

PARENTS

Questions You Should Ask About North Carolina School Report Cards

1 What are class sizes like in your school?

Compare the average class sizes in your school with those in your district and in the state as a whole. Class sizes are important because they can influence the amount of one-on-one instruction teachers provide to students and the level of discipline in a classroom. Consider talking with your school's principal about targeted class sizes in your district, particularly if you notice a substantial difference between your school's class sizes and the district and state averages.

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

Student test scores are important, but you can get the best picture of a school's performance when you look at scores from more than one year. Look at the performance graphs on the Report Card. Ideally you want to see your school's performance improving with the graphed line increasing from left to right. If you'd like to see more of the performance trend, your school's principal can provide you with test score data from previous years, or you can find it on the Web at: abcs.ncpublicschools.org/

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

The report card shows you what percentages of students are working at or above grade level according to the state's standardized tests. But do you know how many of the students in your school are above grade level and really excelling? Do you know how many students are just barely getting by? To get a better understanding of student achievement in your school by achievement level, open your school's online report card at: www.ncreportcards.org

and choose the High Student Performance tab at the top. In addition to these results, principals can talk to you about other useful measures of academic performance such as: student grades and grade/course passing rates, portfolios of work, honor roll membership, and school performances in academic competitions like the debate club or math club.

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

North Carolina is increasingly focused on closing achievement gaps, which are differences in student performance that can be seen when data is viewed by demographic subgroups like race or ethnicity. Use the table "Performance of Each Student Group on the ABCs Tests" to see if groups of students in your school are performing at similar levels. Your school principal can discuss performance gaps between student groups and the measures that the school is taking to close those gaps. Please keep in mind the table, "Performance of Each Student Group on the ABCs Tests," shows the percentage of students who passed BOTH the reading and the math tests. If a student only passed one of the two tests, his/her results do not show up in these percentages.

For detailed information on the performance of students in each demographic group by both subject and achievement level, access your school's Report Card online and refer to the "additional results for each grade level" arrows that appear underneath the tables "Performance of Students in Each Grade on the ABCs End-of-Grade Tests" and "Performance of Each Student Group on the ABCs End-of-Course Tests."

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

Each year the state issues performance designations to schools according to the ABCs of Public Education accountability system. The ABCs designations are a good measure of your school's success in helping students meet state performance standards. Your school will receive at least two designations. The first designation indicates what percentages of students in the school are performing at or above grade level according to state tests. The second applies to individual student improvement and whether or not the students in the school learned as much as the state predicted they would based on the academic knowledge each student had at the beginning of the school year.

6 Do students attend school regularly?

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. Look at the percentage of students who attend your school daily and compare it to district and state averages. Attendance rates don't usually vary more than a point or two between schools, but this is one piece of data where higher is always better. Raising attendance rates in your school is one way to improve student performance. If you think the attendance rates in your school can use improvement, talk with your school principal about why students are missing school, strategies for improving attendance, and ways that you can help.

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

Use the data about numbers of computers, books per student, and the age of your school's library/media center collection to gauge the level of instructional resources that are available to students and teachers in your school. In reading these data, use comparisons to district and state averages to gain information about whether or not your school may need to

improve in this area. If your school is below the district average in this section, you might speak with your principal about the school or district's plans for improving the resources in your school. If you notice that both your school and your district are below the state average, you might speak with your school's principal about the district's current priorities and whether or not there is something you can do to help improve the resources available to your school.

8 Are the teachers in your school well qualified?

Most people—parents and education experts alike—agree that good teachers are critical to students' success in learning at school. By looking at some measures of teacher qualifications, you can better understand the overall quality of the teachers working in your school. One measure of teacher quality is whether or not a teacher has been granted a teaching license. The types of teaching licenses vary as teachers progress from beginning to more experienced. When a teacher is called "fully licensed," he/she has met all of the requirements and teaching standards set by the State Board of Education. The School Report Card allows you to compare the percentage of fully licensed teachers in your school with averages at the district-and state-level. The School Report Card also provides you with information about the percentage of teachers in your school with advanced degrees. Teachers with an advanced degree have acquired a higher degree of content expertise than their certification requires. On the Report Cards, an advanced degree is any degree above a bachelor's degree, including master's, advanced, or doctoral degrees. Finally, the School Report Card provides you with information about the number of teachers and other staff in your school who have been awarded National Board certification. National Board certification is not required for teaching in the state of North Carolina, but it is a voluntary way for teachers to seek additional credentials that recognize their advanced teaching skills and techniques.

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

It is natural for schools to see a certain amount of turnover in their employees in the same manner that a business or another organization might. Use your district Report Card to check what percentage of teachers left your school between this school year and last. Is the percentage much different than the district or the state average? Before drawing a conclusion about your school

and the frequency with which teachers leave, gather more information from your school's principal or from district administrators. You may learn that teacher turnover was quite high because of an early retirement incentive, or you may learn that turnover was high because a new school in your neighborhood required a number of teacher transfers. Consider asking why teachers have left your school and what your school is doing to retain quality teachers.

ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR PARENTS

SPREAD THE WORD. Talk to other parents and community members to make sure they know about the School Report Cards. Review and discuss school and district Report Card data at PTA meetings or organize community meetings to review the report card data. Consider asking school or district administrators to participate in your meetings to clarify what the data means and to answer any questions you might have.

START CONVERSATIONS. Use Report Card data to begin talking about your school with other parents and community members, with teachers, with administrators, with school board members, and business leaders.

ASSIST FAMILIES WHO SPEAK ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE. Help parents who may not be fluent in English understand 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.

ASK QUESTIONS OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHERS. Use the Report Card data as a starting point for discussions about your school. Think about aspects of the school that matter to you, but aren't covered in the Report Card. Then, make an appointment to talk with your school principal about those items. For example, you might want to know how many hours of art and music instruction students receive weekly, or you

might be interested in details about your school's disciplinary policy.

LOOK AT CONNECTIONS, BUT CAREFULLY. Study the connections you might see in your school report card, but be careful to gather additional information from school administrators before drawing conclusions. For example, you might notice the percentage of new teachers in your school was relatively high, but test scores were relatively low. Many factors can explain a change in student performance like a change in the school's curriculum or a change in the amount of time spent teaching particular subjects. Work with your school's administration and explore additional information before drawing conclusions.

GET INVOLVED. Use the data provided in the school Report Card to direct school improvement activities. For example,

- Whether or not students attend school daily can make a big difference in whether or not they learn as much as their peers and perform at grade level. Look at your school's attendance rates and talk to other parents and your school principal about what you can do to help improve them.
- Instructional resources can enhance children's opportunities to learn at school. Review how the numbers and the age of your school's computers and books compare to the district and state average. Talk to your school's principal about how resources are allocated in your school and find out if there is anything you can do to help in finding additional resources for your school.

SET GOALS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT.

The Report Card data can be very useful because it can focus conversations about education and school improvement on specific items that can be researched and measured. Work with others to use the Report Card data as a way to identify areas for school improvement and then to set goals or targets for your school. Use subsequent Report Cards to track your school's progress in meeting those goals and to adjust strategies for meeting those goals.

DON'T STOP HERE. While your school Report Card provides very useful information about your school, it does not provide an absolute indication of whether or not your school is performing better or worse than other schools in the district or the state. Evaluating school performance requires more detail and more measures than this Report Card is able to capture. Talk with school and district administrators, parent groups, and community leaders if you are interested in developing a more comprehensive evaluation of your school.