

COMMUNITY LEADERS

Questions You Should Ask About North Carolina School Report Cards

1 What are class sizes like in your district?

Compare the class and course sizes in your district with averages from across the state. You might also look specifically at the class and course sizes of the schools within your district. Where class sizes differ from the district average, consider looking at enrollment projections and examine school capacity to handle the enrollment changes that are expected. Schools may need to prepare a few years in advance of enrollment changes with adjustments to staffing and/or modifications to facilities. School Boards and other leaders may choose to consider re-assigning students to neighboring schools or take other actions to balance class sizes.

2 Is your district's performance on standardized tests improving?

To assess your district's progress on state tests, look at a minimum of three years of test score results. Can you isolate particular strengths and weaknesses in performance? Consider asking school administrators to outline significant changes or adaptations to curriculum or instructional programs from that same period of time and compare the test results with those initiatives. Look for initiatives that helped your district improve student performance. What kinds of resources were needed for those initiatives? Was the change dependent upon the leadership of a single person, or was the change a broader, more systemic effort? Are there ways beyond test scores of assessing the effectiveness of the change or initiative?

3 How well are the students in your district performing academically?

While it is important to know what percentage of students in the district are at or above grade

level each year, it is also important to know how student performance is distributed. Are most of the district's students achieving ABCs Level III to be considered at or above grade level? Or does the district have a significant number of students scoring at Level IV (the highest level) on ABCs tests? Is there a large group of students at Level II (just below grade level) who might make it to grade level with a bit of extra help? As you collaborate with district officials, you'll want to know how many students need particular programs. Districts with a high percentage of students at Level IV may direct more money to AIG (Academically/ Intellectually Gifted) programs while districts with a large number of students scoring at Level II might focus their resources on extended day instruction or other remediation programs.

4 Does your district have achievement gaps between students of different ethnicities, gender, family earnings, or racial backgrounds?

As school and district performance becomes increasingly defined by whether or not all students—regardless of race, ethnicity, or family background—are performing well academically, communities will see a new level of public accountability for student performance according to demographic subgroups. Your district Report Card can provide you with an indication of where achievement gaps exist in your district and how much difference in achievement there is between the student demographic groups your schools serve. Consider working with your district superintendent to set district-wide goals for closing achievement gaps and to define specific strategies for eliminating them.

5 How is your district's overall performance rated by the state's ABCs accountability system?

The ABCs school designations are an important measure of how well the schools in your district are meeting the state's performance standards. Compare the percentage of schools in your district meeting the various ABCs designations with the state average for each of those designations. Are there differences between the performance of the district's elementary, middle and high schools? Work with your district officials to set goals to meet or exceed the state average for Schools of Distinction and Schools of Excellence, and then formulate plans to meet those goals. For more detailed information about student ABCs performance in your district and why your schools might not already be meeting those performance levels, talk with your district superintendent and district office personnel. Your district testing coordinator can provide you with an analysis of ABCs test score data and can help you identify strengths and weaknesses within the subjects tested.

6 Do students in your district attend school regularly?

Compare the attendance rates at the elementary, middle, and high schools in your district to the state averages. Attendance is an important factor in student and school performance. When children are absent from school, they miss important instruction that their classmates receive. Missed instruction can mean that students fall behind in their work and eventually it means they fall behind in their grade-level knowledge. If attendance is a concern in your district, learn more about counseling services and other programs designed to support students and families. Consider working with your superintendent to discuss strategies for improving attendance. Revisions in transportation options, school schedules, and support services for families are just some of the areas to think about.

7 Do students in your district have access to computers and up-to-date library books?

Use the data on numbers of computers, books per student, and the age of library/media center materials to compare the instructional resources in your district to the average resources statewide. Look at your district's priorities and determine whether or not your district's position relative to the state average is appropriate. Check to see how data might have changed as a result of recent purchases. You might also find out where your district started when it set its goals. It is possible that while your data hasn't reached the state average, your district may have made enormous progress increasing the resources available to students in recent years.

8 Are the teachers in your schools well qualified?

Much of the success of the schools in your district will depend upon the quality of the teachers working in your schools. The district level Report Card allows you to look at teacher quality on a number of measures, including percentage of fully licensed teachers, percentage of teachers with advanced degrees, and the number of teachers and administrators with National Board Certification. The data are broken down by school level (elementary, middle, and high) to provide a more detailed picture of stronger and weaker areas in your district's teacher qualifications. While teacher recruitment continues to be challenging, schools will be best served when the most qualified candidates possible are hired. Explore ways in which you help your district support new teachers to keep them in the profession. Gather information about new teacher mentoring programs and other programs supporting new teachers and evaluate how well those programs are helping your schools retain high quality teachers.

9 How many teachers leave your district from one year to the next?

Teachers are one of a district's most valuable and most expensive resources. Every year teachers remain in your district, they gain experience and additional expertise as professionals. They are critical to student performance, school climate, and school improvement goals. When teachers leave, an important investment leaves as well. Look at your school and district Report Cards to see teacher turnover data between last year and this year. The district Report Card provides information on turnover by school level (elementary, middle, and high) and can help you identify areas of success or concern. Given tight budgets, raising teacher pay may not be a practical solution to solving a high turnover rate. Factors other than pay, such as working conditions, often contribute more to teacher turnover. Use teacher exit surveys, and hold teacher discussion forums to learn more about why teachers leave and the perceptions and concerns of those who stay. Explore whether or not improving professional development opportunities, working conditions, or support from leadership might help retain teachers in your schools.

ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR COMMUNITY LEADERS

- Familiarize yourself with Report Card data and be prepared to ask questions to learn more about what's behind the numbers.
- Be prepared to address questions about the relationship between district resources and performance. In tough fiscal times, the public and the media will be more apt to look for connections between school spending and performance. The school and district Report Cards can provide data you can use to be more specific in your response to these questions.
- Use the Report Card as a starting point in building a picture of your schools' and district's performance. Continue to seek out additional information about schools and students in order to have a more accurate picture of what schools are accomplishing. Help educate others about the need to use many types of information when drawing conclusions about a school and its programs.
- Use the Report Card data when working with district officials to set goals in your district. Look for data that can help you track success in achieving those goals.
- Understand school, district, and state comparisons—what your schools are being compared to—before drawing conclusions.
- Remember that state and district averages are provided for comparisons and are meant as reference points only. Those reference points are relative to the group of schools that has been averaged and they should not be taken as an absolute indication of whether or not a school/district is doing better or worse than other schools/districts in the state. It would be a mistake to assume that a school is under-performing only because its data is a bit below the district or state average.
- Assist families who speak English as a second language in understanding the school Report Card. Spanish translations of the Report Card format and supporting documents are available on the Report Card website: www.ncreportcards.org. When working with parents from other language backgrounds, look for bilingual community members or community organizations that can assist parents in understanding their school's data.
- Help spread the word about School Report Cards in your community. Hold discussions about the Report Cards during a board meeting, publish an article in your district newsletter, or hold a community forum to review the district's Report Card data.