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Is Your Child Showing Grit? School Report Cards Rate Students' Soft Skills

By Evie Blad

May 30, 2017

Where report cards may have once had a handwritten teacher's note saying a student "plays well with others," parents in some districts are now more likely to see a box that shows whether their child performs at grade level in such areas as "relationship skills."

Schools are increasingly rating students on a variety of social competencies and "learning skills" alongside their traditional grades in academic subjects.

In Montgomery County, Md., elementary school report cards indicate whether students are **exhibiting traits like "intellectual risk-taking" and metacognition**, which is an awareness of their own learning processes.

In Austin, Texas, elementary report cards **feature a matrix of "personal-development skills"** that show if teachers think a student demonstrates tasks including taking "responsibility for own actions."

Telling parents how their children are doing on those types of skills, educators say, helps include families in the work of cultivating the qualities that research links to academic success.

"We give a lot of lip service in education about parent involvement," said Maurice Elias, a psychology professor at Rutgers University **who has studied how schools present character-trait information on report cards.** "But for a lot of parents, the math curriculum, the science curriculum is very hard for them to get involved with. ... But when it comes to their child's character, you would be hard-pressed to find a parent who doesn't want to pitch in."

Still, schools that rate students in these new ways face a big challenge: presenting the information so it's useful and understandable for parents and students. And they must tread carefully as researchers **urge extra caution in measuring these so-called**

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Report Cards Get a Makeover

A growing wave of schools give parents feedback on their children's character skills and nonacademic traits through report cards and progress updates. Among the traits and behaviors that schools track:

Optimistic thinking

To determine how a student stacks up in this measure of confidence and positivity, teachers answer questions about how often he or she looks forward to activities and says positive things about him or herself.

Social awareness

This is a measure of a student's ability to empathize and consider diverse perspectives on an issue.

Metacognition

This education buzzword refers to a student's awareness of his or her own learning processes. Experts say students are more effective learners if they understand how they approach failure, learn from mistakes, and process information.



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soft skills and noncognitive traits.

Existing measures, including teacher observations and surveys in which students rate their own character strengths, are imprecise and subject to biases that can make them inaccurate, researchers say.

Looping In Parents

Schools report on students' character in a number of ways.

While some include the traits on traditional report cards, others include them on progress reports they send home periodically. Most schools ask teachers to craft the student ratings using a variety of questionnaires.

Schools have always asked teachers to provide some input on students' character skills in report card comments, but establishing a more formal and consistent method for that feedback allows teachers to track patterns in students' strengths, Elias said.

Current methods show room for improvement, he said. Many districts use computerized report card systems that allow teachers to select comments about students from a drag-down menu of options. Elias found that teachers in one high school—when asked to select two statements about each student from a menu of 60 items—never selected an option beyond the first 31 choices.

Formalizing character feedback also helps get parents, teachers, and students on the same page by emphasizing a set list of skills that guide a school's work in helping students develop socially and emotionally, Elias said. For measures of soft skills to be effective, they must be grounded in a larger school approach that involves standards showing how those skills should be demonstrated at each grade level, classroom instructional strategies, and parental-engagement efforts, experts say.

Expecting students' skills to improve by rating them without those other elements is like expecting to lose weight by stepping on a scale every day without diet or exercise, experts say.

"If the goal is to get parents engaged, then we can't make this as complicated as the common-core math curriculum," said Elias. "We have to focus on a few key things that we want the parents to be focused on."

In Austin, for example, the personal-development skills on students' report cards are grounded in a districtwide social-emotional-learning plan, said Lindsay Lamb, a research analyst for the district who has studied trends in student scores. That plan includes direct instruction on personal and relationship skills through research-based curriculum; changes in schoolwide policies, such as discipline; and efforts to incorporate social-emotional learning into traditional academic instruction.

The district also has a strategy for sharing its social-emotional-learning work with parents. That includes book clubs where parents discuss concepts like how to learn from failure and booths at events where staff members explain the work.

At the Urban Assembly Unison School, a charter middle school in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, students lead their own parent-teacher conferences,

Zest

Included on a character-growth card used by some KIPP charter schools, "zest" refers to students' enthusiasm and energy in approaching tasks.

Grit

A term popularized by psychologist Angela Duckworth, "grit" refers to a passion and perseverance in achieving long-term goals.

Responsibility

Elementary teachers in Austin rate each student on whether he or she "takes responsibility for own actions."

Managing emotions

Austin also gives feedback on whether a student "manages emotions constructively." Many schools with social-emotional-learning programs emphasize the larger concept of self-awareness, a student's ability to recognize and respond to emotions and control his or her own behavior.

Sources: Montgomery County, Md., public schools; KIPP Public Charter Schools; Austin Independent School District; Urban Assembly Charter Schools

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reviewing their social-emotional-learning scores alongside a portfolio of their academic work, Principal Emily Paige said.

"We want students to be able to use this to talk to their parents," Paige said. "That act of self-assessment builds social-emotional skills."

The Urban Assembly charter school network uses a version of a **"student-strengths assessment"** developed by the Devereux Center for Resilient Children. Two teachers use that assessment to rate each student by describing on a numerical scale how often they've witnessed them demonstrating specific behaviors, like "doing something nice for somebody" and "speaking about positive things." Teachers fill out an extensive, 72-question survey about students three times a year and a smaller, nine-question assessment twice.

"Teachers start to look at a student through a [social-emotional learning] lens," said David Adams, the director of social-emotional learning for the network. "Instead of saying a student is acting out, they're starting to say, 'This student needs support in self-management. How can I change my classroom to do that?'"

For example, if a student scores low in "optimistic thinking," a teacher may make a point of regularly asking him about a good thing that happened that day, Adams said.

Avoid Abstractions

It's important for schools that measure social-emotional or character traits to use specific behaviors in both their assessment and reporting, said Angela Duckworth, the University of Pennsylvania psychologist who popularized the term "grit."

She helped the KIPP charter network **develop a "character-growth card" that provides regular feedback to parents** on student traits like zest, a descriptor for enthusiasm. It does so by reporting on teachers' observations of a menu of behaviors.

"You have to have some way of communicating to kids and their families, more articulately, more specifically, less abstractly, what you mean by character," Duckworth said. "This says, 'Here are actual things that you can see and are real to you.'"

A parent is more likely to understand the value of a student resisting distractions than more academic words like metacognition, she said. KIPP schools that use the character scores provide them separately from student report cards so that parents understand they are meant to be formative—conversation starters that contribute to ongoing work—rather than summative, like final grades.

Duckworth has many concerns about the trend of measuring and reporting on individual student traits, as schools seek to foster nonacademic traits like social awareness and responsible decisionmaking. That trend comes as researchers who promote such traits—including Duckworth—argue over how to best measure them and how to responsibly use those measurements.

Teachers may have different views on what such traits as responsibility look like, which may cause students to receive inconsistent scores. And implicit biases could lead some teachers to rate students in certain racial or demographic groups lower than their peers in some areas.

Lamb, the research analyst in the Austin district, said she's found some trends **that may suggest bias**. One analysis found that white students and students from higher-income families score higher on the district's personal development reports than their black and lower-income peers.

The district has made training in recognizing biases and culturally responsive teaching a priority, Lamb said, and trends in students' scores may help inform that work.



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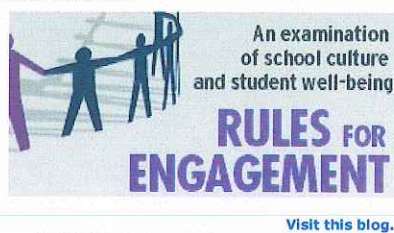
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Rutgers' Elias said these measurements may actually give schools a forum for talking about teacher biases and inconsistent standards they hold for students. For example, a school that notices a teacher consistently rating English-learners lower than their peers may be able to intervene or review that teacher's approach to that student group, he said.

Concerns about bias can also be addressed by asking more than one teacher to provide feedback for each student, Elias said.

But Duckworth worries that parents won't understand some of the flaws with the measurements, including statistical nuances she didn't understand until graduate school. Some researchers also warn that feedback on character traits in the form of scores or grades can feel like a label to some students, which may invite them to compare themselves with their peers, rather than challenging themselves to improve.

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Duckworth also fears schools will begin tying the measurements to high-stakes issues, like teacher evaluations and school accountability, which she strongly opposes.

There's also no documented evidence yet that giving report card-style feedback on character actually leads to improvements for students, she said.

"If kids could get formative feedback, information they could learn and grow from, that is potentially a legitimate use," Duckworth said. "But the reason I say 'potentially' is that that hasn't been tested."

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