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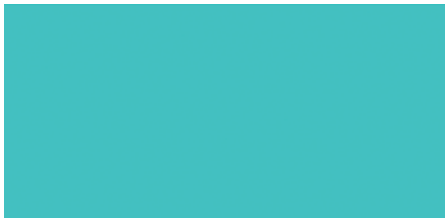
A School Finder to Empower:
Case Study of Louisiana's New School Report Card

THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Council seeks member consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public.

A School Finder to Empower: Case Study of Louisiana's New School Report Card

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School and district report cards are one of the most powerful tools in a state agency's toolbox for empowering decisions—large and small—about the direction of the education system. They facilitate families' decisions about where to send their child. They help establish a common understanding of performance among educators, policymakers, business leaders, and the general public. And they provide a transparent platform for building trust in the state's education system and efforts to improve.

It is not a simple task to deliver on the promise of a tool that is easy-to-use and responds to the needs of families, while at the same time meeting the requirements outlined in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). It requires agency time and resources, and an openness to meaningfully engage with stakeholders. The following case study of Louisiana's development of a new report card web site provides a glimpse into the vision, process, and capacity necessary to deliver a set of tools with value in the field. Through its release, State Superintendent John White hopes the new report card "can help build demand for high-quality schools and accountability. We believe that lifting up positive statewide trends in performance while acknowledging significant gaps helps drive the broader reform agenda as we work to ensure every student can reach his or her potential."

The Louisiana Department of Education's (LDOE) work to develop a new performance reporting tool occurs at a time when all states are experiencing shifts in their accountability and reporting systems. Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, states were called upon to design systems that were responsive to a myriad of stakeholders. This expectation was not new; however, states took stakeholder engagement to new heights during the development of their ESSA plans, and that level of engagement has remained as they turn to develop their new report card systems.

As part of its work to support states, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), encouraged and supported states in their efforts to increase stakeholder engagement. In November 2016, CCSSO released [Let's Keep This Conversation Going](#), a tool to guide state stakeholder engagement through the ESSA development process and beyond. It focused on critical actions, such as working with partner organizations to identify and engage with stakeholders, keeping materials simple and brief, and communicating early and often, among others. While not specifically focused on the development of school report cards, all of the priority steps for engaging parents, educators, and the general public hold. Diving a level deeper, with a focus on both engagement and development of school report cards, in October 2017, CCSSO released [Communicating Performance: A Best Practices Resource for Developing State Report Cards](#). The resource provided a recommended set of strategies to:

- Connect the state's theory of action and school report card

- Tell data stories to illuminate information for users

- Build buy-in and use through multiple engagement mechanisms

- Improve users experience through feedback

- Establish high-quality data and ensure it is secure

- Sustain momentum through continuous improvement

This case study builds upon the previous CCSSO resources to offer an example of how one state went from theory to action in the development and implementation of a new report card system. It highlights real-life examples from Louisiana of the recommended best practice strategies outlined in the previous CCSSO resources. And the case study aims to capture additional lessons learned that may be useful for other states as they work to both meet the requirements of ESSA and empower own stakeholders with actionable information about school performance.

BACKGROUND

The Every Student Succeeds Act requires states to publish "easily accessible and user-friendly" annual school report cards that describe the state's accountability system, define its indicators, display school ratings, and present disaggregated student performance data. While most states previously produced school report cards, the Data Quality Campaign found that they were often challenging to locate and did not always present information in easy-to-understand ways or at the right level of depth for the diversity of stakeholders.[1]

Louisiana set out to address these challenges by creating two different tools. The first, known within the state as the "School Finder," represents Louisiana's federally-required school report card[2] and allows parents to compare schools and early childhood centers from across the state based on location, performance, and academic and extracurricular offerings. The site includes a host of school performance data, including: data on graduates' preparation for college and careers, such as enrollment in college and earning industry-recognized credentials; comparative breakdowns of student group performance; teacher workforce data; and, data on discipline and attendance. Over time, the state will also add in information about school finance, Free Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) completion, and teacher attendance data.

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1   https://dataqualitycampaign.org/showmethedata/

2   Note that Louisiana still needs to add a few data elements (i.e., financial information) to fully meet the requirements of ESSA.

Welcome to the Louisiana School Finder

Search for schools or centers based on what matters most to you.

EXPLORE SCHOOLS AND CENTERS

◊ Enter an address, city, or zip code in Louisiana

Select an age/grade

View Schools/Centers

JUMP RIGHT TO YOUR SCHOOL OR CENTER

Q Search by school or center name

K-12 REPORT CARD GRADE

(A) (B) (C) (D) (F) (T)

ABOUT OUR SCHOOL   ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE ▾

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

WHAT IS STUDENT PERFORMANCE?

FOR HIGH SCHOOL
Student performance is based on how well students are mastering key skills and content for their grade, in addition to how well the school is preparing students for success in college or a career.

▶ Watch a quick video on how this is measured

IS THIS SCHOOL PREPARING STUDENTS TO MASTER GRADE-LEVEL CONTENT?

STUDENTS SCORING GOOD/EXCELLENT ON END-OF-COURSE EXAMS   65%   View Details

IS THIS SCHOOL PREPARING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER?

GRADUATION RATE
What is this measure?   83%   View Details

GRADUATES EARNING CREDENTIALS
What is this measure?   46%   View Details

COLLEGE ENROLLMENT RATE
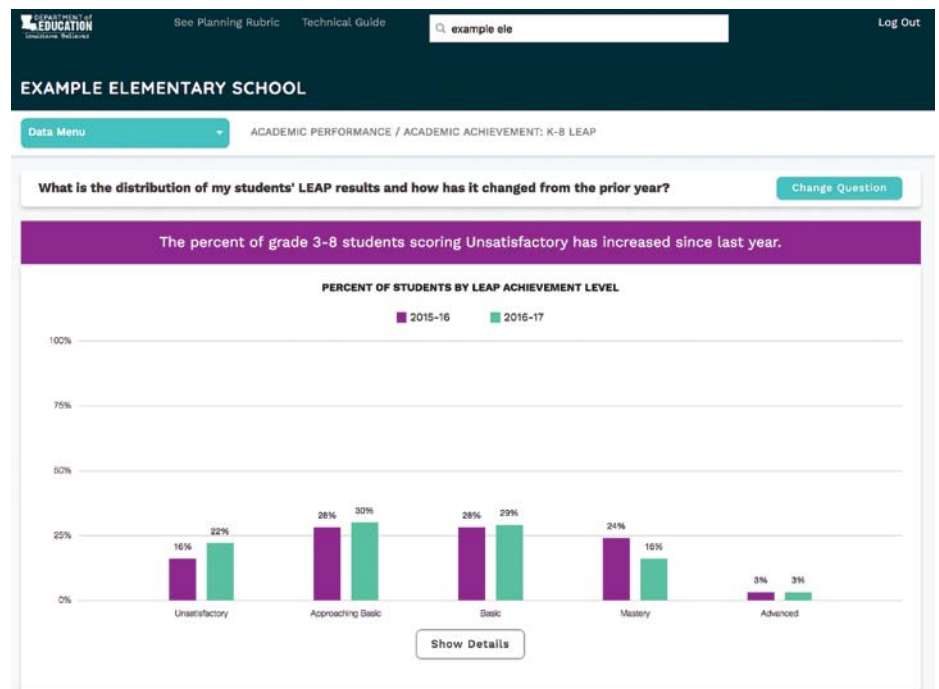What is this measure?   71%   View Details

Louisiana is the first state in the nation to integrate ratings for early childhood programs and centers along with K-12 schools in a single report card website. In 2012, the legislature passed [Act 3](#), which required the state agency to develop and publish a unified rating of early childhood performance, across all publicly-funded childcare, Head Start, and Pre-K programs. Every publicly-funded site, birth to five, receives an early childhood performance rating, which appears on the School Finder website. This rating is based on what matters most for child outcomes: the quality of teacher-child interactions. For both the pre-K and toddler levels, the site profile provides ratings for each measure and explains why they are important in family-friendly language. These data are also aggregated at the community level, so families can see how a site performed in comparison to other sites in the same community. [3] In addition, each site profile also reports the use of state-identified best practices, including the use of a high-quality curriculum and information on the teacher workforce.

The state sees the inclusion of early childhood site information in the school report card website as a game-changer for driving productive improvements throughout the education pipeline. As Superintendent White said in an Education Week article about the release, "It's time that we stop accepting the fragmentation of these programs and understand that they really are part of one comprehensive education system, and we should be reporting their results as such."[4]

The state recognized that its public report cards would never be detailed enough to satisfy educators, and previous attempts to do so left families bogged down in data and confused. Therefore, Louisiana created a second tool, a secure data portal for school leaders and superintendents, with plans to expand role-based access over time. The "Louisiana Principal and Superintendent Secure Reporting Portal" enables users to recreate their accountability score based on individual student data, answer core questions about comparative performance and

3   For example: http://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/performance-profiles/jefferson-davis-community-network-performance-profile-2016-2017.pdf?sfvrsn=2.

4   http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/early_years/2017/11/louisiana_releases_new_tool_to_help_parents_find_high-quality_early_learning_options.html

trends, receive "insight" statements based on the data (i.e., your school performed in the top 80 percent of schools in the state on this measure), and download student rosters to target interventions.

DEVELOPMENT AND RELEASE

Louisiana's approach to producing a new school and district report card and secure data portal focused on the following critical components: stakeholder engagement to identify appropriate set of metrics for formal accountability ratings and public reporting; creating a compelling design that met multiple users' needs; and, broadly preparing for and executing a communications strategy for release. The state recognizes that simply releasing the tool is not the end of their work. They are already deeply focused on the necessary next steps to ensure the tool is used.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT ON METRICS

Louisiana began its planning for the state's revised accountability system under ESSA early in 2016. The state did not have to start from scratch, as its rating system for K-12 schools was well established and included the state's academic priorities. Rather, the approach to engagement around the next generation of accountability was focused on hearing from educators and parents about additional information to provide meaning to school performance. The state reached out to education leaders, various associations, and stakeholder groups to solicit feedback on the system. From those conversations, the state identified potential new measures in its system and shared that back with the field for further input. Information that rose to the top of those conversations included student growth and information on students' access to a well-rounded education. Each of those measures was included in the state's ESSA plan, which was approved in August 2017.
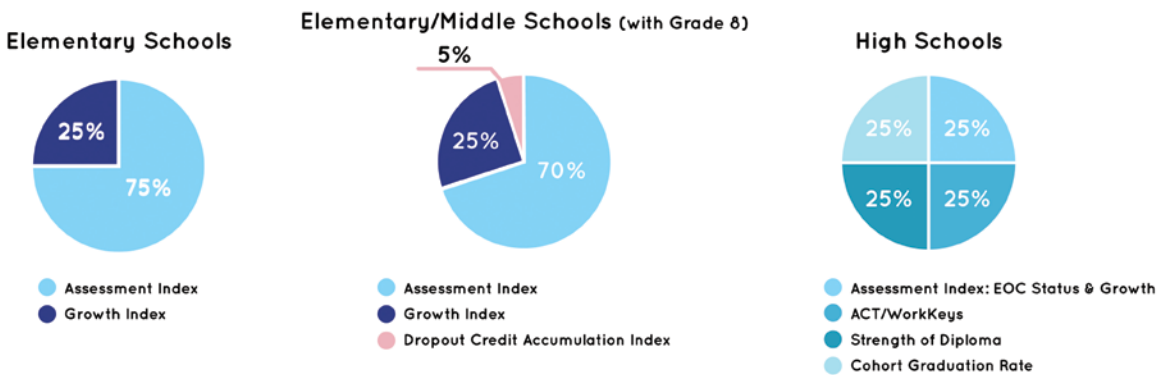
Through the state's development of its ESSA accountability system, the SEA partnered with numerous organizations to ensure that the things being measured and reported reflected the priorities of parents. Parents' feedback revealed an interest in a variety of information beyond traditional academic performance. Parents cared deeply about the culture and climate of the school, students' access to enriching coursework and extracurricular activities, how students progressed over time, and their preparation for their next step beyond high school. Some of the feedback resulted in measures included in the formal rating system, while other requested information, such as data on suspensions and chronic absenteeism, is transparently reported. In deciding which measures to include for accountability versus reporting, the state sought a "balance between meeting the needs of different stakeholders and holding schools accountable for the things most directly under their control, impactful and aligned to our theory of action," according to Jill Zimmerman, Director of Accountability Policy at the LDOE.
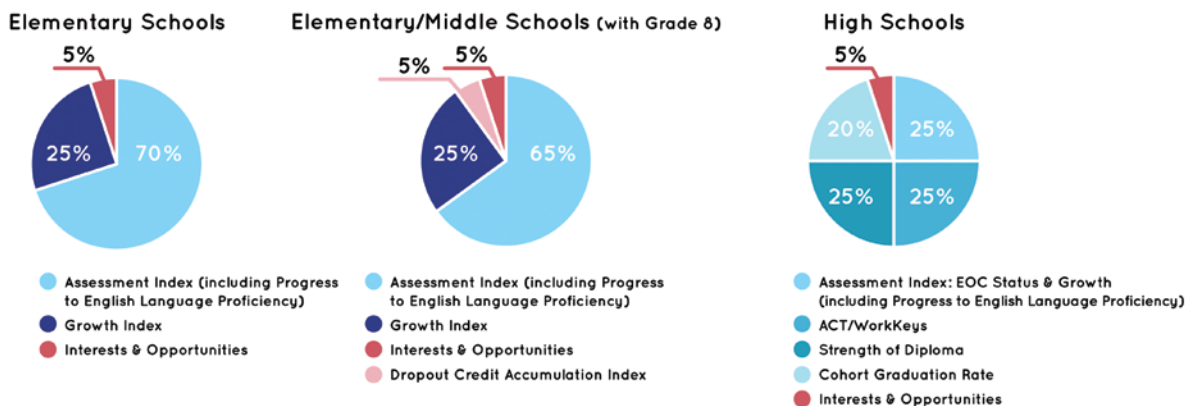
2017-18 School Performance Score Metrics

2018-19 (and Beyond) School Performance Score Metrics

The data in the Principal and Superintendent Secure Reporting Portal are directly connected to the metrics in state's accountability system. Based on feedback from

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5   For more information about Louisiana's accountability system calculations, see: https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/louisiana-believes/essa-accountability-plan-summary.pdf?sfvrsn=12

the field, the state organized the secure data portal around a series of critical questions and created a series of business rules to prepopulate insights based on the data to help contextualize the performance. For instance, the portal calls out when a school's performance is improving over time and its comparison to the district, region, and state on particular measures. It also highlights where there are gaps in subgroup performance.

DESIGN PROCESS

Louisiana began designing its new school and district report card and secure data portal prior to receiving approval for its ESSA plan from the U.S. Department of Education. Following the release of the 2016 school report cards, the state began gathering feedback on possible metrics to include both for accountability and transparent reporting. After compiling a potential list of metrics, in early 2017 the LDOE partnered with EdNavigator, a New Orleans-based nonprofit, to host parent focus groups. The goal was to gather feedback about the prior school report card design and possibilities for a future report card. Information gathered from those focus groups, and others became the foundation for the design of the new school report card.

The Department turned that feedback over to Tembo, a Philadelphia-based school reporting design firm to begin sketching out potential designs for the School Finder website in February 2017. The state chose to work with Tembo given its prior experience designing simple, easy-to-understand report cards for other states and school districts. A grant from the Baton Rouge Area Foundation (BRAF) helped support the state's work with Tembo, which included the development of both the School Finder and the secure data portal. According to John M. Spain, Executive Vice President of BRAF, they were "proud to play a part in supporting this innovative tool so that schools and communities could have the information they need to improve and move the state forward."

Tembo was responsible for executing design and managing the technical aspects of integrating the data into the report card website and data portal. They engaged with the Department on a weekly, and sometimes daily, basis through development and implementation. In that partnership, both found it was critical that there was a point person on each side to maintain momentum. The development process was structured in four phases, with each requiring completion before moving on to the next step in the process. As Sarah Singer, Chief Implementation Officer at Tembo relayed, standing up a school report card website "is not like a term paper where you can stay up the night before and get a successful grade. There are milestones all along the way that you have to hit to make it work within the agreed upon timeline." Those phases for the Louisiana project were:

- Requirements definitions: identifying the data to include on the site and the format for those data

- Design: developing the look and functionality of the report card

- Data provision and acquisition: organizing, receiving and formatting the data for publication

- Build and quality assurance: turning the design prototypes into a full webpage, testing that features work, and checking the accuracy of data

While the state managed the stakeholder engagement process, Tembo was tasked with responding to multiple rounds of feedback. For instance, after LDOE turned over initial thoughts on the indicators for inclusion and key priorities for design, Tembo worked through the spring to create a prototype of the School Finder tool and design options for the school profiles. In early June, Louisiana used a statewide teacher-leader summit to showcase the initial prototype and design options. Educators and administrators were able to click through sample report cards online and provide immediate feedback to the state and Tembo. As a result of that engagement, and other external feedback, the final designs changed quite significantly regarding layout, language, and content. The designs were finalized in August, and the project turned the corner to data collection and development.

The LDOE was responsible for collecting all of the data to feed into the School Finder, academic report card, and secure data portal. LDOE already had access to most of the data to be included; however, it had to be organized in a way that could easily be transferred to Tembo. That meant running the 2016-17 accountability calculations for all schools, districts, and early childhood sites across the state, identifying schools' course offerings from its database, and creating a new data collection process for additional contact information and extracurricular activities. The state worked with Tembo in cycles to test the data and ensure the information was conveyed in the appropriate manner.

The state did encounter a few challenges in the development and implementation of the reporting systems. First, the state's data privacy laws prevent any vendor from accessing data linked to specific students or teachers. As such, the state had to undertake an additional process to anonymize data before sharing with Tembo for the creation of the secure data portal. Second, the state found the quality assurance testing process to require significant time and capacity, especially given that report card website incorporated data from multiple databases across early childhood, K-12 and higher education. It required multiple sets of eyes on the data, checking and double checking that the program and school ratings were accurate and that the data were reported correctly and generated accurate "insight" statements.

- Early 2016: Begin planning for ESSA accountability system
- Jan-Feb 2017: LDOE partner with Ed Navigator to host parent focus groups
- Feb 2017: Tembo start work on School Finder
- April 2017: Submit ESSA plan
- May 2017: Tembo start work on Principal and Superintendent Secure Reporting Portal
- June 2017: Teacher-Leader Summit to solicit feedback on prototypes for School Finder
- July 2017: Finalize content for secure data portal
- Aug 2017: ESSA plan approved, School Finder design finalized, begin feedback on secure portal
- Sept 2017: Preview of School Finder for principals and district administrators, and early childhood lead agencies at quarterly collaboration meetings
- Oct 2017: Produce School Finder videos and conduct outreach to field to prepare for release
- Nov 2017: Launch of School Finder, release of tools for principals/administrators on School Finder, and webinars and trainings on secure data portal
- Dec 2017: Launch of secure data portal and release of tools for principals/administrators on secure data portal

It is important to recognize that the development and rollout of a new reporting system requires significant SEA capacity, regardless of whether the tool is built in-house or by an external vendor. For Louisiana, that meant the state's Assistant Superintendent serving as lead on the project, the Director Communications coordinating stakeholder engagement and decisions around design, and the Director of Accountability Policy leading the data organization. The state also received additional internal support from the state's early childhood lead given its inclusion of early education centers in the School Finder.

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

The state's communications strategy was not just about making the public aware of the site, it focused on encouraging others to host meaningful conversations with their stakeholders and creating tools to facilitate those conversations. State agency staff readily admit that it is much harder to figure out how to get local educators and administrators to hold their own data conversations—among themselves and with their constituents—than it is to simply blast information out from the state capital. But they believe it is significantly more effective, and thus continue to prioritize their communication supports in that direction.

Starting in September, 2017, the state provided an early preview of the school and district report cards to principals and administrators. The state's quarterly collaboration meetings, which occur regionally throughout the state, focused on exposing these individuals to the website, discussing the data, and outlining the supports and resources available from the state in anticipation of the launch. The state highlighted the impending release in its newsletters and monthly phone calls with superintendents, and showcased the site at its October Accountability Commission meeting. And LDOE partnered with the state principals' association to host an additional series of webinars that coincided with release of the School Finder.

To support the transparent telling of stories, the state encouraged every principal to host a parent night where they review data and engage in a conversation about where the school needs to improve and its path forward. Agency staff also created a presentation template that principals could use to host parent nights to talk about the school's rating and the data contained on the site. The template left space for principals to drop in images directly from the school finder. Further, the state produced a school finder data guide so that educators and administrators all have clear information about where the data originate and how each metric is collected and calculated. This is intended to help open the "black box" around the calculations so that conversations can focus on steps to improve rather than questions about data. The state also prepared a series of resources to help early childhood providers better understand the performance profiles and offer suggestions for improving performance.

To support broad public communications, the state created a one-page flyer and social media graphics that schools, pediatricians, realtors, and many others could share to encourage visits to the site. The LDOE communications team made outreach to a number of non-education related associations to make them aware of the release and provide hard copies of the flyers. Staff participated in an assortment of regional and local meetings in advance of the release to preview the site and get the word out, and the Department partnered with other advocates around the state to prepare and coordinate their social media outreach prior to the launch.

The Department, with assistance from an animation company in New Orleans, also created two videos to explain the School Finder and the methods for calculating center and school performance to parents and the general public. The first video is targeted to parents with children in the K-12 system, and the second explains the early childhood performance profiles. Staff from the agency wrote the script for each video and worked with the animators to ensure that the information presented was simple,

and easy to understand. Each video was also translated into Spanish, Arabic, and Vietnamese to ensure that the information could reach diverse communities statewide.

One of the state's main priorities for the new report card was to better empower parents to make informed choices about the education of their children. To support that, school and center websites and contact information are included in each profile. In anticipation of the launch, the state also worked with entity that manages students' enrollment in early childhood programs and K-12 schools in New Orleans to link the School Finder to their applications. In New Orleans, the Orleans Parish School Board and the Recovery School District use a joint application system (EnrollNOLA) for parents to indicate their school preferences. Information from the state's School Finder was integrated into the EnrollNOLA website. While the state does not want to be the only place that parents go to seek out information about programs and schools, they would like to be the first place for that to happen, and connecting to enrollment applications is direct way to accomplish that.

REPORT CARD RELEASE

The Louisiana School Finder was released in November, 2017. The state agency partnered with a variety of associations and nonprofits throughout the state to spread the word about the release, which resulted in numerous advocates conducting public presentations and engaging through traditional and social media. For example, the President of the Urban League Louisiana published a commentary piece in the state's newspaper championing the School Finder. She recognized the tool for its ability to highlight the consistency of resources and opportunities for students across the state. The Louisiana Realtors put out a press release to share the information with its members. The Department also worked with State Board members to do outreach in their communities. For instance, the Vice President of the State Board of Education appeared on the local morning news to introduce the resource to families.

The state and its partners also pushed out information about the School Finder site and the parent videos through its social media channels. As a result, the videos have been viewed over 3,000 times, and the social media engagement has led to hundreds of retweets and likes (see below for a sample tweet). All of the preparation and support paid off, as more than 25,000 unique visitors engaged with the site in the first week after launch. Nearly half of those that visited the site did so using a mobile device. For more statistics on the launch, see the text box "School Finder Release Statistics."

- 16,000 unique visitors to site in the first 24 hours

- 25,000 unique visitors in the first five days

- 46,000 sessions and 185,000 page views in the first month

- 2,200 average weekly users as of February, 2018

- Users from Shreveport/Northern LA, New Orleans, and Baton Rouge visited site most frequently in the first month

- Three-quarters of users access the site directly from www.louisianaschools.com, with significant numbers of users directed from the state agency site, and Facebook

- Just over half of users access the site through a desktop, 43% from a mobile device, and about 5% from a tablet

NEXT STEPS

Louisiana recognizes that the release of the School Finder tool is only just the beginning of their work, both in terms of ongoing stakeholder engagement and updates to the School Finder site. As Superintendent White succinctly stated, "putting something on a website is not the same thing as educating the public." The state is committed to continuing its efforts to engage educators and the public about the School Finder site and the secure data portal. The Department is working with its network teams to offer local trainings and continues to promote the tools through its regional collaboration conferences.

The Department also continues to engage parents and the public about the School Finder through traditional and social media channels, and is partnering with libraries, chambers of commerce, and businesses to spread the word. Stand for Children is producing a digital campaign to talk about why report cards are important, hosting a virtual town hall, and creating one-pagers about the site for educators to put in students' backpacks. EdNavigator is partnering with local businesses to participate in orientation meetings with new families to help them better understand their school options using the site. They are also creating packets to mail to families in New Orleans that point parents to the site and provide tailored school lists based on information from the School Finder that the organization often sees parents valuing.

Additionally, the state has established a schedule for ongoing updates to the reported data. As of January, the state is conducting monthly refreshes of the "About our School" section for each school or program. That enables schools and programs to provide parents and the public with the most up-to-date information about their websites and social media contacts, clubs, sports, courses and music/art offerings. The state has also identified a handful of additional metrics that will be added to the site once they are collected and verified. For instance, the state will begin reporting the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion percentages for every high school next fall.

As of January 2018, Tembo has transitioned both tools to the Department's control. That means the Department is responsible for all new data uploads to the School Finder site, and those now occur directly from the state's data warehouse. The state anticipated needing additional functionality on the School Finder to report other federally-required data, such as school financial information, so those pages were prebuilt. Alternatively, the secure data portal site was built to be fully customizable by the state, allowing it to include new types of data, insights, and ways of presenting the information. This flexibility is important to ensure the state can best meet the needs of its "customers"—namely, school and district administrators—yet, it also means that additional capacity is necessary to manage the data and maintain the site moving forward. Over time, the state intends to open the secure data portal up to more users via role-based access rules. That will require the build out of new functionality by the agency's information technology staff.

KEY LESSONS

As other states work to develop their new data reporting tools, including school and district report cards, Louisiana's experience can be a guide. The following are five key lessons from Louisiana's development and implementation of the School Finder and secure data portal sites:

1. Put Policy Before Presentation
2. Be Clear About the Audience
3. Partner to Engage Stakeholders Early and Often
4. Connect the Report Card to Action
5. Focus on Facilitating Critical Conversations

Lesson 1: Put Policy Before Presentation

Significant time and effort were devoted to the design of the school report card and school finder tool in Louisiana. This was necessary, but not sufficient to ensure the use of the tools. The state recognized early on that it needed to identify and incorporate the measures that mattered most for (1) system improvement and (2) meeting the needs of families. For Louisiana, that

meant building upon an accountability system that was in place for the previous five years, to add a deeper focus on credit accrual, student growth, and long-term, access to well-rounded education. For early childhood, that meant focusing on the measure research shows has the most powerful evidence base and the clearest ability for programs to control throughout the year, namely, teacher-child interactions.

The state's system of performance reporting must reflect its academic priorities. This ensures alignment with the SEA's vision for success and supports for improvement. According to Jessica Baghian, the state's Assistant Superintendent for Academic Policy and Analytics, "the way the state measures schools is our state's North Star—every metric represents the aspiration we have for every child; the system clearly lays out what excellence and competitive readiness mean; and, signals to parents and educators how close their schools are to achieving it."

Lesson 2: Be Clear About the Audience

In the development of any data reporting system, the state must be exceedingly clear about the intended audience. While Louisiana expects the school report cards to be used by different stakeholders—parents, educators, policymakers, business leaders—it made a purposeful choice to design the report card for one audience: parents. That meant:

- Organizing the report card to showcase the information that parents care most deeply about schools' ability to grow the whole child, students' progress on assessments, and students' access to enriching coursework;

- Simplifying language throughout the document, which included providing definitions of the various measures, removing jargon, presenting information in easy to interpret graphs, and providing comparative information on subgroup performance; and,

- Allowing parents to "choose their own adventure" through multiple approaches to reviewing data and comparing performance across schools.

Preparing the Field for Change

In its push for transparency, the state was realistic about the need to give educators and administrators time to become comfortable with the data. Rather than rushing toward accountability, the state identified opportunities where they could "preview" information and provide the field an opportunity to address any pertinent issues. For example, the state established a baseline in 2016 for every early childhood provider in the state, and provided that information to them privately. Given that the 2017 release of data would be the first time these providers experienced accountability, it was important that they understood what they were rated on and had an opportunity to make course corrections. Rapides Parish early childhood network used its initial rating of Approaching Proficient to identify opportunities for improved focus on classroom interactions. As result of their training and assistance, the network's first official rating in 2017 moved up to Proficient.

Similarly, in December 2017 through its secure data portal, the state also released to school administrators what their accountability score would have been for the 2016-17 school year if the state used the new ESSA accountability system. This "preview" of the accountability rating presents a powerful opportunity for administrators to work with their school staff to identify gaps and build upon strengths in advance of when the new accountability system is officially live. In particular, for schools that were on the low end of performance, it also presents an opportunity to conduct an early needs assessment to prepare for any required support and intervention if the performance does not improve.

The state recognized that the level of detail that school and district administrators need to identify gaps and push for improvement was far too nuanced to achieve through a school report card. Instead of attempting to conflate purposes, the state opted to create an aligned data portal for administrators. The secure reporting system provides student-level data on each of the measures, so that administrators can quickly assess where students individually and collectively perform against the bar set by the state and the performance of schools with a similar student makeup.

Lesson 3: Partner to Engage Stakeholders Early and Often

Stakeholder engagement around the design of a new public reporting system is a project unto itself, and it must be staffed as such. However, as Louisiana's experience highlights, that does not necessarily mean that the state agency must conduct all of the engagement. Rather, as Louisiana demonstrated, it had an infrastructure and plan for working with specific organizations that were better equipped to meaningfully engage the necessary stakeholders. In addition, the state had a plan to effectively communicate with teachers, leaders, and counselors about the report card tool development and release throughout the process. That plan focused on developing tools and videos that could simplify the information and ensure that it was dispersed through a variety of channels and, importantly, languages.

The state recognized that their engagement efforts could be significantly improved through partnerships with organizations that reach into broader communities. As Annie Morrison, the Department's Director of Family and Educator Communications said, "states don't need to do the work alone. There are lots of other organizations that can be helpful." The state sought the assistance of EdNavigator to close the relationship gap with parents in New Orleans, using them to host focus groups about the content and design of the report card. They worked with Stand for Children Louisiana in Baton Rouge and through a statewide communications campaign to get the word out to educators and parents about the information. They also identified other organizations that need information about school quality in their day-to-day work, like the realtors and pediatrics associations, to distribute flyers to their members and build into their professional development opportunities. As Alex Deiro, Marketing and Communications Manager at Stand for Children Louisiana explained, "there are already lots of good organizations in each state engaging with families and business leaders. The state doesn't need to know all the ways to engage directly with those individuals, they just need to know the right people that do engage with them. The car is already rolling, so hop in and let's carpool together."

Lesson 4: Connect the Report Card to Action

Louisiana intends for the report card to be action-oriented, and the state has taken steps to make that happen. The creation of the "School Finder" provides parents with a quick,

easy-to-use tool for selecting an early childhood program or K-12 school to enroll their child in a single, centralized place. The School Finder allows parents to filter options by location, grades served, performance, extracurricular activities offered, and a number of other dimensions.

Additionally, the Department of Education is working to streamline and connect its activities with the report card and secure data portal. The state is tying the data from the secure portal into its process for district planning, expecting schools to use the data for the development of their needs assessment, and automatically connecting the data from the secure portal to the application for school improvement funds. And the state is analyzing its results to tailor future district and educator supports.

Lesson 5: Focus on Facilitating Critical Conversations

"State education agencies dramatically oversell their power to convey information just because they are the ones to initially aggregate the info," suggests Superintendent White. Rather than solely focusing on centralizing communications from the capital, the LDOE sees its role as encouraging and empowering local leaders to take ownership of their performance story and communicate that to their constituents.

Producing a user-friendly school report card was never the end goal—it was simply the appetizer for enabling more genuine and nuanced conversations about gaps in school performance, examples of success, and efforts to sustain improvement. As Annie Morrison put succinctly, "report cards are only as good as the conversations that go with them." It is not realistic, nor is it necessarily desirable for the state agency to drive all conversations about education. Rather, it is important that the state has a created a tool that can facilitate conversations that happen across the state outside the purview of the SEA. It's the state's job, according to Superintendent White, to encourage and support those discussions through a system that creates a shared vocabulary and sense of the facts across stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

To many observers, the Louisiana's efforts to engage multiple stakeholders and build a system that reflects their needs has paid off considerably. According to Timothy Daly, Founding Partner of EdNavigator, the creation of the School Finder brought about a sea change in access to meaningful information for parents. The state agency broadly was committed to "empower parents to meet their own goals, and this great website was a moment to make that happen," he said. Now parents know whether their child's school offers band or dual enrollment courses, can easily find information about the number of graduates earning career certificates and the college enrollment rate, and what percentage of teachers are retained from year-to-year. And they do not need to visit multiple sites to

find information about their child's program or school regardless of grades served, location or type. All data in one place, on a common rating scale, in multiple languages, with clear options for parents to "choose their own adventure" for diving deeper. Rapides Parish School Board Preschool Coordinator Cindy Rushing reports that "it's great that for the first time, everyone [childcare centers, Head Start, Pre-K programs, K-12 traditional public and public charter schools] is in the same place, and people see that this is a community."

As Louisiana's experience highlights, school and district report cards can help parents, educators, policymakers, business leaders, and the public make critical decisions about education in each state. For these tools to firmly take hold, stakeholders must find value in the information they contain and the tools themselves must be easy to locate and navigate. Through the development and release of the School Finder and secure data portal, Louisiana worked to build a system that could (1) broadly communicate a coherent set of expectations for all students and schools, and (2) be used to highlight successes broadly.

Superintendent White believes that setting a coherent vision and the ability to inspire and reward in service of that vision are two of the state agency's greatest powers. The School Finder helps the state provide "directional leadership"—communicating what the system prioritizes and highlighting those that are succeeding in delivering results on those priorities. The tool helps bring coherence across the state's vision, accountability system, and method for publicly reporting performance.

Creating a coherent system is the first step in a long line of connected actions to support and inspire performance. It will take much more than the state agency creating a powerful tool to communicate performance. The Department will need continued assistance from organizations across the state to get this information into the hands of those closest to students. Ultimately, it will be up to actors beyond the agency to make the most critical decisions about a child's journey from early childhood to K-12 to postsecondary education, training and beyond.

APPENDIX: RESOURCES

- [Let's Keep the Conversation Going](#)

- [Communicating Performance: A Best Practices Resource for Developing State Report Cards](#)

- [LA School Finder](#)

- [School Finder Flyer](#)

- [Early Childhood Performance Profile Resources](#)

- School Finder [K-12](#) and [ECE](#) videos