish and work relentlessly to produce results where they matter the most – student achievement. After you fully tackle one issue, build on the success by developing new goals and taking on new challenges. Permanent school improvement is comprehensive and ongoing.

This toolkit emphasizes how your neighborhood, in partnership with schools, can take responsibility for ensuring that students achieve at the highest levels. Set your sights high, identify one to four educational issues that need attention, use data to inform your activities, engage families and neighborhood residents in the work, and remain committed for the long haul.

GETTING ORGANIZED
AND SETTING A VISION

What do we want for students in our neighborhood's schools and how do we imagine we will accomplish it?

Getting Organized





Introduction

vision \ vizh-ən \ *n* : a jointly created, broad description of the ideal state or condition of schools

To maintain focus and chart the path, school reform efforts need a vision or mission and an initial plan for carrying out the work. An appropriate metaphor for taking on work in school reform is setting out on a journey. Many of the experiences and processes compare to planning and starting out on a journey – a journey to higher achievement and better schooling. In fact, we will refer to those community groups who have already set out to improve schools as "pioneers."

Before setting out, you must select a destination and to prepare for the trip, by creating a vision of where you want to go and by making early plans to get there. While planning, you should determine who needs to come along to make the effort a success, when you expect to arrive at key junctures, and what kind of vehicle will get you there. The details of charting the route and hitting the road will come later. Let's put first things first.

STEPS TO CREATE A VISION AND MAKE INITIAL PLANS

1. Create a structure for initial planning
2. Set a timeframe
3. Identify key stakeholders
4. Bring people to the table
5. Encourage brainstorming and creative ideas
6. Determine priorities and build consensus
7. Craft a vision statement and publicize it

Steps and Tools

1. Create a structure for initial planning

Determine what size organizing group will be needed for local community-based school improvement efforts. The number of people and organizations involved may depend on what your staff and volunteers can manage, the level of financial resources available to support the group, your experience with similar efforts, and relationships in the neighborhood and schools. The organizers can be a loose band of community activists and concerned families, a partnership between two organizations, or a coalition made up of multiple organizations and individuals. The context of your community and schools will dictate the size and the constituents.

Establish a central organizing body, such as a steering committee, planning committee or task force to begin the early planning. Draw on local people and organizations with significant ties in the neighborhood and schools. This core membership will serve an important role in creating links between educators, families, and residents. There may already be an entity like this in your community; if so charge it with creating the initial plan. There is no need to reinvent the wheel.

When recruiting planning committee members, select a group that is reflective of your neighborhood and the students and families at local schools, in terms of race, ethnicity, language, culture, religion, age, socioeconomic status, etc. To ensure meaningful planning efforts, involve people who know your neighborhood and schools and who are residents themselves. Discover the untapped talent and natural leaders in the neighborhood whose skills may not be widely recognized, but who have the respect of local residents. It is also wise to include one or more people from outside of the neighborhood who will bring new and different perspectives.

> **To be successful it is important to include the people in the neighborhood. The group process is where trust is built. Schools come to view you as a community asset.**
>
> **Neighborhood organizer**
> **Chicago, IL**

If you are aiming for a large organizing group, bring in representatives from a cross section of local and state organizations with common interests. Your community-based group may choose to enter a formal agreement and form a partnership with these natural allies. Consider including the faculty of area colleges and universities who can bring important resources and play critical roles in the educational system. You also may choose to connect with other school reform efforts underway in your area (e.g. Annenberg Challenge, charter school networks, and New American Schools Design Teams). These strategic linkages will strengthen your work by offering access to information and bringing a diverse pool of contributors.

Refer to the tools on pages 7 and 8, with examples of partnerships and planning steps, as you begin to organize. ▶

Sample Tools

Stakeholder Participation Plan

Consider a broad range of roles. Use this tool for your initial organizing and again when you are ready for major action planning.

For initial organizing, consider these roles:

1. Involve in organizing team (requiring significant time and work)
2. Include in brainstorming or solicit input in other ways
3. Keep informed of group's progress
4. Request help on specific tasks or activities

Stakeholder/Group	Representatives (who?) or All	Ideal Role in this Phase of Organizing	Steps to Elicit Involvement
• Parents			
• Students			
• Teachers / other school staff			
• Principals / other school leaders			
• Neighborhood residents			
• College / University faculty			
• Business community			
• Other			

Suggested by Public Impact

Once formed, the planning committee can establish a long-range framework to determine how and when to engage the broader pool of stakeholders. The framework should allow for flexibility and adjustments based on the input of families and neighborhood residents. Refer to the tool on page 9, "Planning Steps for Organizational Success," for a model framework.

Our greatest strength is also our greatest challenge and that is our effort to build partnerships across traditionally divisive lines – parents, teachers, administrators. It is pivotal for success and there is always room to improve and to do it better.

Neighborhood organizer
Philadelphia, PA

Structuring a framework requires a delicate balance of defined action steps and responsive flexibility. People like to know they are working on a well-planned and well-organized initiative, with a beginning and an end. But if it's too tight and too defined, they wonder why their input and involvement was requested. Stakeholders – whether paid staff or volunteers – want to believe that their participation will make a difference and they need confidence that there is a reliable structure and organized support to see their plan through completion. People like to know that every meeting matters, because nobody wants to feel time is being wasted.

2. Set a timeframe for your work

During your early planning, sketch out a timeframe – allotting adequate time for each stage of work. Your timeframe will depend on the scope of work you will undertake and anticipated resources. These planning activities and decisions might all take place at one meeting or through numerous sessions over several months. ▶

Three examples of broad-based partnerships

Pitt County Coalition
Parents for Public Schools
The PTA Council
Community School/Recreation
The Family Support Network
Chamber of Commerce
Communities In Schools
The League of Women Voters
The Exceptional Children's Advisory Committee
Partnership for Progress
The Mediation Center
The Arc of Pitt County
Black Ministerial Alliance

North Phila. Compact for College Access & Success
Philadelphia Education Fund
Temple University
Philadelphia Schools Collaborative
Community College of Philadelphia

New York City's Parent Organizing Consortium
ACORN
Community Action Project
Mothers on the Move
Northwest Bronx Community
Clergy Coalition
South Brooklyn Development Corporation

Sample Tools

Planning Steps For Organizational Success: An Outline for Work Teams

1. Analyze present situation
    a. Where are we now?
    b. What are the conditions affecting us?
    c. Under what parameters are we operating?
    (Laws, policies, mandates, financial requirements, limitations, etc.)
    d. What are our resources? (What can we use, rely upon, work with, as we move forward?)
2. What priorities have emerged from this step? What do we see as the Key Issues?
    a. What key challenges need to me managed?
    b. What major threats need to be mitigated?
    c. What are the primary strengths we can build upon?
    d. What opportunities should we capitalize on?
3. Establish objectives
    a. Where do we want to be?
    b. What do we want to have happen?
    c. What are the specific outcomes we're after?
    d. How will we know we've been successful?
4. Clarify a strategy for reaching objectives
    a. How can we achieve desired outcomes? What approaches might we use?
    b. What are our alternative courses of action? What are the "roads to Rome?"
    c. What are our best alternatives/strategies?
    d. What should be our plan of action?
        i. What specific actions are to be taken?
        ii. Who specifically has responsibility for these actions?
        iii. How will this responsibility be communicated?
        iv. How will we know this responsibility is being accepted and carried out?
        v. How will these actions be funded?
        vi. When are these actions to be carried out?
        vii. What will be our review and control procedures?
5. Analyze conditions likely to affect plan implementation
    a. What might help our plan?
    b. What might hurt our plan?
    c. Where could we get tripped up?
    d. Are our outcomes realistic?
6. Develop alternative strategies
    a. How will we protect ourselves from threats to our plan?
    b. How will we capitalize on helpful forces in carrying out our plan?
    c. How do we need to alter or restructure our plan to assure success?
    d. What is "Plan B?"
7. Establish review and control procedures: How will we monitor progress and measure/gauge results?
8. Implement plan

Used by
Charlotte-
Mecklenburg
Education
Foundation
Charlotte, NC

In any case, transforming schools is a long and thoughtful process, so allow sufficient time to address crucial issues along the way and to respond to unexpected bumps in the road.

Time devoted to planning will vary based on the context of organizational, neighborhood, and school needs. Carefully balance the time allotted for planning and the time for taking action. Because of past efforts, some organizations will be primed and ready to begin with little advance planning. Other groups may need to build their capacity and cultivate new relationships in the initial stages before taking action. Just remember you cannot afford to deliberate too long.

Your overall timeframe should account for significant local events and dates, such as a school board election and the start of the school year. If you want your efforts to have an impact on these events, allow sufficient time to plan and take action well before they take place.

3. Identify stakeholders to include in the process

Stakeholders are those with something to lose or gain by an outcome. With school reform a variety of people qualify. Go beyond organizational partners and involve a broader pool of local residents and educators in every stage of your work. Involve students as well. Even though they are at the center of school accountability movement, students are often left out of conversations about school improvement. Use the Stakeholder Participation Plan (page 7) to think through roles different participants can play.

Important dates and events to consider when setting a timeframe

- Contract negotiations (e.g. superintendent, union, principal, teacher)
- Annual budget preparation, recommendations, and approvals
- School bond campaigns and elections
- First day of the school year or semester
- Dates of student achievement tests
- Public release of student performance data
- Teacher workdays
- School holidays and breaks
- School board elections
- City and/or county official elections
- Grant application deadlines

Stakeholders to consider including in your school reform effort

- Students
- Parents and guardians
- Grandparents
- Teachers
- Teaching assistants
- Substitute teachers
- Student teachers
- Guidance counselors
- Principals and assistant principals
- School district administrators
- School board members
- Retired educators
- Immigrant and minority community leaders
- School Leadership Team members
- Residential/business neighbors of schools
- Faith community leaders
- Senior citizens
- Private/parochial school representatives
- College students
- College admissions officers
- College administrators and professors
- City council members
- County commissioners
- Police officers
- Coordinators of youth organizations/programs
- Afterschool program coordinators
- Daycare center operators
- Small business owners
- Corporate representatives
- Current and prospective funders

"How you tell the story to get people involved is key. You must have a specific bit of information to generate interest and action. For example, you might pose the question, 'Did you know that "X" percent of students missed school last month and the police are willing to help find solutions? Are you?'"

Community involvement coordinator
Grand Rapids, MI

4. Bring stakeholders to the table and foster strong participation

In some communities, just the invitation is enough to bring identified stakeholders to the table. In other communities, leaders struggle with laissez-faire attitudes, and even apathy, among residents when it comes to public education. One approach to rally support is to share information about serious problems in schools. Alarming facts about student performance and its implications may prompt people who didn't know they have something at stake when schools fail. This is a time you may consider taking steps to gather some initial student data and information on schools to stimulate interest among prospective supporters. Early surveys of the community (even those already conducted by other groups) might determine what issues concern residents and what information might compel them to act. ▶

Whenever possible, balance negative reports to stakeholders with success stories from other communities that are confronting similar educational challenges. Or you might announce good news, like recent grant awards and community pledges to support school improvement efforts. Remind stakeholders that there can be positive outcomes when they become involved.

> **You must find ways to engage principals and superintendents so they don't dominate conversations. Timing to bring on board decision-makers is important. If it's too soon they can squelch the ideas of teachers, parents, and the community when they don't see their value. If you include them too late, you don't have their support, which is often critical.**
>
> **Education program director**
> **Tuscaloosa, AL**

Once you have the attention of stakeholders, employ strategies and incentives that ensure their full participation in appropriate project activities. Remember, many stakeholders are parents with jobs and hectic daily schedules that place demands on their time. People are more likely to take time to participate and become involved if the purpose is compelling and they believe their participation is valued. It's also important to consider their daily routines and parental responsibilities when scheduling meetings.

Adversarial situations in the neighborhood and schools could affect the initial planning process, timeframe, and recruitment of participants. It may be that the school and neighborhood issues have created tension between neighborhood residents and school staff. In some cases, there may be deep, mutual resentment and mistrust, and the community may be polarized on school issues. Such circumstances make bringing groups together – to find positive solutions that benefit students – all the more critical, albeit challenging. If this describes a situation in your community, take measures early on to begin easing the tension, building trust, and opening up communication.

Use the tools on page 13 to attract participants and to ease tensions that may exist.

Issues that have rallied residents and prompted communities to take action

- Poor reading skills among students (and the related social and economic outlook)
- Low high school graduation and college admission rates
- Minority student achievement gaps
- Student retention and social promotion policies
- Reconstitution of low performing schools
- High absenteeism (and the correlation between student absenteeism and crime rates)
- High dropout rates (and the correlation between dropouts and local unemployment rates)
- School equity issues
- Teacher recruitment and turnover statistics
- Threatened school closures
- Overall frustration with the state of public schools

Sample Tools

Meeting Strategies To Attract Targeted Stakeholders

- Schedule meetings at convenient times (after school or work hours, during weekends)
- Post notices and make announcements in locations and through channels most familiar to residents (churches, schools, recreation centers, restaurants, radio/TV stations, newspapers)
- Hold multiple sessions to provide more than one opportunity to participate
- Make personal phone calls and home visits to solicit involvement
- Gather in welcoming and convenient places (schools, churches, homes, community centers, colleges, libraries)
- Piggyback other neighborhood and school events (festivals, school open house, parent-teacher conference)
- Provide transportation or at least directions on how to access the location (activity bus, church van, maps, parking instructions, bus/train schedules)
- Provide childcare services and entertainment for children (videos, games, tutoring)
- Speak in plain terms – avoiding jargon – both in written materials and during gatherings
- Take measures to involve parents and residents with low levels of literacy and with limited formal education
- Recruit interpreters – foreign language and/or sign language – for non-English speaking and hearing-impaired residents
- Make sure everyone has an avenue for involvement and impact
- Serve a snack or meal

Measures To Reduce School-Neighborhood Tensions

- Act as a neutral party (or find an outside entity to do so), seeking only to improve the school-neighborhood relations and increase educational achievement of students
- Hold separate meetings with different groups to gain a better understanding of the sources of tension
- Hold small group meetings between those with opposing views, before convening any larger group
- Acknowledge – up front – the history and source of tension
- Find common ground on which to begin discussions
- Set meeting ground rules and outline an agenda to focus the discussion
- Integrate icebreaking exercises, humor, teambuilding activities, and social time into meetings

Suggested by Public Impact

5. Encourage participants to brainstorm and share creative ideas

Determine what kind of information you want to elicit. Do you want to identify only the issues of concern or do you also want their ideas on solutions? Once you determine the purpose, be up-front and tell participants what you hope to accomplish during the meeting. During gatherings, provide opportunities for brainstorming and meaningful discussions among participants to identify school issues and possible solutions. Schools seldom provide opportunities for families and neighborhood residents to express their thoughts freely and to ask questions about school and student performance. Many participants will become excited about joining the effort when they find a group that cares about what they think. Consider using the example shown on this page and on pages 15 - 17 to set ground rules and solicit input.

Keep a record of the ideas generated during the planning process; even those that are not integrated into the vision statement. These notes may be useful during later stages.

> **"The kickoff brought 'movers and shakers' to the table with parents, principals, and teachers. We identified and discussed the issues in an egalitarian manner. Everyone was doing work. It proved to be a powerful beginning that set the tone for the remainder of the events and activities."**
>
> **Education reform advocate**
> **Charlotte, NC**

Sample Tools

An Exercise: Hopes and Drawings

In your small group, make a list of each person's hopes and vision for their children's future. When everyone has given their statement, as a group design and draw a representation without words of the group's collective vision for your children Everyone should help with the drawing. Select a person to be the reporter for the group.

Used by
IDRA
San Antonio, TX

Sample Tools

Generating Input From Participants

- Outline topics for discussion and identify the purpose for collecting the information and how it will be used
- Develop written materials to accompany oral presentations and instructions
- Determine what kind of information you want to solicit from participants. For example, do you want to identify only the issues of concern or do you also want their ideas on solutions?
- Create an environment where participants feel free to share their thoughts (appropriate formats will depend on the context of neighborhoods, schools, and cultures)
- Organize the meeting room for small-group interactions, rather than an auditorium- or lecture-style set up
- Use group facilitators and provide interpreters, if necessary
- Establish ground rules that encourage candor and respect for the opinions of others
- Set time limits on brainstorming exercises
- Pose open-ended questions about specific educational topics
- Assign a note taker to capture the thoughts and ideas of participants
- Use exercises where participants can jot down or illustrate their ideas

Suggested by
Public Impact
(top)

Used by
IDRA
San Antonio, TX
(bottom)

Parent Interviews For Visioning Process

We will be asking you a series of questions about the education of your children. Feel free to answer honestly. This is not a test of what you know, but simply an opportunity to share ideas. There are no right or wrong answers.

1. What is your name? What is your profession or what do you do most of the time? Why did you come to this meeting?
2. What do you think about the quality of the education of your children?
3. What are the most important influences on the education of your children?
4. What do you think needs to be done to improve school?
5. What do you expect from your children's teachers?
6. What do you expect from your children's administrators?
7. What successes have your schools had with parent participation?
8. What more should schools be doing to have more parent participation?
9. What else would you like to tell us about your schools, the education your children are receiving or about parent participation?

Sample Tools

'Achieving New Horizons'
Overview Of A Community Visioning Process

Initiative: "Achieving New Horizons" -- a district-wide education summit

Purpose: Encourage input from all areas of the community, build trust, foster volunteerism, and recognize diverse and divergent community interests

Organizers: A partnership of Wake Education Partnership (WEP), Wake Public Schools, Smart Start, Wake Ministerial Association, BellSouth Foundation, a public health/human service agency, area civic organizations and businesses.

Early Planning: A 15-member task force, the initial visionary group, conceived the idea of an education summit as a way to identify common priorities and set a community-wide vision. After completing the initial planning, some task force members remained, while others stepped aside and tapped new people to take their places for the second phase of planning and implementation. This design served to gain input and ownership from the local leadership, to avoid burnout among members, and to draw appropriate people and resources for specific tasks. This planning process took approximately six months.

Participants: Over 450 Wake County citizens, including school board members, teachers, parents, business people, and staff and volunteers from community agencies and special interest groups

Highlights of the Summit:

A. A daylong session (8:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.) provided participants with a snapshot of the challenges faced by area schools during a period of rapid growth, sociological change, increasing diversity, and budget constraints.

B. Participants were randomly assigned to small groups (8 to 10 participants) and provided with fact sheets on local education issues, such as standards and accountability, funding, school-home connections, growth, and technology.

C. Trained volunteers served as group facilitators to lead participants through a two-hour interactive session. Prior to the summit, the task force had commissioned a Gallup Poll on education in Wake County. The results of the poll provided an important foundation for group discussions. Summit participants reviewed the results and used them to make recommendations for local schools.

D. Participants were encouraged to express their opinions and a specific amount of time was allotted for each group member to speak without interruption.

E. Each table made recommendations and set priorities for the local school improvement.

F. Organizers compiled the recommendations and rankings to develop a vision for community-school improvement efforts.

Used by Wake Education Partnership Raleigh, NC

Outcomes:

- School board acknowledged the community's call for high standards by setting an official goal: "By 2003, 95% of students who take the end-of-grade tests in grades 3 and 8 will score at grade level or better."
- Organizers committed to a second summit to keep "standards and accountability" on the table and to monitor its progress in holding schools accountable.

Sample Tools

Examples Of Ground Rules For Effective Group Discussion From Other Initiatives

Ground rules

- Demonstrate common civility.
- Avoid raised voices.
- Avoid blaming.
- Repeat ground rules as needed.
- Note: When ground rules are broken, facilitators step in to mitigate the conflict and to steer participants away from negative language and behavior.

Ground rules

Listen carefully to others. Try to really understand what they are saying and respond to it, especially when their ideas differ from your own. Try to avoid building your own arguments in your head while others are talking.

Think together about what you want to get out of your conversation.

Be open to changing your mind; this will help you really listen to others' views.

When disagreement occurs, keep talking. Explore the disagreement. Search for the common concerns beneath the surface. Above all, be civil.

Value one another's experiences, and think about how they have contributed to your thinking. Help to develop one another's ideas. Listen carefully and ask clarifying questions.

Don't waste time arguing about points of fact; for the time being, you may need to agree to disagree and then move on. You might want to check out the facts before your next conversations. Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the conversation.

Used by Prichard Committee in communities across Kentucky (top)

From Study Circles Resource Center Pomfret, CN (bottom)

6. Determine priorities and build consensus

Once organizers and stakeholders have raised issues and generated some initial ideas, use the information to determine common areas of concern and priorities. Participants may be saying the same thing but expressing it differently. Look for common themes and categorize them. Also look for areas of agreement and disagreement. Broad categories might include: school policies, curriculum and instruction, school staff and teacher quality, availability of school choices, school readiness, school safety and discipline, parent involvement, and resources and technology.

Discuss the issues and select the ones your group believes are the most appropriate to begin with. You may want the group to quickly note each major theme according to how important it is to student learning, how difficult it will be to make changes, and how urgent it is. Very important or urgent issues that are more easily changed can be a good place to start.

Try to reduce the list to one to four main issues or categories to keep future discussions and actions focused. Naturally, participants may deem all of their issues as important and will want to tackle them all at once. As an organizer, acknowledge the range of needs, but emphasize the value of setting priorities and addressing problems step by step. You might conduct a straw poll where participants vote on their top priorities. In any case, bring the group to agreement on the most significant issues. Remember this is a starting point and you may choose to add or drop issues as your planning progresses.

Refer to the tips below and the tool on page 19, "Steps for Building Consensus," to gauge and negotiate priorities.

Tips for setting priorities and building consensus

- Encourage the group to listen to one another and to find common issues.
- Break large groups into smaller groups for more effective discussions.
- Find common elements and focus on them.
- Identify priorities ("workable chunks") and focus on doing something good for neighborhood children.
- If participants begin to gripe, ask them to make a list to record their concerns rather than allowing them to monopolize the discussion.

Used by IDRA • San Antonio, TX

Sample Tools

Steps For Building Consensus

The effectiveness of neighborhood associations, site councils, district committees and other decision-making groups often depends on their ability to generate consensus among members. Here are some ideas on building consensus from the National Staff Development Council's *NSDC Team-Building Toolkit*.

When seeking agreement on a difficult decision or issue, groups should do the following:

- Discuss the topic, raise questions and concerns, and develop options for solutions
- Decide where consensus is appropriate for this decision, how much time will be needed, and what to do if consensus is not achieved
- Explore differences and similarities, agreements and disagreements
- Make suggestions and modifications on proposed solutions
- Generate a new solution based on the discussion
- Poll each member of the group to ensure all agree and are willing to actively support the decision

If the polling reveals a lack of consensus, the group should seek an alternative position. The facilitator might then ask some of the following questions of the people who oppose the original position:

- Under what conditions would you support this solution?
- What parts of the solution do you oppose?
- What parts of the solution would you modify to be more comfortable with the solution?
- What would be necessary for you to agree with the solution?
- Would you be willing to live with the solution for a limited time?

And the facilitator might ask team members who support the recommendation:

- What are you willing to do to adjust your views to respond to the discontent of those people who are not in agreement?
- If you were not in agreement, what parts of the solution might trouble?

NSDC process used by Parents for Public Schools chapters across the country

And if these questions don't get you there, here are some options from the NSDC's School Improvement Manual:

- Create a compromise position and ask everyone to react to it
- Provide private "think time" and begin discussion again
- Leave the issue and return to it later
- Organize small groups to reach consensus and begin the large group discussion again
- Create a contradictory statement to refocus the discussion and to identify deeper, unarticulated concerns
- Choose another facilitator

7. Craft the vision statement and publicize it to attract others to join your work

A good vision statement not only guides your steps, it also announces to others where your initiative is headed. Use the information and ideas generated by organizers, collaborators, and other stakeholders to develop a vision statement. Then use the vision statement throughout the subsequent stages of your journey to keep the work of all who are involved aligned and relevant.

Communities have undertaken a variety of approaches to set their vision, and you can determine what is most appropriate for your local efforts. In some cases the initial organizers set the vision based on organizational missions and values. Others have held a single meeting with local leaders to create their vision. And some have sponsored broad-scale conversations with community stakeholders – a visioning process – over the course of several months. The process of creating a shared vision and the statement itself can serve as a unifying force for future work. The process builds trust among participants, even those with seemingly disparate views. By identifying a common sense of purpose, your group can move forward – together.

When creating the vision, look at the big picture and avoid getting bogged down in the details of current problems. Encourage participants to imagine the schools they long for and then brainstorm about the qualities, conditions, and products of these ideal schools. Find common elements in their ideas and craft a vision statement. Your statement may be a single sentence or a comprehensive outline addressing several points about the desired educational environment.

Qualities of a good vision statement

- Describes where you are going
- Outlines the scope of work
- Sets you apart from other similar groups
- Keeps the academic well-being of students as a central focus
- Is easily understood by neighborhood residents
- Offers a compelling case for others to become involved

A good vision statement is usually a global and non-measurable concept, but it motivates and inspires the neighborhood and can drive the work ahead.

Set a reasonable timeframe for creating the vision statement and avoid a protracted process. Sometimes groups can become preoccupied with finding the perfect words and phrasing for the statement. As long as the statement conveys the desired message to the public, encourage the planners to move on. Setting the vision is just one step in paving the way for subsequent work. Later, you will set specific goals that support the vision. Indeed, after you have established a vision, there will be considerable work ahead to hold schools accountable and raise student achievement.

Once your vision is established, tell people about it. Use symbols and themes around your vision to bring people together. Include the vision in all correspondence and newsletters. Post it in a visible place at meetings and on the walls of schools and offices of collaborators. Don't let the vision statement sit in a file somewhere – make sure everyone involved knows it, understands it, and shapes their work accordingly.

Refer to the tools on pages 21 - 22 for examples of vision statements set by other groups.

Sample Tools

Examples Of Vision Statements from Pioneering Efforts Across The Country

Vision for "Tying Webs"

A healthy community consists of diverse neighborhoods, each characterized by cohesive relationships of people and institutions based on individual and institutional assets, active engagement in community decision making, and a strong commitment to maximizing the academic achievement of children in the neighborhood.

Vision / Visión
DeQueen Hispanic Advisory Committee

A united committee that is reflected in the home and in school.	Ser un comite unido que se refleje en el hogar y en al escuela.
Make decisions as a group and support our children, our families and our schools.	Hacer decisiones en grupo y apoyar a nuestros hijos, nuestras familias y nuestra escuelas.
Improve the education of our children with bilingual help.	Mejorar la educación para nuestros hijos con ayuda bilingue.
Improve the professional help and bilingual support in our children's English classes.	Mejorar la ayuda profesional y apoyo bilingue en los cursos en inglés de nuestros niños.
Encourage equality and respect among students.	Fomentar la igualdad y el respeto entre alumnos.
Encourage equality for everyone including the parents at work.	Fomentar la igualdad para todos incluyendo a los padres de familias en sus trabajos.
Support communication among families, schools and the community in general.	Apoyar comunicación entre familias, escuelas y la communidad en general.
Create excellent schools for all our children.	Crear escuelas excelentes para todos nuestros hijos.

Used by Partners for Public Education Grand Rapids, MI (top)

Used by IDRA with parent group from DeQueen, AR (bottom)

Sample Tools

Used by
Bay Area
School Reform
Collaborative
San Francisco, CA

The Vision

We view the vision that guides our work as a series of fully integrated principles, none of which stands alone.

About Students

• Every student deserves uncompromisingly high expectations which challenge him or her to grow intellectually, socially, emotionally and ethically. Because children learn differently, they require teachers, schools, and school systems that are flexible and that provide active support that will ensure that every student can meet these expectations.

• Students learn best when they investigate, construct, apply, and demonstrate their knowledge with their teacher and others. Learning is an active, continuous, dynamic process.

• Learning is a function of the whole child. To learn well, children must experience their schools as caring communities in which they are well known and taught in ways appropriate to their individual strengths, needs and experiences.

About Teachers and Schools

• Good schools are self-consciously principled and caring communities which share a sense of common purpose. They are committed to the learning and development of every individual.

• Challenging and productive classrooms require teachers to be active learners.

• Teachers should set and meet high standards for themselves, and they need time and resources to support their learning.

The Mission

The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative aims to firmly establish the Bay Area as a vital, innovative, and effective place to learn and teach. Across the region, we help school engage in a comprehensive transformation process to become thoughtful, caring communities with a common purpose and a commitment to the growth and learning of all children and adults.

• Good teachers expect students to demonstrate deep understanding. They assess student learning through a careful and continuing review of each child's actual work. They use what they learn from assessment to adjust their instruction to individual student's learning needs and to readjust the school's program as a whole when needed.

• The school's performance is assessed in light of publicly understood high standards developed by the entire school community.

• Schools prepare students for active civic participation in a diverse democratic society. They provide a quality education to every student and show a proactive commitment to equity.

About a Role for the Larger Community

• School districts provide active support to schools. Through their policies, political leadership, and allocation of resources, they enhance student achievement and promote student-focused reform efforts.

• Schools, districts, parents, community agencies and the public view the education of children as a shared responsibility.

• Schools, districts, parents and the public agree on the characteristics of good schools. On behalf of all students, they collaborate to improve teaching and learning and they hold themselves mutually accountable for meeting goals that serve all children.

Getting Organized

Reflecting On Your Progress

Here are some questions to ask before continuing on the journey

1. Have we formed partnerships that will offer the resources and commitment needed to be successful?
2. Have we included stakeholders in the process to ensure an effective plan of action?
3. Have we set a vision that will motivate, inspire, and unite the neighborhood?
4. Are we creating schools that we would want our own children to attend?
5. Do we have clear picture of where we want our schools to be in a year? 5 years? 10 years?
6. Will this vision direct the remainder of our work?

Where To Go For More Information

The Achievement Council • Los Angeles, CA
tel. (213) 487-3194

- *Setting Our Sights* by Ruth S. Johnson and other publications on school reform
- Technical assistance to schools, districts and communities on school improvement

Annenberg Institute for School Reform • Providence, RI
tel. (401) 863-7990 fax (401) 863-1290 www.aisr.brown.edu

- Tools for Accountability Project
- Publications on public engagement and school reform
- Access to the network of Annenberg Challenge sites

ASPIRA Association, Inc. • Washington, DC
tel. (202) 835-3600 fax (202) 835 3613 www.aspira.org

- Advocacy for Puerto Rican and Latino communities
- Information for the education and leadership development of Puerto Rican and Latino youth

Consensus Organizing Institute • San Diego, CA
tel. (619) 234-1268 www.cpn.org/COI/coi_model.html

- Support in finding innovative solutions to community problems

National Staff Development Council (NSDC) • Oxford, OH
tel. (513) 523-6029 www.nsdc.org

- Publications and materials on strategies for engaging parents and educators

Right Questions Project, Inc. • Somerville, MA
tel. (617) 628-4070 fax (617) 628-8632 www.rightquestion.org

- Process for parents and community members to probe important education issues

Study Circles Resources Center • Pomfret, CT
tel. (860) 928-2616 fax (860) 928-3713

- *The Busy Citizen's Discussion Guide: Education in Our Communities*
- Support and resources to form citizen study circles for engaging and meaningful conversations

IDENTIFYING STANDARDS & SETTING GOALS

How will you know if your schools are performing well enough?

Introduction

To hold schools accountable for student learning, neighborhoods need yardsticks against which to measure how well schools are doing. It's helpful to think about two kinds of "yardsticks." First, schools need standards for student performance – clear statements about what students should know or be able to do. Second, schools need goals for school performance – clear expectations about the overall performance and progress of the student body.

stan•dards \ stan-dərdz\ *n pl* : detailed statements of what a student should know and be able to do at specific points in his or her education. Example: High school seniors must demonstrate proficiency in algebra to become eligible for graduation.

goals \gōlz\ *n pl* : expectations about the overall performance and progress of a school. Example: To increase the high school graduation rate to 96% by the end of the 1998 academic year.

Standards form the basis for assessing if a student has learned what students at his or her age should know, such as:

- What 5th graders should know about American history
- How proficient 8th graders should be at using computers
- If high school students are required to know a foreign language

STEPS TO IDENTIFY ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND SET SCHOOL GOALS

1. Recognize that high standards and ambitious goals are essential
2. Assess the standards and goals your schools are currently trying to meet
3. Engage stakeholders in discussions about the quality of standards and goals
4. Develop your own expectations for student and school performance

Many states, districts, and schools have begun to set or raise standards for student performance. Standards can be set for every grade, for clusters of three or four grades, or for levels (elementary, middle, high). Increased emphasis on standards by states and districts is fueling a nationwide debate about their place in education. Proponents and critics worry whether current standards are too low or too high and how they should be implemented.

Standards offer the strong foundation from which rigorous education, fair assessments, and strong schools develop. Unfortunately, most families – and many teachers – do not know enough about standards and can be intimidated by the topic. Many people fail to realize that they frequently speak about standards without even knowing it. When parents comment on the differences in what they learned in second grade compared to what their second grader knows – they are talking about standards. When employers talk about what they expect high school graduates to be able to do when hired – they are talking about standards. Bridging these everyday conversations about standards to the educational standards used by schools is an important first step in becoming comfortable with discussions about standards.

High quality standards for student achievement should be. . .

- Developed with considerable input from a variety of sources
- Concise and understandable
- Rigorous and challenging
- Reasonable and attainable
- Focused – organized by grade level or course
- Measurable whenever possible

From the Southern Regional Education Board's "Focus on School Accountability" report

Some questions about goals to ask yourself. . .

- Do the official goals cover the content or subjects you think are important for students to learn?
- Do they specifically address the performance of subgroups of students about whom you are particularly concerned?
- Are the goals ambitious enough?
- Are they specific enough so you will know if they have been attained?
- Do the goals include a timetable for when they'll be achieved?
- Are the goals understandable to neighborhood residents and families, or do they rely on obscure formulas?
- Do school officials report regularly on progress toward the goals?

Goals form the basis for assessing how well *schools* are doing. It's well and good if your schools have high standards for students. But are the schools' students meeting those standards regularly? Are the schools making progress in areas where they are weak? To answer these questions, you need a set of goals against which to judge schools' performance.

Goals and standards should be directly linked. A school's reading standards, for example, might specify how well a child should be able to read by the end of the third grade. The school's goals should specify what proportion of third graders should meet the school's reading standard, and how that proportion should grow over time.

Steps and Tools

1. Recognize that high standards and ambitious goals are essential

Standards can determine whether students are retained or promoted to the next grade, whether they're eligible to enroll in certain courses, or whether they graduate from high school. It is important for neighborhood leaders in low-income areas to pay special attention to the academic standards in local schools. Students attending schools in high poverty neighborhoods are at risk of having lower expectations for their performance than are students in more advantaged neighborhoods. Students earning A's in high poverty schools often perform poorly on achievement tests. Their achievement test scores compare to those of students earning C's and D's in higher income communities.

The Education Trust, a Washington-based education organization, puts it this way: "For too many poor and minority students, schooling has been like trying to bowl with a curtain in front of the pins. No one told them what they should be aiming to hit. Standards can tear the curtain away and make the goals clear to everyone."

High poverty schools making gains in student achievement begin by adopting high standards, and then following through with quality instruction, appropriate resources, and fair assessments of how well students are learning. They also accept no excuses, expect all students to meet the same high standards, and then establish educational goals and monitor them routinely.

2. Assess the standards and goals your schools are currently trying to meet

For a group of neighborhood residents and families interested in holding schools accountable, a place to begin (though not to end) is the official standards and goals the local schools are currently trying to meet. Since most states and districts have adopted student learning standards and set goals for schools in recent years, chances are your local schools are working within an existing framework of student standards and school goals. The tables on page 28 may help you find information about local standards and goals on the Internet or over the phone.

A full set of standards for K-12 can occupy many thick volumes of paper — much more material than most people involved in a school reform effort would have time to read. So one challenge for neighborhoods and families is to find ways to condense all of that information to a manageable scope. One way to boil down a set of standards is by creating an outline of all the topics that are addressed, providing a quick overview of the topics students at different levels are expected to address. Another way is to extract examples of standards from a variety of subjects and grades, much like the North Carolina example reprinted on page 31. Ideally, your school district or state will already have created outlines or examples. If not, it might make sense to recruit some educators to help you with this process.

Sample Tools

Sources Of Information On State Standards

Achieve is a nonprofit organization founded by the nation's governors and CEOs to promote high academic standards, demanding tests, and accountability for results.

The Achieve website, **www.achieve.org,** contains:

- Links to each state's standards (click on Links and then State Education Resources)
- A Standards Database which allows you to view and compare standards by state, subject area, specific topic, grade level, and keyword (click on Standards Database)

Sources Of Information On Local Standards

Your school district may have its own standards. Contact your district or visit its website to learn more. To find out how to contact your district for information on local standards, go to:

nces.ed.gov/ccdweb/school/district.asp

The Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* initiative targets neighborhoods in 22 cities across the United States. Websites and telephone numbers for information on education standards in those cities are provided below:

Atlanta	www.atlanta.k12.ga.us/ADMIN/standard/index.htm	(404) 827-8019
Baltimore	www.bcps.org/info/general/index.html	(410) 887-4034
Boston	www.boston.k12.ma.us/bps/facts.asp	(617) 635-9265
Camden	www.sad28.k12.me.us/index.html	(207) 236-3358
Denver	curriculum.denver.k12.co.us/standards/	(303) 764-3414
Des Moines	www.des-moines.k12.ia.us/DMPS_WEB/dip/intro.html	(515) 242-7911
Detroit	www.detpub.k12.mi.us/	(313) 494-1000
Hartford	www.hartfordschools.org/	(860) 527-0742
Indianapolis	www.ips.k12.in.us/	(317) 226-4725
Louisville	www.jefferson.k12.ky.us/JCPS/98Goals.html	(502) 485-3909
Miami	dcps.dade.k12.fl.us/pupil/	(305) 995-1000
Milwaukee	www.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/html/2003stds.htm	(414) 475-8276
New Orleans	www.nops.k12.la.us/educators/standards.htm	(504) 942-3531
Oakland	www.ousd.k12.ca.us/default-ad.htm	(510) 879-8199
Philadelphia	www.philsch.k12.pa.us/Tchr-stff/homepage.html	(215) 299-7797
Providence	www.providenceri.com/education.html	(401) 456-9211
San Antonio	www.saisd.net/	(210) 299-5500
San Diego	www-internal.sandi.net/standards/	(619) 725-7188
Savannah	www.savannah.chatham.k12.ga.us/production/dim.nsf/Departments?OpenView&Start=1&Count=100&Expand=2#2	(912) 651-7174
Seattle	www.seattleschools.org	(206) 298-7050
St. Louis	dtd1.slps.k12.mo.us/	(573) 863-7266
Washington, DC	www.k12.dc.us/dcps/curriculum/curriculum_frame.html	(202) 442-5599

Once you have a grasp of the official standards students in your area are expected to attain, the next step is to assess those standards. Some of the questions to ask include:

- Are they high enough so that meeting them really means something?
- Do they cover the ground they ought to cover? For example, do they ask students to learn about subjects our community thinks are important?
- Are they clear enough so that educators, students, families, and others know what is expected?
- Is it possible to measure whether students are attaining the standards?

Answering these questions can be difficult. Most people don't have a clear idea in their minds about what should be expected of students at different levels of education. You may have a general sense that kids should be able, say, to read and do basic arithmetic by the time they finish the second or third grade, or to be familiar with certain works of literature by the time they finish high school. But to work effectively, standards need to be a lot more specific than that. How can you tell whether your schools' more specific standards are rigorous, comprehensive, clear, and measurable enough?

One source of help is national organizations that have taken the time to rate the standards states across the country are using. For example, the American Federation of Teachers and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation have separately set out to produce "report cards" on each state's standards. By perusing these report cards, you can get a sense of how experts think your state's standards stack up. Websites and phone numbers for these two organizations in the table "National Sources of Information on Standards" on page 30. That table also contains numerous other national reference points, including contact information for several organizations that have set out to establish national standards in particular subjects.

If you begin to investigate these report cards and other national sources, you will quickly notice that national experts are not of one mind about what makes a good set of standards. Though there is quite a bit of agreement, controversy rages about exactly what students should know and be able to do at different points in their development. (A helpful discussion of this controversy is Lynn Olson's January 1999 Education Week article, "Rating the Standards," available online at: www.edweek.org/sreports/qc99/states/indicators/in-ach.htm.)

Consulting these national sources will not give you definitive answers to questions about your own state's or district's standards. But they can provide some useful information that you can put to work as you begin to engage people in discussions about standards.

To see how community leaders in one state are helping parents and school leaders understand Minnesota's graduation standards, see the website of the Minnesota Initiative Supporting Standards-based Learning and Education (MISSLE). MISSLE is a grassroots organization whose website provides information and research, a communications network and a place for community leaders to find and contribute constructive ideas on how standards are working and could work better. Visit this site at:

www.mnlearns.com/D-Resourses_txt/d-resourses_txt.html

Remember standards describe what individual students should know and be able to do. Goals are broader statements about how well we expect schools as a whole (or even school systems as a whole) to perform or progress. For example, the primary goal of North Carolina's Wake County school system is: "By 2003, 95% of students who take the end-of-grade tests in grades 3 and 8 will score at grade level or better."

Your state, school district or individual schools may have set official goals for student achievement. In this case, you can evaluate how well those official goals align with your vision of good schools.

Sample Tools

Suggested by
Public Impact

National Sources Of Information On Standards

Achieve www.achieve.org	(617) 496-6300
American Association for the Advancement of Science www.aaas.org/	(202) 326-6400
American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages www.actfl.org/htdocs/standards/index.htm	(914) 963-8830
American Federation of Teachers www.aft.org/edissues/standards99/toc.htm	(202) 879-4400
Arts Edge artsedge.kennedy-center.org/	(202) 416-8876 (fax)
Association for Curriculum and Supervision Development www.ascd.org	(703) 578-9600
Center for Civic Education www.civiced.org/curriculum.html	(818) 591-9321
Council for Basic Education www.c-b-e.org	(202) 347-4171
Council of Chief State School Officers www.ccsso.org/standards-assessments.html	(202) 408-5505
"Developing Educational Standards" www.putwest.boces.org/standards.html	
Education Week www.edweek.org/sreports/qc99/	(800) 728-2790
McREL Standards Database www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/	(303) 337-0990
National Center for History in the Schools www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/	(310) 825-4702
National Council for the Social Studies www.ncss.org/	(202) 966-7840
National Council of Teachers of English www.ncte.org/	(800) 369-6283
National Council of Teachers of Mathematics www.nctm.org/standards2000/download.htm	(703) 620-9840
National Education Goals www.negp.gov/	(202) 724-0015
National Skills Standard Board www.nssb.org/	(202) 254-8628
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation Standards Project www.edexcellence.net/topics/standards.html	(202) 223-5452

Sample Tools

Sample Standards from North Carolina Mathematics - Grade 4

1 **The learner will identify and use rational numbers.**

1.1 Within meaningful contexts express numbers (up to 6-digits) in a variety of ways, including oral and written forms using standard and expanded notation.

1.2 Use models to explain how the number system is based on 10 and identify the place value of each digit in a multi-digit numeral.

1.3 Compare and order numbers less than one million.

1.4 In real work situation, discuss when it is appropriate to round numbers; round numbers to an appropriate place.

1.5 Use regions, sets, number lines and other concrete and pictorial models to represent fractions and mixed numbers; relate symbols to the models.

1.6 Use models and pictures to compare fractions including equivalent fractions and mixed numbers; explain the comparison.

1.7 Use models and pictures to demonstrate the value of decimal numerals with tenths and hundredths; show decimals as an extension of the base 10 system.

1.8 Use models and pictures to compare decimals (wholes, tenths, hundredths) which relate to real world situations; record and read results.

1.9 Use models and pictures to establish the relationship between whole numbers, decimals, and fractions; describe using appropriate language.

Taken from N.C. Public Schools Infoweb: Math Curriculum

North Carolina Standard Course of Study

3. Engaging your stakeholders in discussions about the quality of standards and goals

With an understanding of the standards and goals your schools are striving to meet, you can begin to engage members of the community in discussions of these yardsticks. Part of the aim of these discussions can simply be to foster understanding. Standards and goals can be complex, and it is a significant task just to bring people up to speed on the benchmarks schools are currently using. But another aim can be to help community members assess their schools' standards and goals in light of the vision they have created for their schools.

Consider a couple of possible scenarios. In one scenario, a group of neighborhood residents and parents might take a close look at the standards and goals schools are trying to meet, and be satisfied with them. The standards and goals may well embody the very ideas and principles that underlie the community's vision for its schools. If so, you can turn your attention to asking how well the schools are doing relative to their own official standards and goals, a topic this toolkit takes up in the "Gathering Information" section. In this scenario, you essentially adopt the official standards and goals as your own, and focus your efforts on ensuring that schools are living up to them.

In a second scenario, residents and parents may find themselves dissatisfied with the official standards and goals – they may conclude that the aims schools are pursuing do not exactly match the community's own vision of quality schooling. Perhaps the standards appear too low for the demands students will face in college or the workforce. Perhaps they do not cover topics, such as music and art, or local history, that residents find important. Perhaps the school system's goals for student performance are too low for residents' tastes. Or perhaps the goals focus only on overall student performance, when residents are particularly concerned about how low-income kids are doing.

In this scenario, you won't be comfortable just adopting the official standards and goals as your own. You may want to encourage officials to change standards and goals to make them more aligned with your ideas about quality schools, a topic addressed in the "Taking Action" section. But to do that, you will need to engage people in conversations about what the standards and goals should look like.

There are a number of ways to generate conversations about standards. Your approach will depend on how much time and resources you can dedicate to the study of standards. One approach is to present excerpts from local or state standards documents and obtain feedback from stakeholders. This presentation can take place at a special gathering or through a mailed set of publications. You may also consider providing stakeholders with a sample assessment used by schools to determine student proficiency. Another option may be to show examples of student work that demonstrate performance standards.

An example of goals set by the school district in Charlotte, NC

Academic Achievement Goals
Specific results by the year 2001

- 85% of third grade students will read at or above grade level.
- 75% of students will complete Geometry prior to the 11th grade.
- 33% of graduates will complete at least one Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate course.
- Average SAT scores will be equal to the national average by 2001.
- Graduation rate of exceptional students who earn a diploma will increase by 10%.

At a workshop, sponsored by the Public Education Network (PEN) – a national organization of community-based school reform groups, a presenter used an exercise to engage school volunteers in a meaningful discussion of standards. You might use this simple exercise, outlined below, to emphasize the important, and yet complicated, task of setting standards.

Here is the exercise: Select a familiar notion, like "a clean kitchen," and then instruct participants to develop standards for it. Divide the group into small teams – two to eight members each – and instruct each participant to: 1) describe a clean kitchen, by listing the elements; 2) compare descriptions among team members; 3) create a collective set of standards; and 4) as a team, develop a rubric for grading kitchens (what qualifies as an "A," "B," etc). The outcome is a group of stakeholders that better understands what standards are, how they can be used as yardsticks for student achievement, and why they are essential to hold schools accountable.

A more comprehensive approach to engage stakeholders is "Standards in Practice" (SIP), a model developed by the Education Trust. SIP is a process that builds support for high academic standards for all students and offers strategies to accelerate gains in achievement among low-performing students. The process allows parents, teachers, and neighborhood residents to examine actual student work and teacher assignments – collected from local schools – and to compare the work and assignments to local academic standards.

"

Make sure the information you disseminate is accurate. Build credibility.

School choice advocate
Washington, DC

"

"

There are lots of rich resources available. Share the materials with everyone, don't just keep it for the organizers.

Education reform advocate
Philadelphia, PA

"

The focus of SIP is on maintaining regular, structured conversations about standards and student work that ultimately lead to an examination of what teachers do in the classroom and how they assign and grade student work. Learn more about SIP in the "Taking Action" section.

Another example comes from the Philadelphia Education Fund, which held a mini-conference on standards and integrated SIP into the program. Parents and community members participated in the two-day hands-on event, covering district standards, national models, and local curriculum changes. Refer to page 34 for an agenda from this event and to look to pages 35 and 36 for tools on how to publicize an event and respond to your findings.

Sample Tools

Agenda For Standards Mini-Conference
'Making Good On The Promise: High Standards For All'

Overview - Day One

Buffet Dinner
Welcome and Remarks (Community Organizers)
Keynote Address (National Education Advocate)
Reaction from Mini-conference Participants / Q&A
Wrap up: Overview of next day's schedule and sign up for sessions

Overview - Day Two

Agenda Review

Demonstration: Curriculum & Instruction (District's Curriculum Staff)
Introduces participants to instructional strategies, assessments, benchmarks, and content standards.

Working Sessions I: Using Student Work

(1A) Standards in Practice I (SIP-I)
Reviews student work, how to use rubrics (scoring guides), and demonstrates how to design instruction that reflects standards.

(1B) New Standards Curriculum - How will standards change instruction?
Presents instructional practices that enable students – particularly older students – to progress toward achieving standards in their work.

(1C) Case Study: Standards & Cross Cutting Competencies
Using a hands-on, interactive approach, this session introduces participants to classroom practices that are standards driven and that use methodology to actively engage students in using what they know.

Break

Working Sessions II: Opportunities to Learn

(2A) Block Rostering
Addresses how to reorganize the school day to support deeper, more effective instruction.

(2B) Peer Coaching (Classroom Teachers)
Teachers share their experience in creating classrooms where standards drive students' learning and they explore the benefits of the peer-coaching model, which encourages teachers to collectively reflect on classroom practice.

(2C) Twilight Schools/Saturday Schools
Review of an approach to assist students who are on the rolls, but not attending schools and students who have been dropped from the school rolls. Twilight and Saturday Schools provide students with individualized instruction and take place beyond the hours of the regular school day.

(2D) Video: "Making Good on the Promise: High Standards for All"
A video, produced by the Cross City Campaign, that uses the voices of students, teachers, and parents to demonstrate what standards-driven classrooms – kindergarten through 12th grade – look like.

Morning sessions are repeated after lunch

Wrap-up, Comments, Evaluation

Used by
Philadelphia
Education Fund
Philadelphia, PA

Sample Tools

An Invitation For A Parent - Teacher Dialogue
'Standards: What, Why, How?'

Date: Wednesday, April 21

Together, parents and teachers will talk about:

What are "standards"?

Who created them? Why?

Has teaching changed? Has learning changed?

How can we all work together to help our kids?

Who should come to our first Parent-Teacher Dialogue?

Parents who want to understand more about what's being taught in our kids' classrooms

Teachers who want to work with parents to help our kids do well in school

Parent who want to work with teachers to help our kids do well in school

Parents and teachers who want our schools to be the ***best***

Time: 5:45 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

5:45 to 6:30 Family dinner and student performance

6:30 to 8:00 Parent - Teacher Dialogue

(childcare provided)

Place: Frick ISA Middle School

107 Thackerey St.

(off Fifth Ave. in Oakland/park free in school lot)

All are welcome!

To help us plan for food and childcare,
please R.S.V.P. by calling 555-0890, press 3

Used by
Pittsburgh
Council on
Public Education
and
Pittsburgh
Federation of
Teachers
Pittsburgh, PA

Sample Tools

Scenarios You May Encounter After Engaging Stakeholders Around Standards And Goals

1) Stakeholders like the standards and goals and believe they are ambitious enough, but ask whether students and schools are actually meeting them.

Organizers can respond by:

- Collecting data on student performance

2) Stakeholders like the standards and goals, but want to integrate other aims that reflect local culture and history.

Organizers can respond by:

- Identifying what local residents value and what new elements they want to introduce into the curriculum
- Encouraging schools to integrate new standards and goals that supplement current benchmarks

3) Stakeholders believe the standards and goals are appropriately ambitious but worry whether students and /or teachers are prepared to meet them.

Organizers can respond by:

- Collecting data on student performance
- Collecting data on teacher qualifications
- Researching academic programs and models to accelerate student learning
- Researching recruitment strategies and professional development models for teachers

Suggested by Public Impact

4) Stakeholders don't think the standards and goals are ambitious enough and want schools to make changes.

Organizers can respond by:

- Identifying where stakeholders believe standards fall short
- Researching rigorous standards to use as models
- Advocating for schools to go beyond what the state may require

Reflecting On Your Progress

Here are some questions to consider before moving on

1. Have we clearly identified what we want children to know and be able to do?
2. Do we know who sets the standards and goals for our schools? (state, district, school, other)?
3. Have we determined what families, educators and neighborhood residents think about current standards and goals?
4. Do we have a plan for next steps based on what stakeholders think?

Where To Go For More Information

Lists of National, State, and Local Information About Standards on pages 28 and 30 of this toolkit.

Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform • Chicago, IL
tel. (312) 322-4880 fax (312) 322-4885 www.crosscity.org

- Practical action tools for local school improvement efforts
- Clearinghouse on key school reform issues
- Support for the development of school reform leaders

The Education Trust • Washington, DC
tel. (202) 293-1217 fax (202) 293-2605 www.edtrust.org

- Standards in Practice (SIP), a process that engages school staff, families and community members in conversations and strategies around high standards
- Publications promoting high achievement, from pre-K through college, with a focus on minority students from low-income families
- Annual conference on school reform

Education Week • Bethesda, MD
tel. (800) 728-2790 fax (301) 280-3250 www.edweek.org

- Weekly articles and an archive on national education issues and current events
- Annual "Quality Counts" reports on education topics
- Glossary of education terms

Institute for Education and Social Policy at NYU • New York, NY
tel. (212) 998-5874 fax (212) 995-4564 www.nyu.edu/iesp

- Technical assistance to urban school reform initiatives on a variety of issues, including public engagement, collecting and using data, evaluation and school-based budgeting
- Policy studies

StandardsWork
tel. (202) 835-2000 www.goalline.org

- *Raising the Standard: An Eight-Step Action Guide for Schools and Communities* by Dennis Doyle and Susan Pimentel
- Institutes for training and development on standards-based school reform

GATHERING INFORMATION

How do we learn the facts about our students' and schools' performance in relation to the standards and goals?





Introduction

in•for•ma•tion \ in-fər-mā-shən\ *n* : knowledge obtained from investigation, study, or instruction

You will find student and school data useful in every stage of your journey. With student standards and school goals already in mind, you can begin to determine how students are *actually* performing compared to your standards, and how schools are doing relative to goals. Standards and goals provide the yardstick and data reveal how students and schools measure up.

Student data and information on schools hold remarkable potential to transform schools, particularly schools where large percentages of students are not meeting standards. Strategic use of data can help meet broad educational needs and lead to significant gains in achievement. The national and state emphasis on student achievement has increased the amount of data collected on students and schools. While good data are often available, you may find gathering and using them to take concrete action more challenging.

STEPS TO GATHER INFORMATION

1. Determine what kind of information you need
2. Decide how to collect information, using a variety of strategies
3. Gather data from your own stakeholders
4. Analyze and interpret the data
5. Share results
6. Set priorities

Steps and Tools

1. Determine what kind of information you need

There is a wide range of information available on schools and student achievement. We have divided this data into two main categories for the purpose of this toolkit. The first is student information — this is most the relevant data to use in holding schools accountable for student achievement. All other information falls into the category of "supporting information" — data about factors you think contribute to student achievement.

Student information includes demographic information, actual data on student academic performance (e.g. test scores) and other indicators of student success or progress (e.g. attendance rates). The supporting information covers the gamut from teachers' qualifications to facts about families and surrounding community.

Use the tools below and on pages 41 and 42 for examples of student information to consider collecting and for examples of supporting information about students and schools.

> **People are in need of information. Parents are anxious to know more and to become knowledgeable about public schools.**
>
> **School choice advocate**
> **Washington, DC**

Suggestions on collecting data on public schools and students

- **Allow sufficient time** to collect and analyze data (several months).
- **Seek out helpful and friendly forces** in a specific school, at the district level,and in state and national education agencies that will help you obtain the data you need.
- **Go to sources outside of the K-12 system**, such as area colleges, state universities, newspapers, educational research organizations, and national education groups (see page 46).
- **Collect test scores from several years**, rather than from only one year. Examine trends over time in school enrollment, student performance, etc.
- **Be specific about the type(s)** of data you need, and whether you want it disaggregated by race, gender, and/or socioeconomic status.
- **Explain why you want the data** and how you plan to use it to improve student performance.
- **Negotiate with your source**, if necessary, to obtain meaningful data while respecting their preferences about timing of its release, school by school comparisons, disaggregation.
- **Be persistent.** Giving you information may not be the top priority of the people who have it, so repeated contact may be needed.

Sample Tools

Suggested by Public Impact

Examples Of Student Information

Collect overall figures and data broken down by race, gender and socioeconomic status.

Enrollment and demographics

- Number of students enrolled
- Percentage by gender
- Percentage by race/ethnicity
- Percentage by socioeconomic status
- Percentage eligible for free/reduced lunch
- Percentage of student participating in bilingual/ESL programs
- Percentage of student participating gifted/talented programs
- Percentage of student participating in special education programs
- Geographic areas/neighborhoods from which students are drawn
- Percentage of students transferring in/out of the school during a given period (i.e. mobility rate)
- Average daily attendance rate
- Student/teacher ratio
- Per pupil spending
- Number of students who dropout of school

Performance data and indicators

- Percentage of students reading on grade level
- Percentage of students writing on grade level
- Percentage of students doing mathematics on grade level
- Percentage of middle school students completing Algebra courses
- District and state achievement test scores
- Grades of students
- Average PSAT verbal and mathematics scores
- Percentage of students taking PSAT
- Advanced Placement (AP) course enrollment
- AP test scores
- Average SAT verbal and mathematics scores
- Percentage of students taking SAT
- Number and percentage of students graduating from high school
- Number and percentage of students being retained
- Number and percentage of students gaining admission to college
- Number and percentage of student graduating from college

Sample Tools

Suggested by Public Impact

Examples Of Supporting Information On Students And Schools

School faculty and staff

- Number of teachers
- Number of guidance counselors, school psychologists, career advisors
- Number of principals and assistant principals
- Number of support services staff (resource officer, dropout prevention coordinator, nurse, etc)
- Years of teaching experience among teachers
- Faculty attendance rate
- Teacher turnover rate
- Administrator turnover rate
- Percentage by gender
- Percentage by race/ethnicity
- Percentage with masters and doctoral degrees
- Percentage of teachers holding degrees in area of main teaching assignment
- Percentages of teachers holding full teacher certification in their fields

Curriculum (courses and subject matter available to students)

- Number and type of Advanced Placement (AP) courses offered
- Range of course offerings and their content and levels (e.g., college prep, vocational/technical)
- Range of programs (e.g., English as a Second Language-ESL, gifted and talented, arts, and other special interests and needs)

Instruction (what approaches and practices are being used by teachers)

- Team teaching, Computer-based instruction
- Estimated hours of instruction per year

Assessments (what kinds of assessments are used to measure student performance)

- Achievement tests
- Senior projects
- Portfolios
- Essays

School budget information

- Percentage of funds received by sources of funding
- Amount of Title I funding received

Family involvement

- Percentage of parents attending parent-teacher conferences
- Percentage of parents involved in setting school policy and decision-making
- Percentage of parents involved in school activities
- Educational levels of parents

Other categories of information to collect

- Public opinions and perceptions about schools and student performance
- Business/community partnerships (volunteers, funding, computers, other resources)
- School culture and climate
- School reform models and initiatives underway
- District and state education policies and laws

> **We were surprised by how little school insiders knew. Educators are isolated in and across their schools. They had as much to learn as the parents and community members.**
>
> **Education reform advocate**
> **Philadelphia, PA**

2. Decide how to collect information, using a variety of strategies

Even though important student and school data are public information, gathering the data on schools and students can be challenging. Your schools' or district's willingness to share data can affect the ease with which you collect student data and other information. In the best of circumstances, you simply contact the school office or the school district's central office to request data and you receive it within a reasonable timeframe. But for many pioneering communities, collecting school data was the most challenging stretch of the journey. This section, including the boxes, contains suggestions for collecting data.

It is likely you'll experience some apprehension — and even resistance — from schools when you make requests for data, so be prepared. School administrators are often uneasy about sharing data with the community. Public reports of student performance can have unwanted ramifications for school staff, like a negative school image, drops in enrollment, and job loss. Schools also may react negatively because of their own misgivings about student data. In many cases, teachers and administrators are ill-equipped to use data properly and are intimidated by requests and use of it by others. As a result, many schools prefer to keep a tight rein on data.

You will want to minimize resistance from schools as you collect the information you need. One approach is to include key school administrators and district researchers throughout your work, especially the early planning. Gaining their support and buy-in may result in easier access to the information. As another approach, you may want to call, write or visit a principal, a school board member, or a district administrator with whom you have a friendly or established relationship, to obtain suggestions on how to collect the information you want. You might even contact national and state departments of education. In any case, go to more than one place for school data, forge ahead, and be persistent in finding ways to collect the information you need. It's out there, but you'll have to be resourceful— and sometimes patient — to get it.

Refer to the tools on pages 45 and 46 for lists of potential sources of data on student and school performance. ▶

> **Use the people in your neighborhood to identify issues, particularly the leaders in other efforts, such as neighborhood beautification, crime prevention, etc. These people often have children in school and know the schools and the principals.**
>
> **Neighborhood organizer**
> **Chicago, IL**

> **There's value in going beyond any single group. You can benefit from the lessons learned by others.**
>
> **Education reform advocate**
> **Philadelphia, PA**

You'll find a variety of sources for data. Excellent sources of information are "school report cards," where the school-by-school academic performance of students is outlined. Some schools are required to produce annual report cards with a variety of information on schools and student performance. In fact nearly 40 states currently publish annual report cards on individual schools. Report cards can offer one-stop-shopping for organizers in search of reliable school information. Find out if your district or state produces such reports and obtain a copy. If not, producing a report card may be something to consider undertaking when you are ready to act.

Contact a variety of sources to request data on student performance or other information (such as, an individual school, the school district's central office, the state department of education, or school board members and other elected officials).

3. Gather data from your own stakeholders

Organizers from other school reform initiatives claim that people – in and outside of the community – were the most useful sources of information at every stage of their work. Engaging local stakeholders in the information gathering stage, as both sources and researchers, can be worthwhile. The people closest to the issues – students, families and teachers – offer valuable insight to why things are as they are. What they tell you about schools and students can support your research, unveil underlying causes of student performance, and direct you to other problem areas. In addition, their commitment to school reform often increases as they are exposed to educational research, involved in gathering information, and encouraged to track results.

You have several options for collecting and using information generated from local stakeholders. In earlier stages, we discuss various strategies to engage stakeholders and to collect their opinions about schools. You may choose to use such information from your previous efforts. Or you may use research conducted by other organizations. Another option is to collect altogether new data to ensure that it is current, relevant, and specific for your purposes. New data might supplement older data or be used for comparison. For example, you could compare the results of the school district's annual family survey with your own survey of families.

You can solicit information from stakeholders in several ways. The box, on page 47, lists some ideas for collecting information from local people. Whatever you choose to do – mail-in surveys or public gatherings – be sure the process is risk-free for participants. Written responses should be confidential and meetings should offer safe places for stakeholders to speak freely and honestly. You and your stakeholders will want to avoid fear of retribution by those potentially threatened by candid discussions of problems in schools. ▶

> **You have to have 'stick-to-it-ness.' You have to stay with it even though there will be roadblocks along the way.**
>
> **Community activist**
> **Jamesville, NC**

Sample Tools

Sources Of Data On Schools And Student Performance

- Achievement test results (reading, writing, mathematics, science, history, geography)
- Annual school report cards
- Attendance records
- Exit exams
- College entrance tests (SAT, ACT)
- College records on student admission and enrollment
- Records on student enrollment, dropouts, and transfers
- End-of-grade and end-of-course tests
- Records on advanced placement course enrollment
- Family surveys
- Volunteer sign-in sheets
- School and district-produced reports and websites
- Employment records
- Newspaper articles and reports
- Chamber of Commerce reports
- Community assessments/surveys

Sample Tools

Sources Of National Information

Kids Count, Annie E. Casey Foundation
www.kidscount.org/kidscount/index.htm (410) 547-6600

National Assessment of Educational Progress (Nation's Report Card)
nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/site/home.asp (202) 219-1828

National Education Goals Panel
www.negp.gov/ (202) 724-0015

Digest of Education Statistics
nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/digest99/ (202) 219-1828

Quality Counts, Education Week
www.edweek.org/sreports/qc99/ (800) 346-1834

Third International Mathematics & Science Study (TIMSS)
nces.ed.gov/timss/ (202) 219-1828

Sources Of State Information

Visit **www.ed.gov/Programs/bastmp/SEA.htm** to access links to state departments of education.

Sources Of Local Information

Visit **nces.ed.gov/ccdweb/school/district.asp** to access contact information for your district. Below are websites and telephone numbers for school districts in the 22 cities participating in the Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* initiative.

Atlanta	www.atlanta.k12.ga.us/	(404) 827-8959
Baltimore	www.bcps.org/info/general/index.html	(410) 887-4171
Boston	www.boston.k12.ma.us/bps/facts.asp	(617) 635-9265
Camden	www.sad28.k12.me.us/index.html	(207) 236-3358
Denver	www.denver.k12.co.us/	(303) 764-3414
Des Moines	www.des-moines.k12.ia.us/DMPS_WEB/qkfacts/score.html	(515) 242-7911
Detroit	www.detpub.k12.mi.us/	(313) 494-1000
Hartford	www.hartfordschools.org/	(860) 527-0742
Indianapolis	www.ips.k12.in.us/	(317) 226-4725
Louisville	www.jefferson.k12.ky.us/	(502) 485-3949
Miami	dcps.dade.k12.fl.us/district/	(305) 995-1000
Milwaukee	www.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/	(414) 475-8276
New Orleans	www.nops.k12.la.us/	(504) 942-3531
Oakland	www.ousd.k12.ca.us/default-ad.htm	(510) 879-8199
Providence	www.providenceri.com/education.html	(401) 456-9211
Philadelphia	www.phila.k12.pa.us/Directory/alphaschl/page1.html	(215) 299-7738
San Antonio	www.saisd.net/factfig/factfig.shtm	(210) 299-5500
San Diego	www.sandi.net/research/executive/index.html	(619) 725-7188
Savannah	www.savannah.chatham.k12.ga.us	(912) 651-7174
Seattle	www.seattleschools.org	(206) 298-7170
St. Louis	dtd1.slps.k12.mo.us/	(314) 231-3720
Washington, DC	www.k12.dc.us/dcps/data/data_frame.html	(202) 442-5336

In addition to local residents, you may want to contact educators, community organizers, and researchers from outside of the neighborhood. By linking with state and national people, you can collect important data, learn from others' experiences, obtain expert advice, and, in general, broaden your perspective. Make these contacts by attending local and national education conferences, contacting union officials, inviting education researchers and experts to speak locally, and networking with national education reform groups and grant recipients. The information you collect from these groups can be used to compare your school's performance with state and national averages, with exemplary schools, and with schools that are grappling with similar educational challenges.

You will enrich your research by collecting a broad range of information, and you will enhance your actions by developing a comprehensive understanding of the issues.

Collect your own data about schools by…

- Holding focus groups
- Conducting telephone surveys
- Organizing door-to-door or mail-in surveys
- Holding structured public conversations and dialogues
- Making site visits to schools
- Conducting "quality checks" and climate analyses in schools

4. Analyze and interpret data

If organizers lack the skills to summarize, analyze and interpret the data collected, seek assistance from those who do. Tap community resources such as the school district's researchers, college faculty members, graduate students, and qualified participants in your efforts. You may also want to hire a consultant to provide the expert assistance. In any case, make sure the information you compile and present to stakeholders is credible and has meaning for them.

To have meaning for your stakeholders, information must answer the questions they have. For various reasons, information coming out of school systems often does not respond effectively to the questions families and other ordinary citizens have. Data is often presented in technical terms (e.g."normal curve equivalents") that makes it difficult to understand. In addition, the people compiling information within school systems are usually doing so with purposes other than public dissemination in mind. They are compiling the information to meet certain district or state reporting requirements, or to "work" within their data systems. As a result, information often comes out in ways that is non-responsive to citizens' questions. Finally, information is sometimes withheld for political reasons. School officials may be hesitant to call attention to the fact that certain schools or students are not performing as well as others. ▶

> **We contacted the experts directly. For example, we contacted key educators and researchers at Johns Hopkins University, Yale Child Studies Center and the National Commission on Teaching when we had questions about reform models and strategies.**
>
> **Education reform advocate**
> **Charlotte, NC**

Consequently, community residents who want to analyze and interpret school data face a challenge. It is a challenge of translation — taking information that comes in one form and translating it into a form that answers residents' questions. Refer to the box below for some activities that can help in this translation.

Translating data into a meaningful and useful form may require. . .

- Breaking down overall results by subgroups of students (e.g. based on income, race, neighborhood)
- Cobbling together year-by-year information to get a picture of trends over time
- Converting hard-to-understand statistics into simpler indexes or numbers that non-statisticians can comprehend
- Finding comparisons with other schools and districts to give people a reference point
- Using analogies and illustrations to make abstract figures more concrete (e.g. "If all the students who were failing to meet this standard were lined up, they would circle the neighborhood park three times.")

5. Share results

You have an obligation to share the results of your data collection with participants and other stakeholders. Their ongoing involvement and awareness will enhance your work.

Before you present data make sure it is relevant, reliable, simple, clear, and presented with sensitivity. You must be selective about what data you share (and when you share it) for two reasons. First, presenting lots of data can overwhelm people and make them miss the important points while trying to absorb it all.

Second, data presented in certain ways can inflame tensions and insecurities. Be sensitive to how some parents may respond to data disaggregated by race and socioeconomic status and how teachers may react to questions about their qualifications and techniques. You want to be honest — probing shortcomings and examining gaps — but you don't want to alienate the stakeholders you need the most. Of course you'll ruffle some feathers, that's the nature of reform; however, use discretion and take care to build, not burn, bridges. Whatever data you choose to present, summarize the key points in words, numbers, and pictures. Refer to the tool on page 47, "The Problem Statement," for help on how to probe important issues. ▶

> **We attend a lot of local and national conferences on education issues. The staff takes members (neighborhood residents) to the conferences they attend.**
>
> **Neighborhood organizer**
> **Brooklyn, NY**

Examples of ways to share information with stakeholders

- Developing and distributing a fact sheet
- Mailing meeting notes with a summary of the ideas generated
- Holding a conference to present the findings to the public
- Conducting debriefing sessions with district administrators and local policy makers
- Publishing survey results in a formal report, an organizational newsletter, or a newspaper insert
- Producing a video

Share the information you've collected — on schools, student achievement, neighborhood perceptions — by distributing written materials or by holding special meetings to discuss it. When there's an event, some organizers send "data packets" to participants in advance of the meeting to allow sufficient time to read and process pertinent information. Others prefer to present and discuss the data during meetings.

When you present results, be sure to include "next steps" or a "call to action." Let people know what you plan to do next or what they should do based on the information. Information without direction will not advance your efforts to hold schools accountable. This stage of the journey can be very powerful and can fuel your "taking action" efforts. The results go far beyond the raw data collected.

6. Set priorities

After collecting and interpreting data, identify priorities. Undoubtedly you will have gained considerable knowledge about your local schools and student achievement issues. Narrow your focus by selecting priorities to guide your actions. These should be issues that stakeholders and organizers believe must be tackled first. To guide the process, refer to your vision and goals. Let your previous work drive critical decisions about what data to focus on and how to mobilize for action.

Each time you narrow the focus — whether it's setting the vision or setting priorities for action — remind stakeholders that their other concerns have not been forgotten. Emphasize that it is frequently necessary to set a starting point and to address issues in manageable quantities.

In the priority-setting process, let your vision of quality schools for your neighborhood's students guide your decisions. Ask yourself: what gaps are most apparent between where we are and where we want to go? There will probably be lots of gaps, but which ones are the most glaring, or the most galling to families and residents? Which gaps seen most amenable to closing based on action by a group like yours? Thinking that way can help pave the way for the next phase, taking action.

Potential outcomes of gathering and sharing information

- Strategic direction for activities
- Establishment of baseline data for tracking progress
- Heightened awareness about the school improvement initiative
- Broadened perspectives about schools, family roles, and student achievement
- Stronger ties within the neighborhood and among collaborators
- Recruitment of new participants
- Increased media attention
- Expanded resources

Sample Tools

The Problem Statement

What connection is there between your school's problem statement and what your school needs to do to make progress toward the Vision? Use the lens below to more deeply examine your problem statement.

Problem Statement Lens:

1. Does the statement have students and/or student achievement as its center?

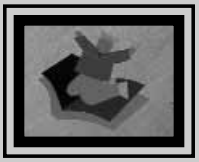
2. Is the statement based on evidence and data about students and/or student achievement?
(e.g., Have you disaggregated the data that supports the problem statement? Can you say which students this problem statement primarily effects?)

3. Is the problem something you can do something about?
(Avoid statements like "our society is divided into 'haves' and 'have nots'," and "we aren't doing enough to narrow the gap.")

4. Be specific. Name what the problem is clearly, without using euphemisms.
(e.g., If the truth is that Latino students are performing at lower levels in reading than Anglo students in the 3rd and 5th grades – say so. Avoid statements like "…our students are not performing at a high enough level in reading. …")

5. No blaming. No whining.
(Avoid statements like "…our kids come from homes where there is little support for education." or "…our kids come to us unprepared for our high standards.")

Used by
Bay Area
School Reform
Collaborative
San Francisco, CA



Reflecting On Your Progress

Here are some questions to ask as you move forward

1. Do we know how local students are performing academically?
2. Are students meeting or exceeding the standards in reading? In math? In science? And in other subjects?
3. Do we know how our students and schools compare to other students and schools? How does their performance compare to nearby schools, to the district average, to exemplary schools, to the other schools across the state, the nation, and world?
4. Is our data reliable and credible?
5. Have we translated the data we gathered into information that's meaningful to our stakeholders?
6. Have we shared the information we gathered widely?
7. Are our priorities based on the academic needs of students and on sound educational research?

Where To Go For More Information

See the list of national information sources in main text of this section

The Education Trust • Washington, DC
tel. (202) 293-1217 fax (202) 293-2605 www.edtrust.org

- Publications promoting high pre-K to college achievement, with a focus on low-income and minority students
- Annual conference on school reform

MPR Associates • Berkeley , CA
tel. (800) 677-6967 fax (510) 849-0794 www.mprinc.com

- *At Your Fingertips: Using Everyday Data to Improve Schools*

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- Research and publications on public perceptions about schools and education

Public Education Network • Washington, DC
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- National network of community-based school reform organizations and resources on proven strategies for improving student achievement.

U.S. Census Bureau • Washington, DC
tel. (301) 457-4100 (customer service) www.census.gov
tel. (888) 249-7295 (orders only) (301) 457-4714 (general information)

- Data on city, state and national populations

U.S. Department of Education • Washington, DC
www.ed.gov

- National education research, resources, and reform strategies and models

TAKING ACTION

What action should we take to hold our schools accountable?

Introduction

ac•tion \ ak-shən\ *n* : an act of will; something done voluntarily

This is where the rubber meets the road. Holding schools accountable means setting high standards and goals, accessing reliable data, prioritizing issues to address, and then acting to improve student learning. Key advice: Remain fixed on your vision and use proven strategies to address identified academic needs of students.

STEPS TO TAKE ACTION

1. Review your vision, standards, goals, and data
2. Diagnose the problems and explore solutions
3. Assess your capabilities and resources
4. Establish a detailed action plan
5. Publicize your accomplishments and celebrate the contributions of participants and supporters

Steps and Tools

1. Review your vision, standards, goals, and data

This is your opportunity to translate your earlier efforts into a constructive plan of action. You will want to make sure that the ideas and strategies generated from stage to stage are aligned with one another. There should be an obvious, interdependent flow from your vision, student standards, school goals, priorities to address, and the proposed actions.

> **Ensure consistency in your message and activities.**
>
> **School choice advocate**
> **Washington, DC**

If you haven't already linked with state and national education researchers, this may be the time to do so. Drawing on the knowledge of experts may help you probe for root causes of problems, and then focus sharply on solutions and strategies to address them.

There are many different ways that communities have gone about holding schools accountable for student learning. One way to categorize the approaches is found in the box on the next page, which breaks out five different "modes" neighborhood residents and families might consider. They range across a continuum — at the top of the box, the strategies tend more toward discussion and information sharing, relatively indirect ways to hold schools accountable. Moving down through the box means taking a more direct approach; the final stop — starting a new public school — represents the most direct way for neighborhoods and schools to have a hand in changing the way schools work.

Again, Hill's *Building More Effective Community Schools* is a helpful resource, providing some considerations to help you think about what kind of strategy makes the most sense for your context.

2. Diagnose the problems and explore solutions

You may have identified your priority issues during the "gathering information" stage. Tackle each priority by finding out how others have addressed the same issue. You may find existing reform models and proven strategies — being used by other schools in your community or in other cities and states — to make changes for the better. Make sure your actions are grounded in research that shows links between the actions and increases in student achievement.

Refer to the Casey Foundation's *Building More Effective Community Schools* by Paul Hill for information on promising approaches and resources to address your school's problems. You may also want to check out the U.S. Department of Education's website of "27 promising school reform models" at www.ed.gov/pubs/ToolsforSchools/intro.html for direction. These and other resources cited throughout this toolkit can guide you in finding specific strategies to address your issues.

> **Schools often have a narrow view of what neighborhoods can and should do in schools.**
>
> **Community involvement coordinator**
> **Grand Rapids, MI**

Sample Tools

Some Ways Neighborhoods Can Take Action To Hold Schools Accountable

Disseminating school data and information on standards to the public

- Produce annual school report cards to disseminate information about schools and student performance
- Establish a family-oriented clearinghouse that provides information on schools and student achievement
- Educate parents and community members about educational standards

Creating mechanisms for organizing public dialogue, building consensus, and mobilizing broad constituencies to reform schools and educational systems

- Conduct a community-wide visioning process around standards and accountability
- Hold school-based accountability dialogues and events
- Launch a media campaign to highlight standards, alert families about important academic issues, and reward schools that produce positive results
- Hold an education summit

Increasing parent representation and decision making in the school reform process

- Lead parent organizing initiatives around the issue of student achievement
- Sponsor parent leadership institutes to educate parents about education issues
- Pressure schools to assign diverse parent representatives to decision-making bodies

Advocating or supporting specific changes in schools (curriculum, staffing, professional development, enrichment programming, policies)

- Implement school reform models targeting specific academic needs
- Coordinate afterschool, summer school, and tutoring programs aimed at raising achievement levels
- Link businesses, social service agencies and community organizations with schools to meet the needs of students
- Organize public campaigns around issues such as low standards, teacher quality, discrimination, inequities, and overcrowding

Starting a new public school

- Create new schools, such as charter schools and alternative schools, in response to the neighborhood's identified educational values, standards, priorities, and needs.

Suggested by Public Impact

3. Assess your capabilities and resources

Once you've scoped out some possible actions, assess your capacity to carry them out. This step should by no means discourage you from taking on the work, but rather encourage you to assess what your organization can realistically do and where help from others is needed. Be honest about personal and organizational capabilities — acknowledging your potential and your limitations — to successfully implement the project. If you lack expertise, experience or resources, take the opportunity to cultivate new volunteers, to bring on additional help (paid consultants, part-time, full-time or temporary staff, student interns), and to collaborate with other organizations. You may also choose to stagger the work over time if you can't manage it all at once.

You may have already received funding to support your efforts to improve schools. If not, now is a good time to begin seeking financial support. Your research will support your efforts to design effective programs, write strong grant proposals, and secure funding. Grantmakers, business leaders and other prospective funders will value the research and groundwork laid in earlier stages. Providing specific data on local educational needs and a coherent plan of action will help make the case for support. Funders also may take note of your efforts to engage stakeholders, indicating a strong base of support to take action.

Refer to the tool on page 57 for examples of questions to ask while assessing your organization's resources.

"

It is important to build slowly. You shouldn't accelerate too fast – that kind of action is based on anger and people will burn out too quickly and accomplish little.

Parent trainer
San Antonio, TX

"

"

Bringing change to schools takes a long-term commitment from the whole community.

Community activist
Jamesville, NC

"

4. Establish a detailed action plan

It will be useful to develop a written plan, detailing the action you will take. The planning tool on the page 58 can help. For each major action, you should document how it supports your goals, who is accountable for "making it happen," what resources are needed, and how long it will take to complete the task. Align activities with expected outcomes and determine how you will measure success. Organizers may chose to develop the action plan, especially if they plan to be heavily involved in activities. Another option is to appoint a subcommittee or a group of stakeholders to develop the detailed plan.

Some communities have established organizational structures to develop and implement activities (work teams, action teams, subcommittees, and team leaders). When possible, include a range of individuals, representing a variety of stakeholders, in the development of action plans. The talents of families, residents, and volunteers in your neighborhood will vary, but find a role and assign responsibility to everyone who wants to participate. There certainly will be plenty to do and school reform efforts cannot afford to exclude anyone from process. Assigned roles and responsibilities may also offer opportunities to cultivate leadership skills among family members and residents.

A good action plan will contain a reasonable timeline, well-coordinated activities, assigned roles and responsibilities, clear benchmarks and expected outcomes, and assessments. The action plan can ensure accountability among organizers and volunteers. ▶

Sample Tools

Suggested by Public Impact

Questions To Ask While Assessing Organizational Resources

Time

- What are we already committed to do?
- How can we redirect efforts to focus on fewer areas?

Staff

- What are our strengths and weaknesses?
- Who's a strong leader? Who writes well? Who's a good facilitator? Who can conduct the research?
- Who will build strong relationships in the community, in schools and/or with the media?

Partners

- How will they complement or supplement our strengths?
- Are they credible among key stakeholders?
- Do they have valuable connections to needed stakeholders and/or resources?
- Are they willing to collaborate?

Volunteers

- What are our strengths/weaknesses?
- How can we re-direct volunteer work/assignments for increased productivity?
- How can we recruit/involve more volunteers?
- Do volunteer assignments complement and enhance staff work?

Funding

- What work/activities need funding?
- Are prospective funders interested in supporting our work?
- Which potential funders have a vested interest in our focus area?

Sample Tools

Suggested by Public Impact

Action Planning Chart

Step or Action	Goals Supported?	Who is Accountable?	Who Can Help?	Other Resources Needed	Timeframe	Outcomes Expected

The next few pages (pp. 59 - 66) offer brief notes on several promising community-led efforts to hold schools accountable.

Holding School-Based Accountability Events: Accountability events, or accountability dialogues, are something like "report cards," but live and interactive. A school, in collaboration with a community-based organization, hosts public forums where parents hear firsthand how students as a group are performing and how the school plans to improve areas of weakness. Organizers present student data, analyze their findings, and respond to questions and comments from parents, teachers, administrators and neighborhood residents.

Accountability events go beyond traditional school meetings where principals and teachers give lecture-style reports to parents. Instead, they are facilitated conversations among stakeholders both inside and outside of schools. Participants come together to establish standards for student performance, to gain a better understanding of their individual and collective needs for information, and ultimately to ensure students meet identified standards.

Several California communities — working with the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) and the Western Assessment Collaborative at WestEd — have used accountability events to ensure that schools are addressing the academic needs of students. Organizers are seeking authentic accountability in schools and communities, rather than simple accounting. Here's the difference: Accounting consists of administering tests and reporting the results, while accountability requires ongoing public engagement and constructive action to improve student performance.

Some communities have held a series of progressive dialogues, rather than a single event. At the first session, participants review student data and generate questions, and then return for subsequent sessions to investigate and probe deeply into their questions and concerns about student achievement. Over time, organizers expect to see these changes: increased understanding of the community's standards for student performance; better accessibility to good data about progress toward those standards; and more focused and potent action toward improvement. They believe accountability events offer a promising approach to hold schools accountable and may serve to renew public trust in schools.

Refer to the tool on page 60 for tips on holding accountability events.

Sample Tools

Used by
Western
Assessment
Collaborative
at WestEd
San Francisco, CA

Tips For Coordinating Accountability Events In Your Neighborhood

- Publicize the event through a variety of community networks and media outlets; and give parents sufficient notice to attend
- Develop an engaging presentation using technology
- Introduce parents to standards and assessment instruments and methods
- Discuss changes – over time – in student performance
- Be cautious about labeling students
- Use straightforward and simple language (avoid jargon)
- Ensure knowledgeable and credible presenters and /or facilitators
- Offer opportunities for questions and answers, one-on-one discussions with presenters and/or small group discussions
- Advise parents of the school's planned measures to increase achievement, and offer suggestions on "next steps" and resources for parents
- Provide interpreters for people who have trouble understanding English and who are hearing-impaired
- Create a safe and comfortable setting for parents, teachers, and neighborhood residents to speak openly and honestly
- Encourage probing inquiry from all participants
- Outline what sound action participants can take to improve student performance
- Use the event as a tool to engage your community in action

Sponsoring Parent Leadership Institutes: A parent institute, or academy as they are commonly called, is a frequent starting point for community-based reform efforts to hold schools accountable. An institute may be a full-day training session on a specific topic or a series of comprehensive workshops offered over several months or over a full year.

Many organizers recognize that parents play an important role in school reform, but many do not have the skills, knowledge or confidence to become champions for school improvement. These institutes educate parents about important issues with the expectation that they will apply what they have learned to hold local schools accountable. It's like the adage about giving a man a fish or teaching him to fish. Parents who are knowledgeable about standards, student data, assessment and school policies become ardent advocates for quality education — throughout their children's academic career and on behalf of other students and parents.

The North Carolina Education and Law Project, based in Raleigh, offers an institute for parents called the "N.C. Parent Education Studies Program." Refer to the tool on page 63 for an outline of the program's curriculum. The program is conducted over a series of four weekend sessions. Organizers provide overnight accommodations and stipends to cover childcare costs, travel reimbursement and meals. These incentives attract participants who otherwise might worry about expenses and time away from their jobs and children. Past participants have gone on to become vocal proponents of school improvement and to mobilize other parents in their communities to change schools for the better.

The Logan Square Neighborhood Association's (LSNA) "Parent-Teacher Mentor Program," in Chicago, puts a different spin on parent institutes. In Logan Square, parents are placed in the classroom to work alongside teachers and students. These parents commit to 100 hours of volunteer service in classrooms over a three-month period. Organizers encourage parents to participate regardless of their educational experience and language skills. Bilingual training and school-parent liaisons offer ongoing support to parents during their service in schools. After completing the program, participants receive stipends and gain recognition in a graduation ceremony.

LSNA believes the "Parent-Teacher Mentor Program," with over 400 program graduates, is contributing to improvements in schools and gains in student performance. Participating schools have seen increases in students' math and reading scores. In its first year, one school received the biggest gain in test scores of any Chicago school over the past decade. After working in schools, parents become active in other issues, like voting on school board policies, serving on school councils, and educating other parents. In the process, parents also are inspired to improve their own lives by attaining GEDs, taking English language courses, enrolling in college, and starting businesses.

Refer to the tools on pages 62 and 63 for information how to organize and conduct a parent institute.

Sample Tools

Common Elements From A Variety Of Parent Institutes That You Can Integrate Into Your Own

- Give parents ample opportunity to interact with each other
- Focus on their roles as decision-makers and community leaders
- Emphasize the importance of academic standards and student performance data
- Provide a solid foundation on local and national school reform strategies
- Recruit natural leaders and untapped talent
- Consider offering a stipend or allowance to cover childcare costs, transportation, materials, and other expenses related to participating in the institute
- Require participants to develop an action plan
- Encourage participants to involve and engage other parents
- Hold periodic follow-up sessions and provide ongoing support to past participants
- Offer opportunities for participants to meet and talk with key educational figures (e.g. superintendent, school board chair, and district education researcher)
- Provide a reception, graduation ceremony or celebration at the end of the program

Suggested by
Public Impact

Sample Tools

Used by North Carolina Education and Law Project Raleigh, NC

Parent Education Studies Program Notebook
Table Of Contents

Organizing Public Campaigns: Public campaigns — using the collective power of parents, neighborhood residents and community activists, intensified by a laser-like focus on a single educational issue — can be very effective in holding schools accountable, especially in communities with a tradition of grassroots organizing. National neighborhood organizing groups, like the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) and Industrial Area Funds (IAF) have been successful in leading public campaigns to improve schools.

An IAF chapter in New York, called IAF-Metro NYC, uses community organizing to address its identified annual themes in education. Themes include enhanced parent organizing and leadership, more principal accountability, and higher achievement standards. Community concerns about education generally determine the organizing themes and sometimes articles in daily newspapers alert organizers to pertinent issues. One successful campaign to hold schools accountable focused on what IAF-Metro NYC deemed "dead zones" — schools where 35 percent or fewer students were reading on grade level. After two years of pushing the issue publicly and demanding accountability, the district finally responded by closing 40 "dead zone" schools and removing 58 principals.

Parent organizing is labor intensive. However, few groups are organized so you can go far with a good key team.

Parent organizer
New York, NY

Examples of public action taken by neighborhood organizers

- Putting pressure on public officials and key decision-makers with a concerted campaign of calls, letters, email, and visits from concerned parents and community members.
- Holding rallies – with hundreds of supporters in attendance – where school issues are presented and decision-makers are asked publicly to make needed changes.
- Inviting the media to cover pertinent stories and events where residents' demands for change are outlined and where decision-makers' responses to their requests are detailed.

The Alliance Organizing Project (AOP) in Philadelphia organizes parents and fosters leadership in neighborhoods around a variety of education issues. AOP organizers take their lead from parents by holding "listening campaigns" to identify parents' concerns about their children's performance and their schools. Organizers support parents by providing assistance in identifying issues and collecting relevant information from teachers, principals and central office administrators.

Parents organize "public actions," where school leaders and elected officials are invited before hundreds of parents and the media and are pressed to take immediate steps toward solutions that will improve schools. Having the media present to record and publicize verbal or written commitments by school officials serves to hold officials accountable after the event. One successful public action, organized by AOP, addressed a severe teacher vacancy problem that had been identified by parents.

Developing School Report Cards: Report cards are an increasingly common approach — from local to national levels — to hold schools accountable. Even though your state or district may produce a report card, it is worthwhile to consider producing your own. While conducting your research, you may have used a report card, but found it lacking. For example, some state-produced report cards leave gaps and raise more questions than they answer. In other cases, the reports have a limited distribution or their presentation and language do not appeal to local residents. If report cards don't exist or if they are not useful enough, seize the opportunity to produce your own with input from neighborhood parents and residents.

Education Week, a national publication, and A-Plus Communications, a national education organization, joined to research and publish *Reporting Results: What the Public Wants to Know*. Drawing on surveys of parents, taxpayers, and educators, the publication offers helpful advice for communities and schools planning to develop a report card. Below is a list of some key findings from their report; you can learn more about it at *Education Week's* website, listed on page 67.

Suggestions offered in "Reporting Results: What the Public Wants to Know"

- Plan ahead – and avoid wishful thinking
- Test scores provide only part of the picture
- People want to know about safety, teacher qualifications, and other measures
- Comparisons count (between other local, state and national schools)
- Be cautious about the labels you assign to schools (e.g. "low-performing," "exemplary")
- Downplay demographic data
- Make the report easy to read
- Use credible messengers
- Help people understand how to use the information
- Use report cards as a tool to engage your community

See page 67 for infomration about this report.

Sharing demographic data about students — race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and primary language — is a common element of report cards. *Reporting Results*, however, advises organizers to "downplay" demographic data because it ranked low among survey respondents. Community-based efforts to produce a report card should carefully consider this issue by taking into account the audience's demographic makeup, as well as its attitudes and perceptions.

Many educators and researchers find demographic data useful in understanding the context of student performance. Recognizing that minority (ethnic or language) and poor children often face specific challenges, they use the data to determine which educational strategies will best meet every child's academic needs. Some parents and community members, however, perceive the inclusion of such data as "labeling" or "making excuses"— based on racism, classism and other prejudices — and worry that educators use it to blame students and their parents for failing schools.

You know your community best, so you should be the judge about how to present demographic data. We suggest finding a way to present the data, because it not only reveals problems with standards, expectations and instruction, but it can also help find solutions. If you're unsure of how residents might respond, survey them — informally or formally — to find out how the data can presented with relevance and sensitivity. Consider adding a brief explanation, in the introductory pages of the report, about the value of demographic data to assess and respond to the needs of students.

Make sure the group charged with creating the report card is diverse and reflective of your school's student population. This group can determine how to present sensitive information in straightforward terms, but without offending some stakeholders. A report card produced by local parents and residents, rather than policymakers and education leaders, may be the most important key for a meaningful report card.

Creating New Charter or Other Public Schools: Parents and neighborhood organizations across the country have become involved in creating new public schools to address needs not being met in existing schools. Sometimes these schools serve particular populations of students with a particular interest or special need; other times they are more generally open to residents of a neighborhood, providing an alternative for everyone. Historically, community-based public schools have been part of traditional school districts, requiring the approval of school boards or district administrators. But with the advent of charter schools legislation in almost three-quarters of the states, it is now possible for grassroots groups of citizens in many places to start new public schools even without the go-ahead from their school districts.

Providing detailed advice about the start-up of new schools is clearly beyond the scope of this toolkit. Fortunately, many resources have emerged to help would-be school entrepreneurs get started. Most states with charter school laws have one or more nonprofit technical assistance organizations, and perhaps an office in state government, that can help people start charter schools. And there are numerous websites and publications available to provide other kinds of advice. While geared toward charter schools, a great deal of this information would be helpful to people starting alternative schools within school districts as well. For a list of some of these resources, refer to page 67.

"

Keep building – it takes time and hard work.

Parent organizer
New York, NY

"

"

Publicize your project, organization or initiative. Visibility is crucial.

School choice advocate
Washington, DC

"

5. Publicize your accomplishments and celebrate the contributions of participants and supporters

Take advantage of opportunities to raise the visibility of your organization and actions. Publicize your accomplishments with families, participants, educators, key decision-makers, policy makers, and the media. Share the good news about positive neighborhood action to hold schools accountable by highlighting efforts in newsletters, mailing press releases, producing a documentary video, and developing reports. Include your vision and goals with every public notice. The media coverage and attention can attract other volunteers, families, collaborators and funders to your cause.

A good way to gain buy-in and support among stakeholders is to acknowledge their contributions and accomplishments. Sometimes it doesn't take much to show your gratitude — a thank-you note, certificate of appreciation, or an acknowledgment in a newsletter or at a public event. Working to hold schools accountable is ongoing and often can seem thankless, so take time to encourage and bolster enthusiasm among participants. It is important to reward civic responsibility, especially among those who may never have been active before.

Taking Action

Reflecting On Your Progress

Here are questions to ask throughout your work

1. Have we translated our vision and goals into taking constructive action?
2. Have we sufficiently tapped the talents, skills, and resources in the neighborhood?
3. Are our individual and collective roles and responsibilities clearly defined?
4. Are stakeholders being included in decision making?
5. Are we building positive relationships within local schools, the neighborhood, the district? And with partners, collaborators, stakeholders, and funders?
6. Do we know what outcomes to expect?
7. Do we have sufficient financial support to sustain our efforts?
8. Are we building local capacity to ensure long-term effectiveness and sustainability?
9. Are we demanding evidence of continuous growth and improvement year after year?

Where To Go For More Information

Accountability Events
Bay Area School Reform Collaborative • San Francisco, CA
tel. (415) 241-2740 basrc.wested.org

Parent Leadership Institutes
North Carolina Education and Law Project • Raleigh, NC
tel. (919) 856-2150 www.ncjustice.org/edlaw/pesp/

Prichard Committee For Academic Excellence • Lexington, KY
tel. (606) 337-1453 www.prichardcommittee.org/cipl/cipl.html

Community Organizing
ACORN • National offices in New York, Washington, Little Rock and New Orleans
tel. (718) 246-7900 www.acorn.org

Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) • In communities across the country
www.tresser.com/IAF.htm

School Report Cards
A-Plus Communications Report in Education Week's Quality Counts
"Reporting Results: What the Public Wants to Know"
www.edweek.org/sreports/qc99/opinion/aplus.htm

Starting Charter and Other New Public Schools

U.S. Department of Education / Wested's uscharterschools Website www.uscharterschools.org

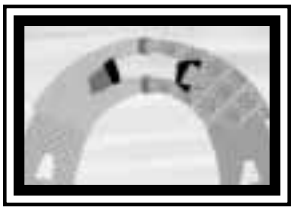
- Provides how-to information on starting and running a charter school; links major reports on charter schools; a state-by-state listing of resources; and access to online discussion groups.

Center for Education Reform
tel. (800) 521-2118 edreform.com

- Publishes the how-to *Charter School Workbook*; summaries of state charter laws; the *National Charter School Directory*; and other charter school and school reform resources.

Charter Friends National Network
www.charterfriends.org

- Provides a listing of charter school technical assistance resources in your area.



REFLECTING, EVALUATING, & LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCES

Are we achieving our goals and vision? Are we holding schools accountable for student achievement?

Introduction

eval•u•a•tion \i-val-yə-wā-shən\ *n* : an act of determining the impact of your work

Evaluation is a matter of simply stepping back and taking a critical look at what you are doing. There is no single "right way" to hold schools accountable, so remain open to what your evaluation reveals about your efforts.

Ongoing evaluation of your work will be necessary to stay on a positive track and to bring improvements in schools. Many people prefer not to take a critical look at their work and, as a result, approach evaluation with dread. Nonetheless, it is crucial that organizers and their stakeholders develop the capacity to assess their own work in the same way they are asking schools to evaluate and improve. Only through regular self-assessment will you help create long-term improvement in schools. Take time to ask and seek answers to fundamental questions, like "Are students learning more because of our efforts?" "Are families and other stakeholders better off because of our work?" "Is our neighborhood a better place?" "Are we making progress toward our vision?"

And as with every stage of your work, share the results with stakeholders, including funders, and publicize significant accomplishments with key decision-makers and the media.

STEPS TO REFLECT, EVALUATE AND LEARN FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES

1. Determine what data to collect and evaluate
2. Modify evaluation strategies
3. Appreciate the richness of your information

Steps To Make The Most Of Your Experiences

1. Determine what data to collect and evaluate

Your experiences in gathering student data may shed light on the value of collecting data for the purpose of evaluating your work. In the same ways your vision, goals and stakeholders determined what student data to collect, allow these same things to determine what you evaluate about your own project.

You will want to examine how the group operates (process evaluation) and what the group achieves (results evaluation). To evaluate the process, collect products and indicators from your first meeting to your last action. Potential sources of process data include meeting agendas and minutes, journals used by organizers and participants, attendance logs, evaluation forms completed by participants, and notes on subcommittee activities and event debriefings.

To measure results, you will want to take a look at student data and test scores that were collected during earlier stages and compare them with data collected after taking action. For example, find out if the percentage of students reading on grade level has increased, are more students enrolled in college prep courses, and have fewer students dropped out of school? The data you collect should reflect the goals of your effort.

"

We should have been more formal in assessing the work, but time was an issue. There has to be a reasonable balance between assessing and evaluating and 'doing' the work. In the next phase of our work we have proposed a more formal assessment.

Education reform advocate
Charlotte, NC

"

"

We are always evaluating what to do next, because there is always something to work on.

Neighborhood organizer
Brooklyn, NY

"

Just as with student performance and school quality, there are variety of ways to collect the data you will need for evaluation, and you should consider using multiple methods. In addition to those listed above, you may choose to conduct surveys, interview teachers, students and parents, hold focus groups, and observe classrooms and school settings.

Instill in leaders, families and residents the value of assessing every meeting and collecting baseline data before taking action to enable you to measure the process and results. Refer to your record of the ideas generated during the planning process to evaluate your responsiveness to neighborhood concerns and needs. The information will serve to build trust among stakeholders who will feel their opinions and ideas are valued and are being acknowledged.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, community organizers hired a research group at the community college to evaluate its work. Neighborhood residents also are learning to evaluate their own work with assistance from the researchers. This is an excellent example of how you can use local resources and partners to build your organization's capacity for self-evaluation and your stakeholder's appreciation of and skills in evaluation.

2. Modify evaluation strategies

As your efforts progress, your strategies for evaluation should progress too. During the initial phase of work you may only be able to measure the process, looking at participation rates, hours of volunteer services, levels of satisfaction with activities. After time and the investment of considerable resources, you will want to step up evaluation efforts to measure the impact of your work and changes in student performance. Determine what changes in the learning environment will be evident at key points. What reasonable and observable changes can you expect in parent involvement, school-family-neighborhood relationships, classroom instruction, and student achievement?

Identify long-term goals, as well as interim measures of success. You may lose momentum and the community's support by only setting long-range goals that you do not expect to reach for five or more years. Engage the community about how they measure success, note their expectations, and set appropriate benchmarks (what will improve or increase in six months? in a year? in two years? in five years and longer?) The continuous questioning may include, "How do we apply 'lessons learned'? How can we continually improve the work? How can we promote the results of our work?" If you find you are not producing the results you seek, you may want to begin making changes and modifying your action plan.

The tension and hostility for organizing parents persists. When parents are empowered principals and school staff are often not ready for the new relationship.

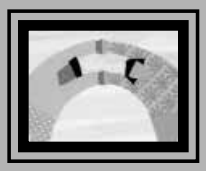
Education reform advocate
Philadelphia, PA

The toughest thing was mustering the energy to perpetually sell the good news and the good work to local decision-makers. We should have linked with them earlier and had face to face meetings to interpret the successes of the students. It is easy to assume the progress and successes are self-evident.

Program director
Tuscaloosa, AL

3. Appreciate the richness of your information

Along the journey, you will discover unanticipated changes in people, schools and local organizations. Taking action directed at one issue may bring positive changes and provide useful information in other areas as well. Develop strategies that capture a range of information from the experience and remain open to the possibility of uncovering new and meaningful findings. Also acknowledge that other events and activities, outside of your work, may have influenced the change you observe.



Reflecting

Reflecting on Your Progress

This toolkit has encouraged ongoing evaluation of your efforts, ending each section with a piece called "Reflecting on Your Progress." It is only fitting that the toolkit as a whole should end with the same. "Progress" will mean something different in every local context. But a universal feature of efforts to change schools and transform neighborhoods is that there will always be room to do better. So a perpetual question for organizers will always be: are we ready for the next push? Yesterday's successes should not diminish your energy for tomorrow's challenges; instead, they should give you the strength to meet them.

So as a parting exercise, ask yourself: How well have we prepared to sustain our efforts in the following areas…

- Fostering strong leadership among families and neighborhood residents?
- Strengthening critical linkages?
- Organizing stakeholders?
- Raising money to support our school reform efforts?
- Broadening funding sources?
- Raising awareness and visibility?
- Increasing student achievement?
- Improving other indicators of educational success?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS & REFERENCES

We owe a debt of gratitude to the pioneering school improvement efforts cited in this report. The organizations and individuals, contacted in July and August 1999, are listed below. With their generous contributions of time and tools during the development of this toolkit, these "pioneers" helped clear the way for others to move schools aggressively in new and positive directions that benefit all children.

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