What's Missing From Our State School Report Cards?

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It is almost a miracle that modern education policy has not yet entirely strangled the factors that lead to high performance and the enjoyment of learning.
Albert Einstein

In The U. S., schools are graded on the same scale as students (A, B, C, D or F). School grades are based on state achievement test scores in reading, writing, math, and science. Half of the grade is based on performance, which is the percentage of students who have the knowledge and skills required for their grade level. Almost every article or policy statement related to state school report cards focuses on the assessment of units of study based on the common core or state standards or related material focusing on highly prescriptive curriculum. And most recommendations include summative assessment recommendations, usually in the form of standardized achievement test score results. Items typically included on state report cards include:

Achievement Test Scores
Attendance Rate
Annual Dropout Rate
Graduation Rate
Per Pupil Expenditures
% of students in poverty
% of students with disabilities
Out-of-school suspensions or expulsions for violent and/or criminal offences
% of students served by gifted and talented program
% of students retained
Enrolled in an AP/IB Program
Career/Tech students in co-curricular organizations
Enrollment in career/technology courses
Students participating in work-based experiences
Number of seniors who have completed FAFSA forms
% of seniors completing college applications
Number of students enrolled in dual enrollment courses
Success of students in dual enrollment course
Enrolled in adult education GED or diploma program
Completed adult education GED or diploma program
Teacher salaries
Degrees and longevity of the teachers

An examination of the list will lead to three almost unescapable conclusions. First, achievement test scores almost always lead the list and are ordinarily the only thing that most school administrators care about. Second, careful examination of the list will reveal that almost all the items below test scores correlate highly with the reported test scores. Of course, scores are always higher in more affluent districts that pay their teachers higher salaries and have greater teacher longevity, where dropout rates are lower, and where a higher percentage of students complete college applications. District demographics such as socioeconomic status, average ratio

of teachers to students, school counselors, nurses, licensed librarians, social workers, and mental health professionals per student are obviously major contributors to standardized test scores. And exogenous factors (any trait or behavior that is present and active in an individual but that originated outside that person) certainly affect school performance and behaviors. Examples of such factors are prenatal care and nutrition, parental education, early childhood experiences, quality of educational services, environmental opportunities, resources, and support.

The third thing that is probably not as apparent is that nowhere on the report cards is there any information about non-academic characteristics that lead to the factors most important to students such as enjoyment of school and learning, degrees of interest and engagement, preferred ways of learning and expressing themselves, and, perhaps most important, feelings of belonging. Although data on these non-cognitive characteristics cannot be as objective or statistically precise as achievement score data, the fact that these factors (frequently called "soft data") relate to success in school and therefore should lead policy makers to consider making it a part of state report cards. Whenever I think about this omission of any kind of non-cognitive data I am reminded of the following quotation by Albert Einstein:

> *"Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."*

This brief article argues for a reexamination of state report cards, and it is consistent with a recent emphasis in the education literature on the importance of social and emotional learning and executive function skills as well as traditional lesson learning assessments. Including these personal skills data on state report cards is essential because of the old education truism, ***That which is evaluated gets done!*** If state policies and decision making for grading schools are required items, then schools will have to collect it.

Rationale For Expanding State School Report Cards

Every student should have someplace in the schoolhouse and creates some sort of connection to the place, the teachers, and their peers. This feeling of belonginess means someone is glad to see me, willing to talk and listen to me, call me by my name, and generally make me feel that this is a place that I belong. Belonginess refers to a human emotional need for interpersonal relationships, affiliation, connectedness, and being part of a group. Examples of belongingness needs include friendship, intimacy, trust, and acceptance, receiving and giving affection, and love. Far too often, schools have become places where the only recognized outcome is the acquisition of information. The result is often a lack of attention to social and emotional skills and the executive function skills such as goal setting, teamwork, friendliness, cooperation, optimism, empathy, kindness, appreciation, acceptance, and tolerance of others, and again, feelings of belonginess. These are the skills that are so important in promoting good mental health, reducing bulling and aggression, and creating an environment that leads to successful transitions into higher education and meaningful careers.

Even the work of Lewis Terman, the pioneer of studies about high ability students in America, stressed the importance of non-cognitive abilities in his 40 year follow up in the final book of his five volume series entitled Genetic Studies of Genius (Terman, & Oden, 1959).

> A detailed analysis was made of the 150 most successful and 150 least successful men among the gifted students in an attempt to identify some of the *non-intellectual factors* that affect success. Since the less successful subjects do not differ to any extent in intelligence as measured by tests, notable achievement calls for a lot more than a higher order of intelligence.
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> The results [of the follow up study] indicated that personality factors are extremely important determinators of achievement. The four traits on which the [most and least successful groups] differed most widely *were persistence in the accomplishment of ends, integration toward goals, self-confidence, and freedom from inferiority feelings.* In the total picture the greatest contrast between the two groups in *all-round emotional and social adjustment, and in drive to achieve.* (Terman, 1959, pg. 148; italics not in the original).

Conclusion

In recent years many new instruments have been developed that ask students about their interests, enjoyment of school, preferred styles of learning and expressing themselves, school happiness, engagement in learning, and self-ratings of executive function skills. An instrument has also been developed to assess students' perceptions if their imagination, creativity, and innovation and an instrument has been developed for parents that asks questions about students' non-school interests and activities. In a recent article that focused on assessment *for* learning as opposed to assessment of learning (Renzulli, 2021), an argument was made, and sample instruments were suggested that would uses formative assessments for gathering information from the students themselves about strengths such as interests, instructional preference styles, preferred modes of expression, and executive function skills. Suggestions were also made about how this information can be used to adapt teaching to meet student needs by providing feedback on how we can modify teaching and learning activities. This type of assessment focuses on the individual rather that group data and comparisons. Both types of assessment are important but "Formative assessment with appropriate feedback is the most powerful moderator in the enhancement of achievement (Hattie, Hattie, & Timperley, 2007).

It is interesting to note that almost all education decisions about how we personalize and differentiate for individual students or groups are based on cognitive measures. And, as Terman mentions above, in the out-of-school world, employers certainly pay attention to traditionally measured ability, but they are far more interested in factors that relate to non-cognitive strengths and the importance of factors related belongingness that are important to success in the workplace.

As mentioned above, these data are not as easily captured as test score data, but advances in technology and artificial intelligence are now making the collection and analysis of student self-assessment data far easier to obtain. In one study an individual educational profile for each student and a matching database of relevant resources geared to provide enrichment activities and high-end learning experiences that matches student interests, learning styles, and expression styles with a vast array of educational activities is entirely completed and analyzed online (Field, 2009).

Despite the availability of these new technological advances, the state school report cards have not changed for decades. If we are ever going to take the next step of including additional non-cognitive date for decision making the resources for including these data are now readily available. That which is evaluated gets done.

References

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