

What is this guide about?

This guide describes seven key pieces of information that state and local report card team members (including data managers, designers, developers, and policy and communication experts) need to know and understand to make informed decisions about report cards. Each of the seven key pieces of information includes links to resources from expert organizations or nonregulatory guidance from the U.S. Department of Education. Report card teams may use this guide to confirm key activities and priorities for their work or communicate with colleagues about report cards.

1. Phases of Report Card Development

There are [four phases](#) of developing or improving online report cards:

- Gathering of requirements
- Design and content development
- Building, testing, and launch
- Sustainability and enhancement

2. Report Card Requirements

The U.S. Department of Education will publish guidance (coming soon!) to assist state and local educational agencies (SEAs and LEAs) in implementing report card requirements. This guidance will describe SEA and LEA responsibilities and includes sections on reporting, such as:

- Accountability data
- Use of school improvement funds
- Civil Rights Data Collection
- Educator qualifications
- Per-pupil expenditures
- State performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress
- High school postsecondary enrollment rates
- Parental engagement

3. Data Quality for Report Card Results

[Data quality](#) is essential for the usefulness of report cards. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), data quality includes five attributes:

- **Accuracy:** Are the data correct?
- **Completeness:** Are the required data all there?
- **Timeliness:** Are the data available when needed?
- **Validity:** Do the data accurately reflect what they are supposed to reflect?
- **Consistency:** Are the data stable over time and across sources?

4. Continuous Improvement Planning and Testing

SEAs and LEAs can connect [development and sustainability](#) by testing report card features and gathering feedback from stakeholders.

- Learn what works and what does not by building test sites prior to launch.
- Test new features or functions with stakeholder groups before release to identify ways to contextualize the information or avoid possible misinterpretations.
- Keep track of stakeholder requests for report card enhancements.

5. Design and Structure of Report Cards

SEAs and LEAs should reflect on the following regarding report card [design and structure](#):

Who uses the report card? Why and how?

- Identify priority users and find out why and how they use the report card information.
- Design the report card to reflect common usage.
- Give context to users on how data relate to key benchmarks.
- Help families use the report card in conversations with educators.

How should information be prioritized?

- Let the story lead.
- Prevent information overload.
- Organize information.
- Balance a variety of needs.

How can information be communicated through text?

- Refine language by using familiar words and simple sentences.
- Define specialized words.
- Do user testing.

How can information be communicated through visualizations?

- Include only those elements that best convey a story.

6. Data Visualization for Report Cards

[Data visualization](#) is the process of graphically presenting data to reveal its patterns, trends, and meaning. The NCES National Forum on Education Statistics recommends the following:

Four key principles for effective data visualization:

- Show the data.
- Reduce the clutter.
- Integrate text and images.
- Portray data meaning accurately and ethically.

Seven recommended practices for data visualization:

- Capitalize on consistency.
- Do not present data that should not be compared side by side.
- Do not limit your design choices to default graphing programs.
- Focus on the take-home message for the target audience.
- Minimize jargon, acronyms, and technical terms.
- Choose a font that is easy to read and will reproduce well.
- Recognize the importance of color and the benefits of Section 508 compliance.

7. Data Accessibility

It can be challenging for SEAs and LEAs to meet report card requirements and prioritize the information that is most important to families. Learning Heroes and Tembo developed a [report card prototype](#) based on extensive research on what families want and need from report cards:

- Families need help understanding what the numbers mean.
- Families tend to prefer comparisons to similar schools and districts in their region rather than state- and national-level comparisons.
- Families are more likely to engage with report cards that are short and simply presented.
- Families prefer information that can be understood “at a glance.”
- Families prefer to see progress over time.
- Families value both academic measures (e.g., test scores, dual-credit attainment) and non-academic measures (e.g., attendance, behavior incidences).
- Families prefer plain language and terminology (e.g., survey feedback) over education-specific terminology (e.g., school culture).