

An Experiment in Changing Reporting Practices

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Often a review of a case study is helpful in determining factors which influence change. This summary of efforts to improve reporting practices points up several key problems. The development of such a case study and a careful examination of its implications may be an important aspect of *research in action*.

“**M**AKE haste slowly” is a good rule to remember when anticipating any change, and particularly when that change has to do with reporting to parents. Changes in reporting practices must come gradually. If the changes are to be accepted, they need be built on the understanding of all who are to use and receive the reports. These things have been learned by administrators, teachers and parents in Vanderburgh County, Indiana, who, working together, have sought to bring about a change in reporting.

In 1949 several teachers were discussing the need for a change in the type of reporting used. These teachers thought that the “ABCDF” method of reporting in use was somewhat inconsistent with a modern philosophy of education. Their main objection to this method was that it implied the comparison of individuals with other members of the class. These teachers felt that the progress of each individual child should be expressed in terms of the child’s own ability.

One evening, in a Classroom Teachers’ Association meeting, the need for

a change in reporting practices and for a change in the class register was mentioned. Shortly thereafter, the superintendent appointed a committee of twelve principals and teachers to study the method of reporting, and to make recommendations for improvement. The committee was set up in such a way as to provide a primary group, an intermediate-grade group and an upper-grade group.

Many members of this first group had always used the letter method in grading children. Most of the teachers on the committee had, themselves, always been graded by the “ABCDF” method. The “ABCDF” system held much prestige through years of use, not only by each member of the committee, but by most members of the teaching profession. While they wanted to report on children individually, many committee members found the “ABCDF” method of comparing individuals recurring in their thinking. On many occasions the group had to stop, restate and re-think the purposes of reporting.

The committee examined and studied many types of report cards in use throughout the nation. It concluded that, whatever the report used,

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it must convey accurately the philosophy and purposes of the school. Committee members were convinced that the report to parents should be an instrument of child guidance, rather than a means of pressure or of discipline. They agreed that parents need to have a picture of the pupils' achievement, yet they also need to know why a child is not making the expected progress and what can be done by the parent to help the teacher provide the experiences the child needs.

With these ideas in mind the committee submitted a suggested report card. The terms used on this first revised report were as follows:

Outstanding—Indicates strong work consistent with ability

Good—Indicates strong work, but below ability

Satisfactory — Indicates satisfactory progress

Unsatisfactory—Indicates work not of an acceptable quality.

The card set up definite goals and purposes toward which the schools were working in each of the subject matter fields, as well as in the personal and social development of the child. On the back of the card, space was provided for comments by teacher and parents. The card was to be sent home three times during the year.

The real test of the value of this first new card came when it was put into use in the school year of 1950-51. When placed in use, the card was misinterpreted. To some of the teachers, and to many of the parents, the term "Outstanding" came simply to mean "A"; the term "Good" was "B"; "Satisfactory" was interpreted as "C";

and "Unsatisfactory" was the same as "F." Perhaps the most that can be said for the first revised report is that it eliminated one letter grade, "D"; for, figuratively speaking, all the other grades, "A," "B," "C," "F," were there—at least in the minds of many of those who used the card. It can be said here that the first revised report did serve as an important step in the transition from the formal report. It served rather well until something more adequate, and more easily interpreted, could be found.

Further Study Needed

At the close of the school year 1950-51, it was apparent that further study of our system of reporting was needed. A new committee, made up of principals and teachers, worked toward a card which reported on the progress of the individual as related to his ability and would be interpreted as such.

That the second committee met with considerable success is evident in the cards produced—one for the primary grades, and another for grades four through eight.

The primary card included a list of both positive and negative statements under "Growth in Personal and Social Habits." A check mark after the appropriate item indicated where the child was doing well and where he needed to improve. The "Growth in Scholarship" was reported in brief letter form under "Teacher's Comments."

The 1951-52 card for grades four through eight provided a list of desirable personal and social habits opposite which a check mark was placed indicating that the child was doing satisfactorily for his age. A check list

was used also for "Growth in Scholarship." A "C" might indicate a comment signifying a need for improvement, or it might call attention to an outstanding piece of work. Space was provided also for "Parent's Comments." The report was sent home at least four times during the year.

While the second revised card seemed ideal in that it provided for a report on the individual progress of each pupil, and it emphasized the well-rounded development of the child, its use brought problems, too. The third committee tried to work out some of these problems.

The third committee set to work in the spring of 1952. It invited parents to participate in planning a new card, or in revising the one in use. The parents made many fine contributions to the thinking. Parents said that they did not understand what was meant by evaluating a child on the basis of his own ability. Teachers felt they needed help in writing a good individualized report. Primary teachers pointed out that they had much difficulty in writing a report on a first grade child during the first few months of school. Other teachers suggested that a report on the attendance be made only once during the year. They pointed out that it is very difficult to stagger reports when you are required to make these at a specified time during each report period.

Parents and teachers on this third committee decided to keep the report very much as it was. The "C" which had been used to denote "Comment" was changed to an "N" for "Note," because "C's" were interpreted by some as the Grade "C." A "Readiness Re-

port" was added to aid teachers of the first grade in making their early reports. A "Teachers' Handbook on Reporting to Parents" was devised to aid teachers in making better reports. Parents and teachers on the committee agreed to go to PTA's, and to PTA Study Groups in order to interpret the card to the people.

Results of a Survey

Near the close of the 1953 school year, it was decided that a county survey should be made in order to find out whether the report was meeting the needs of those using it. A simple questionnaire was sent home with each of the approximately 4,100 children in the county. The questionnaire asked parents whether they liked or disliked the present method of reporting, and asked for suggestions for improving the reports.

Of the 2,979 replies received, 1,619 or 54 per cent favored the present method of reporting. A total of 1,360 or 46 per cent opposed the present method of reporting.

When the returns were classified according to grade levels, the percentage favoring the new method was as follows:

Grade 1...73%	Grade 5...48%
Grade 2...60%	Grade 6...46%
Grade 3...66%	Grade 7...36%
Grade 4...55%	Grade 8...33%

(The above percentages do not include grade combinations as grades 1 and 2, or 3 and 4, etc.)

Since the greater percentage of the parents of primary children expressed satisfaction with the new type of reporting, little change was made in the 1953-54 card for the primary grades.

The committee for the 1953-54 card, again made up of parents, principals and teachers, studied the suggestions given on the questionnaire returns. Several of the suggestions seemed to say, as one parent put it, "I'd like to know, in a nutshell, what my child is doing in school." An effort was made by the committee to meet this need, and still retain the basic philosophy of evaluating the child on the basis of his ability.

What Has Been Learned?

At the time of this writing, it is difficult to predict the success of the 1953-54 card. However, it is reported that parents are saying they understand this card better than previous ones.

What has been accomplished through this report card project?

1. One thing has been learned, and learned well. The perfect report card is yet to be found. At present, class enrollments are much too large to do a really effective job of reporting on every child in a class.

2. Parents, teachers and principals have worked cooperatively on a com-

mon problem. Improved understanding of mutual problems has come about through open, friendly discussions.

3. Teachers are growing in their use of the individualized report. They are becoming increasingly aware of each child and his individual needs.

4. Teachers' comments on reports indicate that they are going beyond mere judgment-passing in the evaluation of the progress of their pupils and are going toward an analysis of children's difficulties with suggestions for improvement.

5. A closer bond is gradually developing between parents and teachers through an exchange of comments on reports, and through conferences held to supplement the reports. As one parent said on the questionnaire reply, "I like the personal contact between parent and teacher."

Much is yet to be done by way of improving reporting practices. Many administrators, parents and teachers in Vanderburgh County, Indiana, feel, however, that they are going in the right direction.

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