

Customer Voice Research School Report Card

Sherbert Research



**Research Report No
DCSF-RR112**

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School Report Card

Objective

Research was required to refine concepts, design ideas and language for proposed School Report Cards based on clear insights from parents of primary and secondary school aged children.

More specifically the research aimed to support decision making and establish usefulness about the refinement of the School Report Card including:

- Helping the DCSF to decide whether or not to include a single overall grade;
- Give feedback from parents on the relative importance to them of different performance categories and how many categories they would like included (three or more) within the School Report Card;
- Ascertain understanding and credibility: how parents would use the grades (overall and individual), whether they understand the DCSF's explanation of how they were put together and their feedback on the relative importance of categories to them.

Respondents

Eight one and a half hour discussion groups with parents of primary and secondary school pupils:

- Five with mums
- Three with dads

56 parents in total, from a range of socio-economic backgrounds.

Research took place across England (rural, suburban and inner city locations) during the week commencing April 20th 2009

Key findings

Overall, the concept of the School Report Card was welcomed.

Most felt that if it came from central Government it would be credible and authoritative.

All agreed it would be a useful resource for school selection or comparison and appreciated the simplification of what can feel like a laborious process for some. It was felt to have more relevance and appeal to those parents looking for schools rather than those with children already at school. Most of those with children already at school felt they would be less likely to actively seek it out.

During the discussion groups many parents expressed an appreciation of a qualitative assessment of schools. Ultimately, they wanted the card to focus on broader issues of well-being, development and growth, not simply statistics of achievement.

However, achievement and progress were seen as the most important measure of a school.

All parents stressed the need to keep the report simple in content and presentation, but emphasised that over-simplification of results could mislead and possibly damage schools' reputations. Therefore, the majority preferred the report card without an overall score.

School selection

'Reputation' was unanimously cited as the driver behind school selection. This is a complex term, covering a range of evaluation criteria. For parents, it can cover:

- League table results
- Overall academic success
- Behaviour / discipline
- Uniforms, control and standards
- Headteacher / teacher commitment and turnover
- Communication from schools

It also covers:

- Transport links and ease of access
- Friendship groups
- Social circles and general acceptance within the community

The School Report Card

Spontaneous response

Parents in this sample greeted the concept of the School Report Card with mild enthusiasm. It was interpreted generally as 'a good idea' and one that would prove a useful start point especially for those having to select a school cold.

However, it was noted that its usefulness in many locations in England could be limited, given the influence of reputation and perceived lack of choice when it comes to school selection.

The Report Card's coverage of 'areas beyond academic standards' was welcomed by parents across the sample as a positive complement to the league tables and Ofsted reports. This included both those parents who refer to the league tables and those who do not.

School Report Card examples

On seeing draft versions of what a School Report Card might cover and look like, most felt the language and style could be more accessible as many struggle to understand some of the terminology, which confused them and some then disengaged.

Overall score

Seeing the overall score initially stood out and captured parents' attention and a few thought it was a good idea to sum up school in one measure. However, the majority quickly started to query its relevance as they realised a school's performance is far more complex than a simple score and suggested avoiding including this in the final report card.

A few lines of thought seemed to underpin this reasoning:

1. The need to recognise performance beyond the academic

As it stands, parents tended to assume the overall grade was primarily focused on academic achievement. Many felt such results could be misleading and too narrowly defined

2. The need to break cycles of low-achievement

With a single overall score in place, some parents also questioned the outcome for low-scoring schools. *"Who wants to go to the worst school?"* one asked. *"It's self-fulfilling. Unfair."*

Some felt such a system could stigmatise lower-end schools and further lower esteem among their pupils and staff.

Others however, realised that this could potentially help boost the reputation of lower academic achieving schools

3. The need for fair representation of a school's standing

The majority of parents felt that the simplicity of an overall score could be misleading, leading them to be misinterpreted and therefore potentially controversial. This could in effect negate any value of the overall score as parents would not be receiving an overall picture.

Many parents questioned how the overall score would be worked out and the weighting ratio and some expressed concern of potential bias to 'bump up' standards.

Without an overall score, parents tended to feel the School Report Card would have more individual relevance as they would look at measures that they felt were important and reflected the aspirations they have for their children. Parents therefore believed they would focus more on the detail behind performance categories without an overall school.

Performance categories

Response to the performance categories fell into three sets:

1. Expected and understood

Attainment - meaning 'results'

Pupil progress - meaning advancement through key stages

2. New and welcomed

Parents' views - a form for opinion sharing

Pupils' views - a report of how the school really is on a daily basis

3. Not understood and questioned

Wider outcomes
Narrowing gaps

In both of these headers the need for 'plain and simple English' was frequently noted by a range of parents across all social grades.

When explained, the category of '**Wider outcomes**' was understood and appreciated. Parents called for it to be broken down with simple headings including behaviour and discipline procedures, breakfast and after school clubs, extra-course options and school trips. This was seen as a positive addition to the card.

'**Narrowing gaps**' caused real confusion across the sample and was felt to be similar to progress. Some parents in suburban and more rural locations felt it was not relevant to their children's school.

Weighting

Weighting was only felt to be relevant if there was an overall score. Otherwise parents felt they were interested in a range of measures. Four to five categories, as listed, felt the right number for most. Three seemed too few, confusing 'Wider outcomes' with the even broader 'Other outcomes.'

The hierarchy was as follows:

1. Attainment
2. Progress (in broadest sense)
3. Wider outcomes
4. Parents' and pupils' views (as separate categories)
5. Narrowing gaps

Dads seemed more concerned about attainment and mums also included 'Wider outcomes'.

Presentation of results

A clear difference emerged across the sample. Respondent parents from socio-economic groups (SEGs) AB and some C1s expressed concern that the letter system could be too imprecise to accurately reflect the complexities it was measuring. As many noted, a high-B could be one mark off a low-A, yet be interpreted entirely differently. They therefore liked the bar chart. Whereas parents from SEGs DE and some C1s and C2 preferred the letter scoring as it was simpler and they understood it. They tended not to question it.

However, despite this difference, most parents in the sample agreed that the letter scoring has widest appeal and the simplicity of a well know score was appreciated.

Other information

The provision of an Ofsted summary was applauded, giving the report further credibility and cross-referencing a familiar tool.

'Direction of travel' was roundly criticised as a term. Most assumed it meant travel directions to the school, not performance trends. However, once they understood what it meant they appreciated this type of benchmarking.

'Partnership working' felt similarly vague for many. Once understood, many parents agreed it could be useful, but was 'too much' information for the card, and not ultimately significant in choosing or assessing a school.

'Early Years / 6th Form' was seen as useful information and could influence a parent's decision on school selection. Parents therefore agreed that this information should be kept.

Text descriptions

Parents across the sample struggled to understand descriptions of terms. The language used was seen as being far too esoteric and they requested it could be expressed in 'layman's' terms. If the explanation of how school performance is measured will be included, it needs to be in an easy to digest format.

Some appreciated the 'National Comparisons' column as this meant the School Report Cards were put into a wider context.

Other measures suggested:

- Attendance measures
- Staff turn-over figures
- Head's mission / vision
- Case histories on previous pupils
- Notes on extra-curricular activities
- Communication from school including complaints
- Provision of IT

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