

SARC RULES

NCLB regulation focuses attention on requirement for reporting to parents

Under the federal No Child Left Behind program, K-12 schools are supposed to provide parents with a school “report card.”

Such report cards are not really new in California. But it's likely few parents know much about them, buried as they are on school Web sites.

Prop. 98, the K-14 funding guarantee passed by California voters in 1988, added a section to the California Constitution that requires every K-12 school district to prepare and publish a school accountability report card or SARC each year for each school.

Then in 2000, SB 1632 by state Sens. **Charles Poochigian**, R-Fresno, and **Tom Hayden**, D-Santa Monica, instructed for the state Department of Education to develop a template for the report card that included data from the state's then-new Academic Performance Index.

For some years, schools across the state have been using that template to post some of the suggested data at their Web sites.

Now, with the imposition of NCLB rules for schools that receive a portion of the state's \$60 million a year in Title I funding for low-income schools, there's new pressure to revise, publish and distribute those report cards to every parent in the state.

On Sept. 12, the U.S. Department of Education issued a guideline on how to handle the report cards, which are to include new Annual Yearly Progress data for a school's students — even more data than what's already required by state regulations.

That federal guideline says that states and local districts receiving Title 1 funds for low-income schools “must prepare and disseminate” the report cards to all schools and “all parents of students attention those schools.”

Whether that means each school must provide all parents with the full report card, written in understandable terms and translated into the home language of the student, remains a matter of debate.

But as schools continue to confront NCLB, it seems probable that growing numbers of parents will begin to demand wide distribution of SARCs.

Grass roots groups, such as UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, are beginning to lobby schools to issue even more inclusive report cards in order to keep parents better informed about what is going on at their children's schools.

The report cards should be printed and be available in “the different home languages in the community,” says **John Rogers**, associate director of the UCLA institute.

He'd also like the reports to include more easily-understood information about instructional materials and school facilities.

“What parents need is information that allows them to know whether their kids are getting the education they deserve, information that will allow them to go to the local school board, go to the principal and say, ‘What is going on here?’ ” **Rogers** explained. “Now, in large measure, the data that is available is outcome data. It is about how well students are performing on tests, which is not unimportant. But it's not data that parents can necessarily do anything with. I think that is a real concern.”

At present, accountability report cards or SARCs for virtually all public K-12 schools in the state are available on the Internet through links on the state Department of Education's site at www.cde.ca.gov. (To find the local report, start from the “student performance data” link on the department's home page.)

Any member of the public who is Web-savvy, has a computer with Web access and enough capacity to download fairly sizeable PDF files can look at the data each school has made available as long as they know the name of the school and what district and county it's in. And as long as they can read English.

A review of those report cards for a half dozen schools in different areas of the state suggests that they vary significantly in terms of appearance and embellishment and completeness.

Most will at least tell the viewer how many teachers on emergency credentials are employed at the school. They also provide details on how the school is doing on the state's Academic Performance Index, although, with few exceptions, there is not usually much information about how to understand what the API scores mean.

As one example, Henry Elementary in the Anaheim Elementary School District provides enough data and background about how its students are doing on the state's testing program to make a parent's head spin.

One who is adept at reading charts can see that 6 percent of Hispanic or Latino 2nd graders at the school are meeting or exceeding the state standard in English language arts. And that percentage improves by 6th grade to 17 percent. This is not unimportant because the school's student population is 92 percent Hispanic or Latino.

Scores have been going up, and the school became eligible for governor's performance awards in 2000 and 2002. But scores have not been improving as much as for similar schools, where its comparative ranking dropped from 8 to 5 over three years, even though the number of teachers out of 52 working on emergency credentials was lowered, from 16 in 2000 to 4 in 2002.

The detailed report available at the Anaheim school site contrasts starkly with what's posted for schools in the Paso Robles Joint Unified School District. Only the overall API score and improvement is posted for any one school — and only the test results for the spring of 2000. For Paso Robles, most of the information at any one school site is taken from a general template prepared by the district. And the posted data on teachers on emergency credentials appears to be district-wide.

Steve Rees, who heads up School Wise Press, a private company that prepares the accountability report cards for some 50 school districts, says that “most districts are completing the state form, filling in the open boxes required for both data and writing from principals. Then they are taking that and they are posting that on their district Web site. That is the most common, minimalist solution that districts have embraced.”

He suggests that NCLB compliance won't "come from filling in the boxes. NCLB requires three other things. There is a test of understandability. There is a test that it be expressed in a language that parents can understand.... The third test is dissemination."

Rees argues that the only way school districts can really be NCLB compliant is to distribute a printed report. He suggests a carefully crafted, simple summary backed up by a full and detailed report.

Rees notes that state compliance teams, which are supposed to visit every school once every four years, could push schools to do a better job of reporting.

They "have a wonderful, practical approach to determining understandability," he said. "They actually ask parents when they are doing a walk through, 'have you seen this report? Did you understand it?' ...Then they have got some anecdotal evidence."

Statewide school officials are not unaware of some developing tension over making these reports understandable, and the cost of delivering them.

Suzanne Tacheny, a member of the State Board of Education, said she has been "working really hard" on a format for providing just the test scores to parents, "to make them better text, cleaner writing, all that stuff."

But, she adds, putting a full student accountability report card in the hands of every parent in the state would be "so expensive."

Her recommendation: That the state include information on those test reports, which are mailed to all parents and translated into ten languages, "about the existence of the accountability report cards, (saying) for more information ask your school board or go to the Web site."