

# School Report Cards offer opportunity for community participation in education

Now in its second year, School Report Cards (SRCs) are still a relatively new development in Qatari education. With the two-year's worth of data that have been gathered and analyzed about school performance, parents and other stakeholders can now compare progress both between and within schools. In this short article, we hope to cast more light on the role of SRCs as an effective evaluative tool. We will explore their outcomes and limitations and hopefully will lead to a constructive and purposeful consideration and use of SRCs.

As with all new initiatives, stakeholders have asked some very legitimate questions about SRCs including: Is the information contained in them important? What's the most important information that should be included? Does the SRC really assist parents in making informed decisions regarding their children's schooling? Why doesn't the Evaluation Institute use SRCs to rank schools according to their education achievement in order to help parents know which is the best school and which is not? Have students changed their schools as a result of SRC's findings? Why did the Evaluation Institute decide to assess the Ministry of Education schools and private Arabic schools and compare them with Independent Schools in spite of the differences in services and support provided? Are there other or additional methods to assess the schools? Do parents understand how to read and analyze the SRCs effectively?

## SRC goals

The aims of the SRC are to help parents and the community in general become more informed about, and

subsequently more involved with, schools and schooling in Qatar. SRCs provide the basis by which parents can engage with schools and influence important matters relating to their child's schooling. The ultimate goal is to enable parents to make more informed decisions about their child's schooling.

## SRCs data and indicators

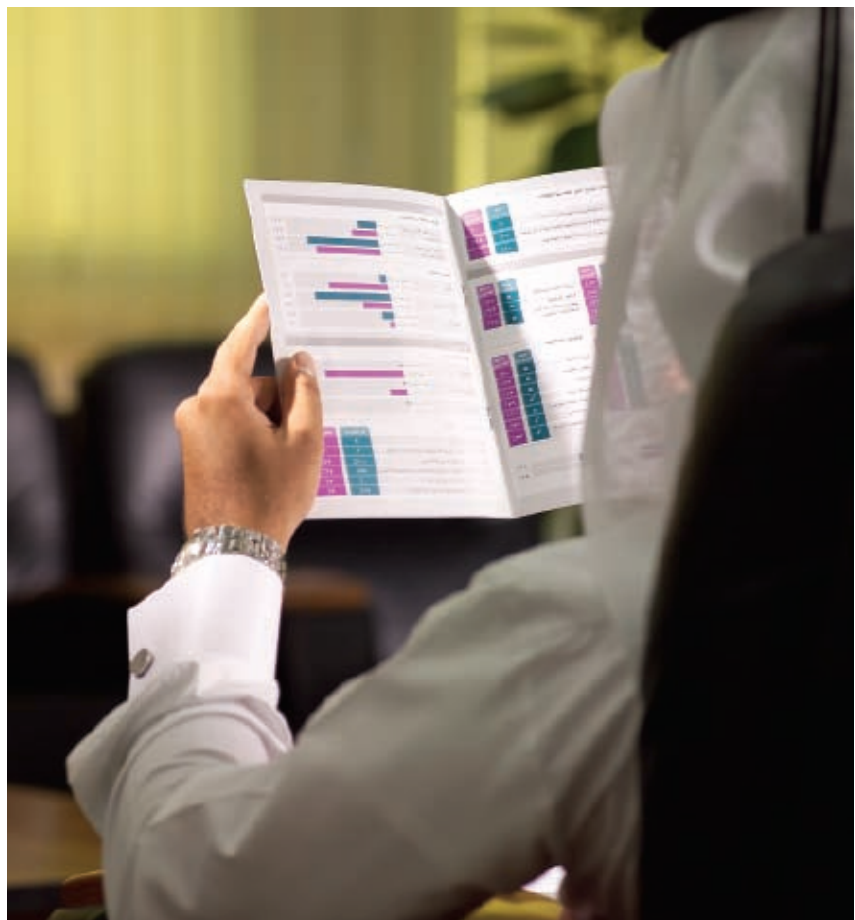
SRCs provide information on a broad range of aspects of schools including: results from the Qatar Comprehensive Education Assessments (QCEA); as well as parents and students overall satisfaction with the school; parents opinion on homework assigned; information on basic education practices at the school; teachers' approaches to helping students with learning difficulties; school activities and services; students' academic aspirations; important characteristics of the teachers' professional backgrounds; matters related to parental participation in, and interaction with, the school; teachers' pedagogical practices; school

facilities; the ratio of computers to students in the school; teachers' comfort level with using modern technology in teaching. In addition, the SRCs contain comparative data on selected aspects of school performance between 2005-2006 (the most recently available information) and 2004-2005 (information available from the previous school year).

This allows stakeholders to track progress and changes that may have occurred over time. All these indicators are targeted towards providing information on the context, inputs, processes and outcomes related to school education.

## How data and information were collected

The data was collected from a number of sources and through a range of processes which were generally overseen and undertaken by officers from the Data Collection and Management Office (DCM) of the Evaluation Institute. Information was obtained from schools, parents,



principals, teachers and students through paper and computer-assisted questionnaires. Collectively these are referred to as the Qatar Comprehensive School Surveys (QCSS) and provide a means of finding out what respondents think, feel and know about the school and related educational matters. The SRCs also include information gathered from school enumeration and profiling processes and student performance on the QCEA.

## The critical roles of the School Report Card

*Education for a New Era* magazine asked Mrs. Aysha Al Hashemi, Principal School Evaluation Officer at the Evaluation Institute's School Evaluation Office about the SRCs main features. She said, "SRCs are not designed to rank schools according to their academic performance. It is up to the parent themselves to decide in which school they wish to enrol their child; and this should be based on the parent's priorities for, and understanding of, their child. A child's individual educational needs and strengths will vary from one to another.

One parent might be totally concerned with the academic aspects, another might concentrate on extra-curricular activities, while another might seek a school with teachers with excellent educational credentials. Still others care most about issues of student attitude, behaviour and discipline. Some parents base their decisions only on location."

She went on to say that the information presented by the SRCs does not reflect every activity in the school, however, it does provide a picture of the school performance - one that may not be comprehensive - but is certainly balanced and broad.

On its own, the data is not sufficient to make definitive judgments, but serves as a useful basis for assisting parents in their quest to find out more about, and become more involved in, their child's learning and school. The parents should use the SRC information together with other information they may obtain themselves from the school and other sources, to be fully informed.

Seeking and incorporating additional information can be a challenging task for parents but it is without doubt a worthwhile one, as the outcome will be a better education for their child.

The SRCs particularly serve three of the underlying bases of the current reform: by presenting a wide range of information on each individual school they cater for variety; they provide a sound basis by which parent choice can be exercised; and they are an element which allows for schools to be held accountable for educational provisions and outcomes.

Building partnerships with stakeholders in the community including schools, parents, community organizations, media, business and academia will contribute to the education reform effort. Such partnerships will encourage more and better education understanding, and educational data use, analysis and reporting. This, in turn, will lead to overall improvement in school programs and foster the development of healthier and nurturing school environments. It will help in providing better services, in forging links between the schools and parents and the community in general, and in creating dialogue between education policy-makers, school leaders and education consumers. It will also play a role in making schools accountable and generally advancing a more democratic and transparent approach to education, whilst maintaining quality. Moreover, decisions regarding education are no longer seen as being in the hands of a few but are the shared and collective responsibility of a wider section of the community.

The lessons learned from other countries implementing education reforms confirm the increasing realization that education is a vital community concern. Students are members of the school and broader communities and these all play important roles in the students development and learning. As a result, educators strive to find the best ways to involve all influential and active stakeholders either from within the education sector or from outside, to contribute in supporting and promoting education reform and improvement. The SRCs play key roles in helping to forge these important school-family-community partnerships.

It is vital to realize the importance of communal participation in improving the quality of education. Effective education systems have fuller community participation. Community participation can take many forms: enrolling children in the public schools; helping raise funds and making

decisions about deploying finances; attending and participating in school meetings and activities; giving advice and opinions on school matters; and, becoming involved in decision making.

In a very important sense, involvement in decision-making includes participating fully in the data collection and analysis opportunity through schools surveys. This helps identify schools weaknesses and strengths. It also means that the parent and school communities have the opportunity to have their say and participate in key planning, implementation, evaluation processes such as priorities identification, goal-setting and impact assessment.

## Partnerships help forge a family environment that supports a child's learning

The SRCs strive to forge a community partnership. This partnership will identify important features about the student's enrollment, attendance, academic achievement, desirability to learn, and will help make parents key players in facilitating access to education, monitoring, and oversight of the education system. It also bridges the divide between school, home and community. This assists in lessening tension and conflict between school, home, teachers, and parents. Furthermore, community partnerships allow for constructive input into what should be taught at school, and what should be taught and reinforced at home through homework. They also assist in facilitating student transition from school to further studies or to the workforce, and ultimately in preparing students to participate fully and effectively in society.

In essence, the SRC is a useful tool for parents in particular, and the community in general, to question the school about the progress and its performance, to explore its strengths and weaknesses, and to negotiate development priorities and options. These are national responsibilities for all. Education is a communal concern, which benefits by involving all key actors in its planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating. This is critical to Qatar's goal of becoming a more open, democratic society with a vibrant, diversified economy.