Redesigning Report Cards to Reflect Academic Health:

How Middle School Report Cards can More Effectively Represent

Attendance, Behavior, and Course Performance

An Action Research Project

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to develop a preliminary report card design and evaluate it for further development of an academic health reporting system. This process required three steps: (1) a determination of what information should be presented on the report card, (2) how to physically design a report card to best reflects that information and make the most impact on the student, and (3) an evaluation of the redesign by educational professionals. A literature review was done to determine the first two steps in this process and two focus groups were held to evaluate that mock-up before it is used in student-teacher and parent-teacher conferences. The evaluation was generally positive. Both focus groups were supportive of the overall process of redesigning the report card, however, many concerns regarding the accuracy of data, and the usefulness of and understandability of the redesign led to many points of constructive criticism.

Redesigning Report Cards to Reflect Academic Health

Approximately two to ten times a year a student receives a report card, a progress report, testing results, and/or additional reports informing the student of his or her academic performance. These reports, however, mean very little to the student or that student's parent/guardian, except to show whether or not the student passed or failed a particular class. The basic report card shows only a list of classes, marking periods, and grades. If a student is lucky it will also include GPA, attendance, and some comments by the teacher. Most report cards only take up half a page. At the last set of report card conferences held at my school I found parents looking at their child's report cards in two ways: checking to see if their child passed or failed, and trying to understand why their child received the grades they did.

Research Question

In redesigning a school's report card, how can information be visually presented in order to concisely convey a student's grades, attendance, and behavior? How can the white space be used effectively in order to give context and inform the student and parents of relevant information as well as the limitations of the report? What are the responses of teachers, parents, and students to the report card redesign?

Theoretical Framework

The inspiration for this project came from two of my own professional areas of interest. The first is a series of talks given by the world's greatest thinkers called TEDTalks. A 2010 talk given by Thomas Goetz outlined how Wired Magazine decided to redesign medical records using principles like clarity, simplicity, relevance, context, and color (Goetz, 2010). The purpose of the redesign was to make blood test results more meaningful to the patients themselves and helps us understand how to layout the physical design of the report card. In that same talk Goetz

outlined how his blood test redesign is integral to the patient taking ownership of his or her own

body and health. He outlined a basic positive feedback loop with personalized data (the blood

test) at the beginning of the loop.

Figure 1: Goetz's Positive Feedback Loop
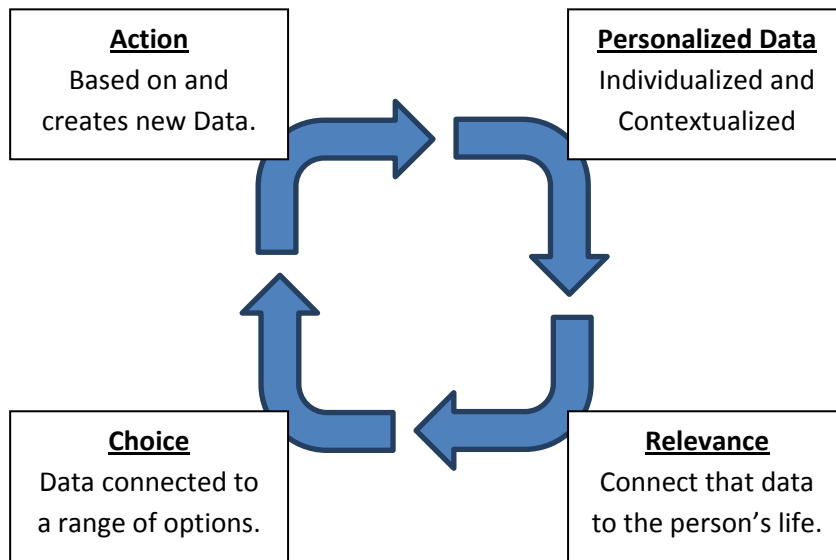
I intend to investigate whether this same loop can be recreated in students when presented with

their personal academic data. My current job requires pulling together data for a middle school

in Detroit. This work provides the the second half of the inspiration required for a report card

redesign, what information to put on the report card. The basic principles of my job come from

research done by Johns Hopkins University on what they call Early Warning Indicators or EWIs

(Balfanz et al., 2007). These EWIs are signs a student puts out that warns their teachers that they

are beginning to disengage from school. Johns Hopkins identified three basic early warning

indicators: (1) attendance, (2) behavior, and (3) class grades. These indicators are considered to

be the true measures of a student's academic success beyond what is reported on most quarterly

report cards. From these two factors: (1) what to put on the report card and (2) what principles

should underlie the redesign, I created a new report card that aims to involve students in their

own positive feedback loop.

Literature Review

Before I could undertake any report card redesign I reviewed the literature in order to

identify research and past efforts of redesigning report cards. I searched the internet using

Google and I also investigated several academic indexes (Proquest, ERIC, and JSTOR). I used

the following key words in various combinations as part of the search: Report Card, Redesign,

School, and Student. The search results brought back several scholarly works about what to

include on report cards (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Balfanz, 2009; Parthenon Group,

2007; Pinkus, 2008; Roderick, 1993). Additionally, I found articles and resources related to

school districts attempting to improve on assessment and report systems by changing their report

card (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Whittle, 1997). Finally, I also examined the

comments of parents, teachers, students, and ordinary people on blogs and other websites that are

critical of current report cards (Rushowy, 2010). In sum, I looked at 12 resources, 7 of which

were empirical studies. While examining these search results a pattern of research emerged that

can be divided into two distinct themes and to redesign a student's report card these two items

need to be addressed: (1) How do educators define academic health and what are the specific

behaviors that represent good or bad academic health and (2) how can the classic quarterly report

card be redesigned to effectively communicate that information to the student?

Theme 1: Academic Health

A student's academic health has two parts: their current status and their likelihood of

earning a High School Diploma. In other words, how are they doing now, and how does that

affect their future success? It is this information that needs to be included on any report card for

it to be meaningful to the student, the parent, the teachers, and anyone else involved with that student's academic health.

The signs and symptoms of academic health have been labeled by the Center for the Social Organization of Schools as Early Warning Indicators (EWIs) (Balfanz et al., 2007). These EWIs fall under three broad categories: attendance, behavior, and academic performance. It is from these studies that I got my original definition of Academic Health. Academic Health refers to a student's current status in school, based on the ABC's of academic success as outlined by the CSOS (Attendance, Behavior, and Class Grades) which in turn influence the likelihood that the student will graduate on time or at least within one year of when he or she was supposed to graduate (Balfanz, 2009). In his study, conducted in Philadelphia, he was able to predict with 75% accuracy those students that would later dropout. He identified the following three indicators of dropout behavior in as early as the sixth grade: 1) failed math or English, 2) attended class less than 80% of the time, and 3) received poor behavior marks on their report cards.

These studies done by Balfanz (2009) at the CSOS were later summarized in a policy brief written by the Alliance for Excellent Education along with several other studies that attempted to answer the same question (Pinkus, 2008). For example, Roderick (1993) found that many students who would eventually drop out earned an average GPA at or below C- as far back as their fourth grade year. In studying fourth grade records, this study attempted to go younger than any of the previous studies I found in identifying EWIs. A final study done in Boston Public Schools found 75% of their dropouts by looking at those students who failed several classes in ninth grade, had academic risk factors like poor attendance in eighth grade, were ELL students, and in special education classes that took them out of the mainstream classroom

(Parthenon Group, 2007, as quoted in Pinkus, 2008, p 2). These studies, like the original done

by the CSOS all wanted to see how far from graduation they would be able to predict future

trouble, but it is the CSOS study that I return to because it focuses on the age group that I am

currently working with. They chose sixth grade because it is a transitory grade for most students.

Sixth graders are either attending different schools than they did the year before or coming up

against a different set of circumstances like larger classes and different grading and testing

policies (Balfanz, 2009). Their EWIs also focused on readily available data that can easily be

added to the standard Detroit Public School report card, or is already there, but the significance

of which are not pointed out.

Theme 2: Report Card Redesign

This country has had a long history of providing parents and students with report cards.

For example, according to Marzano (2000), "For at least a hundred years, teachers at almost

every level have been using grades of some type – letter grades, percentage scores – as the

overall indicator of student achievement" (as quoted in Mathura, 2008, p 12). It is a basic part of

our culture and one that I believe needs to be built upon instead of replaced.

Researchers Thomas Guskey, Gerry Swan, and Lee Ann Jung (2010) describe a series of

discussions and surveys that ask participants to evaluate Kentucky's attempt to redesign their

report cards based on statewide curriculum standards. When comparing the traditional and

standards based report cards both provide the basic letter grade we have all come to know, but

the new report card the state piloted included categories beneath the grade that attempts to

explain how the student is doing on the different categories within the overall letter grade. For

example, the social studies grade may be followed by scores of 1-4 on different state standards

like "Demonstrates knowledge of historical perspective in relation to current events." Their

attempts to further explain why the student is receiving the grade that they did do not, however, help us understand a student's academic health. There is no attempt to include a student's attendance to class or behavior once in class. It focuses solely on grades.

Canada's Ministry of Education in Ontario Province (2010) recently redesigned their report cards to provide greater detail of their students' academic health. This report card was designed as the initial progress report, not as a final grade report. The principal of Ontario's Roberta Bondar Public School, where the report cards were piloted, remarked that the report card redesign features learning skills instead of focusing on a summative assessment (Rushowy, 2010). That focus allowed the teachers from Roberta Bondar Public School to open up what was once a rigid document in order to include several aspects of the ABCs put forth by the CSOS. For example, the redesigned report card included check boxes for a student's behavior, a place to calculate attendance, grades, a student's current grade, and a large box for teachers to make comments and write next steps. The report cards did, however, fail the test of clarity, simplicity, and the use of color used by Goetz in his redesign of medical records. There is no color aside from whatever ink the teacher uses to fill out their section of the report card.

A similar redesign was started back in 1994 in the York Suburban School District in Harrisburg, PA (Whittle, 1997). Because changing a schools report card system involves changing the culture of the school, the York Suburban School District decided to make it a long term project lasting 5 years. The first year involved an intense review of the literature and a call to other state school districts to share their reporting systems. The second and third phases of the project were focused around deciding and designing a report card system which reflected the vision of York Suburban School District. After a review (phase four) that included staff development and parent informational meetings the process was completed. The final report

card included a grade report for each subject area that was paired with a progress scale.   The

grade report was intended to answer the question: How well does the student understand the

concepts? The progress grade (a scale of one to three) focused on whether the student was

moving, improving, or slipping further behind. The third section of the report card focused on

work habits and social development. This section included things like following directions,

neatness, getting along with others, and respect. Lastly, a comment section was included for the

teacher to provide extensive notes. The York redesign is quite similar to the one done later in

Ontario. Both asked teachers to provide extra data on each student and write paragraphs worth

of notes. Unfortunately, though, actual examples of the report card were not included in the

study, nor were reactions by teachers, parents, and students reported. All of this data would be

useful information when evaluating the effectiveness of any report card redesign.

Conclusion

A final analysis of the literature points to a report card that fulfills the basic needs of the

traditional report card as well as add context to that report (Balfanz et al., 2007; Balfanz, 2009;

Guskey, 2010; Mathura, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Whittle, 1997). If a student

is not doing well, educators need to know why and the report card should explain that. In my

action research project I intend to use readily available data within the school district system to

redesign the report card to include the ABCs of school success outlined by the Johns Hopkins

CSOS. Unlike redesigns done previously in Ontario Province, The State of Kentucky, and York

County, this redesign will not require any extra work on the part of the teacher. It will be based

on the principles of clarity, simplicity, uses of color, personalizing information, providing

context and specifics, and maximizing the white space. If Goetz is correct, this report card has

the potential to be the beginning of a positive feedback loop that will get the students to take ownership of their academic health.

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Research Methods

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Setting and Participants

The report card design and evaluation were done in three different settings with three separate participant groups. The first phase, the design phase, was done on my own working with Microsoft Access (a database program) and was conducted immediately following the literature review. The evaluation phase, phase two, was conducted with two separate groups and done in two different settings. The first was an observational case study with six middle school teachers held after school in a teacher's classroom. They were seated in a circle and handed copies of the Academic Health Report Card and asked several questions. In the end, five females and one male were interviewed for a total 6 participants (N=6). The second focus group was more concentrated on the specifics of the report card. It was held during lunch with twelve City Year Corps Members. City Year is a volunteer organization for recent high school and college graduates, as well as current college students, who serve a year in high needs schools as tutors and mentors to at-risk students. They were seated around a large table and given three sheets of paper, each on focusing on the three different aspects of academic health: attendance, behavior, and course performance. This group totaled 12 total participants (N=12), two male and ten female. After both focus groups were completed, a grand total of 18 participants were interviewed (N=18).

Data Collection

At the beginning of the design phase I took the indicators found during the literature review and applied only those that were most immediately useful, that of Johns Hopkins

University.   A cursory review of the school district's database revealed that information

regarding attendance, behavior, and course performance was easily available and came in several

different forms. The following information was chosen for the Academic Health Report Card

mock-up:

1. Daily Attendance: although attendance was taken by every teacher during every

    period, the most reliable data was taken during one class (social studies). This

    data was used to represent average daily attendance.

2. Suspensions: although several discipline referrals are written every day, only

    those resulting in suspensions are entered into the system.

3. Quarterly Grades: a letter grade for each subject entered by the teacher at the end

    of every quarter.

4. Quarterly Citizenship Marks: given out by each teacher and representing that

    student's behavior in their classrooms on a scale of 1 (positive behavior) to 3

    (negative behavior).

5. Attendance Phone Calls: a log of calls home for attendance was kept by the City

    Year Corps Members. While making these calls they record the date, person

    contacted, reason for absence, and any notes/comments.

Once the design phase was completed the focus groups were conducted and data was

collected regarding their evaluation of the report cards. To see a list of the questions asked at

both focus groups see Appendices B and D. In the teacher focus group the questions were

presented on an agenda sheet and asked, in order, throughout the meeting. During the meeting I

took notes on the responses given to each question (Appendix C). City Year was also asked

several questions; however, both their questions and responses were created and recorded using a

more systematic process. Their questions were focused on each individual section of the new

report card and answers were marked using colored sticky notes placed underneath each

question: green for approval, yellow for concern, and red for disapproval. If they had any

comments regarding the report card they were asked to write them on the sticky notes. To see

the questions, responses, and comments see Appendix D.

Data Analysis

Data from each of the focus groups was analyzed using two different methods. The

divergent analysis was done because each focus group was held using different data collection

means. Notes from both groups were inductively analyzed, which means they were "organized

into patterns and themes in order to construct some sort of framework for presenting key

findings" (Mertler, 2009, p 141). The approval/disapproval marks given by City Year presented

a set of quantitative data that can be used to analyze reactions to specific parts of the report card.

Those marks were organized into categories and used to create graphs.

Limitations

Despite an attempt to get as much input from as wide an array of sources as possible,

there are still some voices that are not presented within this project. The first is the students

themselves. Although they were given the new report card, and were able to discuss them with

the City Year Corps Members, they were not asked for their feedback on its design. A teacher

did follow up on the conferences by assigning a short paragraph on the most helpful part of the

conferences, however, those at data were not available for analysis. Two other important stake

holders that were not involved in the evaluation: parents/guardians and school administration.

Another limitation of the project was the lack of notes taken during the focus groups. While

conducting the teacher focus group I did not record the conversations, nor did I take enough

notes to fully represent the quality of the conversation. The same can be said about the City Year focus group. Although I did ask them to make comments, they also asked me several questions that I did not record.

Findings

When this research project was first started there were two themes running through it: academic health and report card redesign. Within these two themes, the findings of report card evaluation points to three patterns within the data: an overall positive reaction to the project, a need to understand the data used in the report card and what it means to the students, and the reaction to the color scheme and physical design of the report cards.

A Positive Reaction to the Report Card Redesign Project

When taken as a whole, the reaction from both the teachers and City Year Corps Members was generally positive. While working with the teachers, I took notes with the intent of using the teachers' comments to update the report card. As mentioned earlier, I analyzed the notes and color-code the teacher feedback into three categories: green for approval, yellow for concern, and red for disapproval. Figure 2 represents City Year's participants' feedback.

Figure 2: Distribution of Comments from City Year Participants
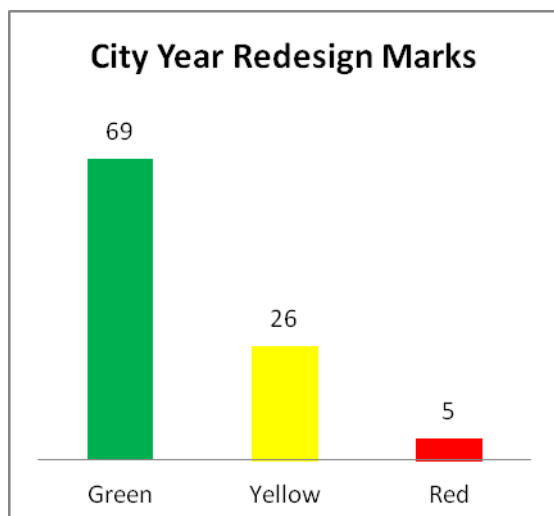
The evaluation meetings were positive overall. Participants offered general comments such as "they [students] need to see this" and questions regarding how soon we will be able to hold conferences bore out that positive environment. The teachers' insistence that these report cards go home with the students also reflected a positive reaction. When the sticky notes provided by City Year were tallied up, those comments were substantiated with numbers. As Figure 2 shows, the green sticky notes outnumbered the yellow and red by more than two to one (Green=69, Yellow/Red=31). Furthermore, as Figure 3 explains there was a higher frequency of positive or approval comments compared to combination frequency of "concern" or "disapproval" comments.

Figure 3: Distribution of Comments Based on EWI's

	Positive		Negative		Total
Attendance	16	64%	9	36%	25
Behavior	31	76%	10	24%	41
Course Performance	22	79%	6	21%	28
Cumulative	69	73%	25	27%	94

Thus, even when isolating the green comments as the lone "positive" feedback and combining the yellow and red equivalent into a "negative" mark, the results are still positive for all three sections (attendance, behavior, and course performance) of the report card redesign.

**Understanding the Data and What the Data Means to the Student**

When going over the notes I took during the teacher focus group, as well as the comments and marks made by City Year, one of the greatest areas of concern is the data used to make up the report card. A total of eight comments were made by both groups either asking questions or criticizing the data I used to design the report card. Five of those comments were made about what the data meant to the individual student (See Appendixes C and D). Specifically, the participants wanted to better understand the context of the presented data. For

example, one teacher had a question regarding the course performance section. The teacher

wanted to know what it took to graduate. Another teacher asked about missing data and what it

meant if the student did not receive a grade for a specific class.

These comments were also reflected in the marks given by City Year participants to

specific parts of the report card. As Figure 4 shows, when I asked the City Year participants

about their perception about the numbers used to represent a student's attendance, only three

marks were positive, while there were four yellow and one red marks (Green=3, Yellow=4, and

Red=1).

Figure 4: Distribution of Participants' Comments Regarding EWI
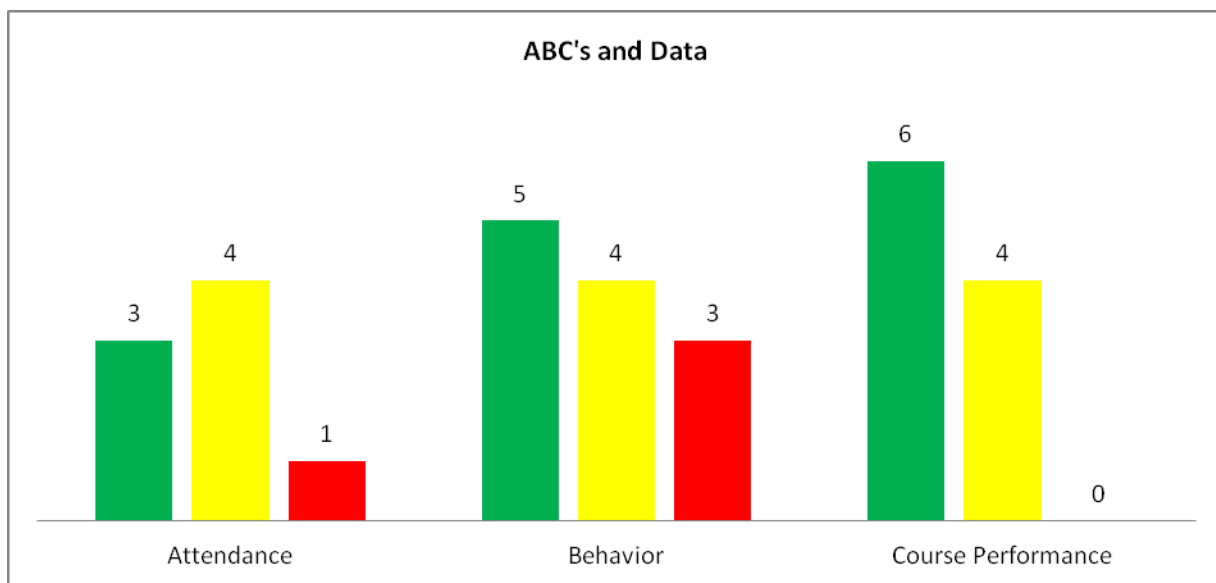
Patterns of questioning the data were also found in the other two sections of the report card. As

Figure 4 details, in the behavior section, the one question that received the most negative marks

of the entire report card was about using a stoplight to represent a student's citizenship grade

(Green=5, Yellow=4, and Red=3). In the final section, course performance, City Year made the

same number of yellow marks for the actual grades a student got for each of their core courses as

they did for Attendance and Behavior (Green=6, Yellow=4, and Red=0). This section, a grid of

composed of course grades, marking periods, and letter grades, most resembled a traditional

report card, and yet it still had a high number of yellow marks.

When these poor marks are all added together, the negative, 12 yellow and 4 red marks,

outnumbered the positive, 14 green marks (Green=14, Yellow=12, Red=4). This one area

provided the most negative response in the entire evaluation process. They are the result of a

history of unreliable data within the school district. In previous meetings with City Year data

was presented regarding a student's attendance that was later found to underreport the students'

absences. It was this uncertainty in the data that was reflected in these three areas.

Physical Design of the Report Cards

In regards to the actual design of the new report card, the color, layout, etc, the responses

were both positive and negative. Figure 5 shows the distribution of comments by the City Year

Participants about the report card's color scheme.

Figure 5: City Year Participants' comments about the Report Card Color Scheme
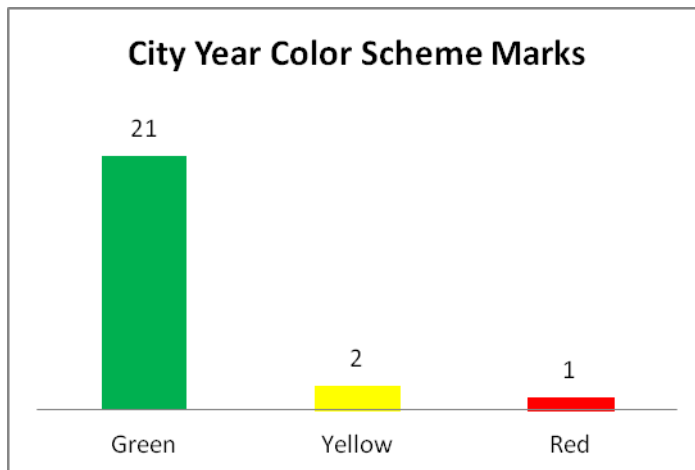
As Figure 5 shows, the City Year marks on the use of color in the design, there is almost

uniformly positive feedback (Green=21, Yellow=2, Red=1). There were also many comments

from both teachers and City Year about the physical design and layout. Of the fifteen comments

about report card design and layout, only one was positive. Teachers specifically mentioned the label in the course performance section for the class passing stars. This, along with other comments, focused on typos and programming mistakes that were easily corrected. This mixed message points towards support for the project, but a need for improvement.

Discussion

Returning to the positive feedback loop presented by Goetz, this research project was intended to become the start of each student's individual loop. The data they are being presented is personal, it is their data, and unlike the original report card, the data being used more accurately reflects a student's academic health. It is personal, individualized, and answers the two questions that students, parents/guardians, and teachers are looking for when they review a report card: how is the student doing in his or her classes and why. This makes the data relevant to those interested in the student's Academic Health and the findings of this project bear that out. The participants, when shown the report card, responded positively and believed it to be relevant to the students. It is these first two steps in the positive feedback loop that was focused on in this project: personalizing the data and making it relevant to the students. The last two, Choice and Action, were a part of the report card conferences and in the design, but were not focused on during the evaluation and analysis of the attendance, behavior, and course performance sections of the report card. One final section was used during report card conferences that brought the loop full circle. Students were asked what their next steps were, "What can you do to build on your strengths and/or improve your areas of concern?" After presenting the students with their data, they were asked what came next, which would then lead to more data, and another go around the loop. Further action on this project can occur at the beginning of next year. Students can be presented with their results from the previous year and asked to make a plan for the new year.

Conclusion

When I started this project I wanted to have a report card that actually meant something to students. I wanted a document that truly represented how the student was doing in class and to make it easily understood by the students themselves. I wanted to be able to act like a doctor going over their test results and have the students look at their report card like a patient who wants to know how to stay or get healthy. The results of the evaluation suggest that if I truly want to have such a report card, the process has only begun. Although the teachers and volunteers provided positive feedback, they offered constructive criticism about different parts they felt could be improved. The next step would be to move beyond this first attempt at redesign and develop a system of report cards. The district database has information on more than just attendance, behavior, and grades. Within that system is information such as state standardized tests, district benchmarks, reading levels, math ability, and personality tests. Further research can include the opinions of stake holders that were missed during this action research project as well as improve on the note taking process used during the focus groups. It can also answer several lingering questions. What information is best presented every week, every month, every quarter? What information is best known at the beginning of a school year versus the middle or end? A report card can be more than just grades.

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Appendix A – Report Card Redesign Mock Up

Personal Student Information

RALPH WALDO EMERSON MIDDLE SCHOOL
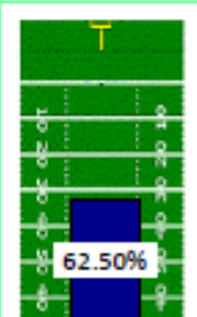
Q3 | **The ABCs of Success**

Attendance: 90% of Success is SHOWING UP!!
Behavior: Work Hard and Be Nice!!!
Class Grades: Always strive for your best!!

ATTENDANCE

Attendance GOAL = 95%

Attendance

Absent	42
Tardy	0
Present	70

The graph represents a student's hrm attendance. It counts days when the student was on time and when they were tardy.

Average Daily Att

62.50%

Reasons Absent

Sick

Unknown

Reasons absent are based on calls home made by City Year Corp Members.

BEHAVIOR

Citizenship Goal = All ONES!!!

Way to GO!! You earned a GREEN LIGHT by working hard and being nice.

The citizen lights are based on the student's average Citizenship grade. Students who recieved all 1's earned a green light, any 2's earned a yellow light, and any student with at least one 3 earned a red light.

English DP 6	1
Math Grade 6 DP	1
Science Grade 6	1
Social Studies Grade 6	1

Suspensions

No Suspensions

CLASS GRADES

Passing Goal = 4 Classes

WAY TO GO!! You have passed all of your classes and are on your way to move up to the next grade.

Core Classes

	Q1	S1	Q3	S2
English	A	A	B	
Math	C	B	C	
Soc Stud	B	C	B	
Science	B	C	C	

Next Steps What can you do to build on your strengths and/or improve on your areas of concern.

Appendix B: Questions and Notes from Teacher Focus Group

1. What information presented on the report card is not clear?

2. What information would you like added to the report card?

3. What information would you like removed from the report card?

4. What information do you approve of, but would change in some way? How
   would you change it?

5. What suggestions can you offer for the physical layout of the report card?

Appendix C: Notes from Teacher Focus Group

Grades: No label on what stars mean. Need to make stars appoint. Should specifically say that they mean passing classes. Need to make a point that stars do not equal grades, but simply passing classes.

Attendance: hrm only. Want it to be shocking. CY Call log is good. Football grid could be too busy.

Behavior. Suspensions should only cover this year. Meriweather: put in cart, you bought it, don't cry about it. Suggested cutting off at Quarter. Not too much info – students could get confused.

NO IEP Data.

Appendix D: Questions and Responses for City Year Focus Group

<u>Attendance</u>

The Numbers: currently shows attendance in their homeroom only and is a raw count. Do you agree with using this data?

G	3	I'm concerned that the data won't be accurate.
Y	4	Could an enrollment date be added?
R	1	Kids who come in consistently late for hrm but are here the rest of the day are counted as absent all day? It would be nice if we had info on kids that are tardy to other classes. Agree with concerns about tardy and only hrm. Kids who come in late are absent all day?

The Graph: based on PRESENT and ON TIME. Do you agree with using this for the graph?

G	4	ADA – if they attended then it should be counted even if they are tardy. Also, I like the term "on time" instead of present.
Y	2	
R	0	

Reasons Absent: based on city year calling history. Understandable and Useful?

G	4	Should the "reasons absent" ad up to the same # as the total # of days absent.
Y	2	Yes, useful, although attendance data doesn't add up w/cy call history records. Reviewing what reasons we could have is helpful.
R	0	

Color Scheme: Colors work with the presentation?

G	5	
Y	0	
R	0	

Behavior

Stop Light Graphic and Comment: Understandable and fit together?

G	5	Font color on stoplight explanations needs to be darker. Caution comment area.
Y	4	Traffic light color more visable.
R	3	Light color should be based on suspensions and citizenship grade. Light color should be more visable. I don't think suspensions should be separate. Why is there data missing from social studies and English? Color should be based on both Cit # and suspensions and coursework. You have to turn it around.

Explanation of Stop Light: useful and understandable?

G	9	
Y	0	
R	0	

Suspension list: easy to use and interpret?

G	10	
Y	0	
R	0	

Color Scheme: Colors work with the presentation?

G	7	Yes
Y	2	Colors on stoplight be more visable
R	1	Can suspensions be a different color than citizenship?

Course Performance

Grading Stars and Comment: Understandable and fit together?

G	7	¾ star example is missing word "track".
Y	2	Are c's good grades?
R	0	

Core Classes: Understandable and Useful?

G	6	Q's and S's. I don't understand what about Q1?
Y	4	I would like to know more specifics, whether they will be able to move on to the next grade or not if they are failing classes. How many classes can they fail?
R	0	Q's and S's are confusing. Can we only show what has happened so far?

Color Scheme: Colors work with the presentation?

G	9	
Y	0	
R	0	