



10 Keys for Promoting Your School Report Card Results

1. Pick your headline.

No matter how hard you try to avoid it, most likely you're going to get a story in your local media which compares you to other schools. So by planning now, you can help shape your headline. Work with your local site council to determine what three things you want people to remember about your school's data. Frame your remarks around these things. Draw your answers to questions back to these issues. Make sure they are prominent in the materials you produce to explain your school's progress. If you do this, chances are these three things will be underscored in the stories written or aired about your school's results.

Make a one-page summary of your results with highlights and bullet points in easy-to-understand terms.

2. Avoid Jargon.

Using jargon is the quickest way to confuse people and sabotage your communication efforts. Using jargon can anger people by making them feel like you're talking "down" to them. It's often very difficult for school officials to spot jargon because it is an integral part of communicating specific information with our colleagues. When writing an explanation intended for the public, ask yourself, "How would I explain this to my parents, grandparents or neighbor?" Run your ideas past a non-educator. Ask him to be honest and to tell you when he doesn't understand your point or explanation. Remember that you're not writing a "how-to" manual. Avoid using sentences with more than 15 words. And paragraphs should be no more than three sentences long. Use the "KISS" rule - keep it simple, stupid.

3. Relate your results back to your School Improvement Plan.

You and your community should be able to see a direct correlation between what you've set as targets in your improvement plan and your school's progress results. This also makes the case for doing what you said you wanted to do. If you targeted math and you see the biggest jump in math results--tout it! You did what you said you were going to do and that's the purpose of your local school improvement plan. Likewise, if you didn't specifically target reading and your scores dipped slightly--perhaps you may choose to focus more on reading in your next plan. The bottom line is you are following your action plan--the school improvement plan. Your report card should show the fruits of your labor.

4. Keep your site council up to speed.

This is your direct tie to the community and each site council member should be trained as a community relations ambassador. When it comes to finding out the "scoop" on how well your school is performing, let's face it, community members tend to have the most credibility--even more than school officials. That's why it's crucial that each site council member be prepared and feel comfortable explaining what is happening at the school and how students' academic performance is being boosted. They should know where your school's strengths are and how you are addressing its weaknesses. Encourage these people to talk with any community organization or group with which they are associated.

5. Build credibility.

Tell the good, the bad and the ugly. Everyone knows no one is perfect. Schools are no exception. But if you only tell the picture-perfect stories, your messages will soon lose credibility. If you are the first one to tell your community where your weak areas are and then describe how you plan to address them, your community will be more understanding. They have to feel like you are telling them the whole story in order to build confidence in you. After telling your community about how you plan to address weak areas, the key is that you follow up later and report your progress. Being able to deliver on issues like this will boost public confidence in you and your schools.

6. Take time to explain.

People can't understand your school's progress if they don't understand the whole issue of making your schools better. The key to a school's progress is improving continuously. Even good schools must get better. Also, the issues involved in describing school improvement can be rather complex. Make sure you take ample time to explain the issues and how your school fits into that picture. Question and answer sheets are a good tool to use, but also plan for small, informal face-to-face meetings with people so you can help them understand--and they realize you want them to understand. By keeping your message simple, you'll draw attention to the fact that your results support your message. Also, make sure you are communicating in all the native languages of your community.

7. Focus on growth.

Sometimes it's easy to get caught up in test scores and lose sight of the growth your school is showing. To avoid this, focus your comments, reports and explanation on the amount of growth your school is showing. This doesn't mean hide the scores. But rather, make the amount of growth meaningful to your community. Particularly on the Colorado Student Assessment Program assessments, it can be easy to misunderstand what the test scores mean. For example, proficiency does not equal grade level. New proficiency standards are often set very high, well above the national average definition of "grade level." If you had set goals for the number of students you said you wanted to see move from below proficient to proficient, make that a focal point. And, don't forget to show the number of students who went from proficient to advanced if there was an increase. You can do this easily by creating your own customized report card, using graphs wisely and keeping it easy to understand.

8. Don't sugar-coat your results.

Tell your school's progress results, but don't pontificate. And be careful that your explanations don't become excuses. There's a difference between telling how you plan to address areas of weakness and offering excuses for results that didn't meet your expectations. In a recent A Plus Communications survey, parents indicated they didn't want excuses and warned educators not to dwell on the socio-economic make up of their student test takers.

9. If your results aren't what you expect or want, tell what you're doing about it.

Then, get others Involved. Again, don't hide the fact that you may not have met your expectations. Do tell how you are addressing the issue. Be sure to share ways your community can help get involved so that improved results are seen next time. Give everyone a role. Make school improvement everyone's business.

10. Don't focus only on the CSAP assessment results.

Remember that the CSAP results are only one part of your school's achievement record. It's critical to include local test information and school programs that are a part of your school's improvement plan.

Often it's these local programs that make your school different from the rest.