

Empowering Families with Data



How Washington, DC, Engaged Stakeholders to Build Its School Report Card

Every family deserves access to the information they need to understand the quality of their community's schools and to make the best decision about their child's education. School report cards are the primary way that states communicate the information that families want and need about schools, but too often, the report cards are difficult to find and understand.

Families have not historically been consulted in the design and creation of states' school report cards, and the resulting tools and resources have focused more on compliance with federal law or meeting the needs of more technically proficient audiences, such as researchers. When communities have been engaged, that outreach often has looked more like a listening tour rather than ongoing, two-way communication between leaders and their constituents.

To reverse this pattern and ensure that states' new report cards are accessible and relevant to families, state leaders must do more robust stakeholder engagement than they have done in the past. This work is so critical that the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) explicitly called for improved parent and community engagement as well as the creation of "parent-friendly" report cards. As states roll out their new accountability systems, having clear, accessible report cards will be more important than ever to communicate these changes, the new types of school data available, and the ways in which schools are being held accountable for their performance.

Leaders in Washington, DC, capitalized on this opportunity to completely rethink their approach to stakeholder engagement. With an organizationwide commitment to reaching families across the city, leaders in DC's [Office of the State Superintendent of Education \(OSSE\)](#) implemented a multiphase process that provided different opportunities for families to engage (both in person and electronically), minimized barriers to participation, and engaged community partners across the city to hear as many voices as possible. This case study tells the story of DC's strategy and provides key lessons for states to consider when approaching their own stakeholder engagement.

Data Quality Campaign (DQC) staff attended multiple events and community engagement sessions and conducted interviews with key participants to better understand this robust stakeholder engagement initiative. The key lessons identified in this case study are directly informed by that research and reflect the process as observed by DQC staff and described by participants. For more information on DQC's research process, refer to "Methods" at the end of the document.

WHAT IS A SCHOOL REPORT CARD?

Every state, as required by federal law, publishes an annual report card detailing the academic performance and progress of each school in the state. While this requirement has been in effect since 2002, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) builds on the existing requirement by specifying that the report card must be accessible and user friendly. Report cards include a mix of required data points (e.g., annual test scores) and additional information relevant to the particular needs of a state's stakeholders (e.g., course offerings, extracurricular activities).



What Happened in Washington, DC?

Before the creation of the new [DC School Report Card](#), families had to navigate four different websites produced by four different entities—OSSE, DC Public Schools, the Public Charter School Board, and My School DC—to piece together the information they wanted about their local schools.

OSSE leaders zeroed in on this challenge and focused on creating a report card that would centralize information about all public schools in one easy-to-find and easy-to-use resource. Leaders also knew that they had one opportunity to do this work and that engaging families across the city would be critical to their success. According to interviews with OSSE staff and leaders, Superintendent Hanseul Kang championed this focus, emphasizing the need to make the report card redesign process locally led, transparent, and ongoing.

In partnership with trusted community-based organizations (CBOs), OSSE leaders facilitated almost 120 in-person feedback sessions and circulated online surveys seeking feedback on the content and design of the new report card over the course of more than a year. OSSE provided translation services, dinner, and child care at its own feedback meetings. It also designed two toolkits—one focused on content and one focused on design and terminology—and translated them into different languages so that community members could host their own feedback sessions across the city. By providing a variety of options for feedback and alleviating common barriers to participation, OSSE leaders heard more than 4,000 community voices throughout the city, more than 70 percent of whom were parents. This feedback directly informed the final content and design of the [DC School Report Card](#), which was published in December 2018.

EDUCATION IN WASHINGTON, DC

Washington, DC, has a [complex education governance structure](#) that includes six different agencies, each of which has its own set of responsibilities and decisionmaking authority. While DC is not a state, the city's government has many of the same responsibilities as a state government, especially when it comes to public education.

- **Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE):** Serves as DC's state education agency.
- **DC State Board of Education:** Advises the state superintendent of education on a variety of educational matters.
- **Deputy Mayor for Education:** Develops and implements the mayor's vision for public education in DC.
- **DC Public Schools:** Oversees the city's traditional public schools.
- **Public Charter School Board:** Authorizes and provides oversight for the city's public charter schools.
- **My School DC:** Oversees the citywide public school lottery.

DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTICS ON FEEDBACK RESPONSES

- 57% Black/African American
- 14% Hispanic/Latino
- 25% White

How Did DC Leaders Approach Stakeholder Engagement?

OSSE leaders decided early on that families would be the target audience for the new report card. As such, the process focused on intentionally engaging families across the city, especially those who have been historically underserved, to make sure the report card would effectively meet all families' needs. Outreach efforts were focused on families with English language learner students, families with students with disabilities, and low-income families. Previous engagement efforts taught district leaders that the outreach this

time would have to be different: "In the past, we've learned that just a singular engagement meeting at 5 p.m. is getting only one small slice of the community," said OSSE's Deputy Director, Communications Chloe Woodward-Magrane. "This time, we wanted to reach a broad audience."

To reach this broad audience, OSSE leaders focused on four key strategies.

1. Partnering with Knowledgeable, Trusted Organizations to Expand OSSE's Reach

Families are more likely to participate in an event if the invitation comes from a person or group with whom they have an existing relationship. State education agencies do not always have established family networks, so reaching a true cross section of families can be difficult when doing outreach. To address this challenge, OSSE leaders engaged community and school partners to inform them about the project and empower them to seek feedback from their own parent networks. CBOs were invited to special information sessions, during which they were given a preview of the work, time to ask any questions, and the opportunity to give their feedback on the process to date.

OSSE leaders worked with a total of 11 official CBO partners, each of which conducted their own outreach and received input from their parent and community networks. One of these community partners, Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE), worked directly with parents, hosting 14 feedback sessions and leading neighborhood canvassing efforts, which together resulted in nearly 1,100 community responses. PAVE and other partner organizations also helped develop the meeting agendas and feedback forms that OSSE staff used in their own feedback sessions to make sure the documents were as clear and meaningful for parents as possible.

"The biggest lesson I took away from this was to go to parents where they're at through partners rather than trying to get parents to come to you. It will not only be more efficient, but it will also be a warmer introduction with these families because you share that connection."

—Sujata Bhat, senior manager, Education Forward DC

OSSE leaders also engaged school leaders and targeted natural community gathering points, such as libraries, to get the message out about the new report card and related feedback sessions. "We reached out to school leaders in each ward to send out emails to their school communities, worked with other government agencies, and left fliers all over schools and community libraries," said Kerry Savage, PAVE associate director of policy. "When you are canvassing, you have to think outside of the box to make sure you are including the voices of traditionally underrepresented populations. We went to talk to people at bus stops, laundromats, and all other types of places you might not normally think about to collect feedback." Additionally, OSSE leaders worked with the DC State Board of Education's ESSA task force, My School DC, and the Public Charter School Board to get their respective input and make sure their networks were engaged and informed throughout the process.

TIP: When scheduling outreach, make sure to consider the time of year. Some families may be more engaged with education issues during the school year rather than during the summer.

By collaborating with a diverse set of partners, OSSE leaders were able to reach a significantly broader and more representative audience than would have previously been possible. This effort not only introduced the agency and its work to a new set of parents and families, but it also helped begin to build support for OSSE's work throughout the community.



2. Setting Community Partners Up for Success by Providing Materials and Personnel Supports

Conducting community outreach and hosting feedback sessions requires time and materials. Many of the community partners that OSSE engaged had small staffs and limited capacity to do the work completely on their own, so OSSE staff focused on making the lift as easy as possible to incentivize collaboration.



The primary resources that OSSE staff created were toolkits for each feedback phase to make the process as simple as possible for partner organizations. The toolkits, one on [report card content](#) and one on [report card design](#), were provided in English, Spanish, and Amharic.¹ Each included the following pieces:

- background information on DC’s ESSA plan and stakeholder engagement process
- outreach material templates for email invitations and promotional flyers
- promotional materials, such as sample social media posts and text messages
- a facilitator guide, script, and sample PowerPoint slides for the feedback session
- a link to the online survey for families that could not join in person
- additional materials, such as sign-in sheets and answers to frequently asked questions

OSSE staff also made themselves available to print materials, deliver them to the organizations, and pick them up upon completion. OSSE provided money to cover the cost of food and child care services at the community feedback sessions and offered its own office space to organizations that needed it. Providing these comprehensive toolkits and supports made hosting sessions as easy as possible for partner organizations and demonstrated leaders’ commitment to a robust and meaningful engagement process.

3. Eliminating Common Barriers to Participation

Parents and families are busy and have many demands on their time. To get a representative cross section of families, OSSE leaders focused on eliminating some common barriers to participation.

In partnership with local philanthropies, OSSE leaders provided a variety of incentives and supports to encourage participation and ensure that all families, regardless of circumstance or location, could have their voices heard. Provided services included the following:

- child care
- translation services and translated materials
- access to WiFi and mobile-accessible materials
- dinner
- grocery store gift cards

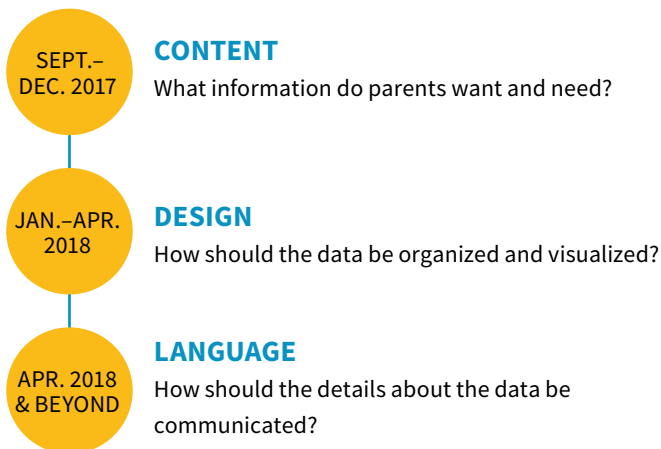
For families that could not make the in-person sessions, electronic surveys were available so that feedback could be submitted at another, more convenient time. OSSE’s “you bring the people and we’ll do the rest” mantra pushed leaders to think creatively about the best ways to support community partners and ensure that those partners felt equipped and able to do this important work.

TIP: Parents and community members will enter conversations with varying levels of background knowledge. To stay on course and receive helpful feedback, consider how to communicate background information—including information about the previous parts of the outreach process—during meetings to help keep conversations focused.

1 English, Spanish, and Amharic are the three most widely spoken languages in DC. The phase 2 toolkit was not translated into Amharic as it was not used in phase 1.

4. Providing Updated and Ongoing Communications

The words “stakeholder engagement” can sound like empty jargon if those leading the work are not transparent about the process, the feedback received, or how that feedback informs actual decisionmaking. For this process to feel authentic and productive, the communication needed to be two way and continue throughout each phase of the work. As such, OSSE’s report card redesign had three distinct phases of feedback:



After each phase, the feedback was **compiled and published** on OSSE’s website so that any member of the public could see what feedback was given and how it was being integrated. For example, after phase 1, the feedback report detailed the data that parents most wanted to see on the report card (e.g., information about teachers, parent and family engagement, and school climate) and which indicators could be included this year given available data. For any data points that could not be included this year, a commitment was made to continue evaluating those indicators to determine how they might be included in future report cards. OSSE staff also presented the feedback results to the DC State Board of Education as well as internal decisionmakers to ensure that parent feedback informed decisionmaking at all levels.

“I got [these resources], and I love that they talk about what feedback they received, from whom they received it, and what they’re actually doing about it!”

—M. O’Hara, public school parent

“We’ve been very transparent about what the feedback from the parents was,” said Woodward-Magrane. “When the parent data has been gathered, it’s been available to the public so that OSSE is held accountable for being responsive to their feedback. We can now point to those items and say they are on the report card as a direct result of parent feedback.”



Importantly, outreach did not end when the report card was designed and built. Partners and leaders across the city continued hosting sessions to introduce the new report card to families and the public. OSSE leaders disseminated a variety of informative brochures to help explain what the report card is; how to use it; and details about DC’s new summative rating system, the **STAR Framework**—all of which were translated. And after the report card was live for a few weeks, OSSE circulated a survey asking for feedback on what was working about the new report card and where adjustments needed to be made. This ongoing, two-way communication not only helped people understand how the process was progressing but also signaled OSSE leaders’ commitment to meaningful stakeholder engagement work.

Conclusion

Washington, DC, is unique for its status and size. But the lessons learned from observing this yearlong process can still provide valuable insights for state leaders who are considering stakeholder engagement around any issue, not just school report cards.

This intentional process of stakeholder engagement was marked by a strong commitment across city leaders and CBOs to connect with families and hear their ideas for the DC report card. While this process is never truly finished and OSSE continues to listen and learn from stakeholder feedback, leaders' intentional focus on expanding their reach, breaking down barriers to participation, and providing ongoing communication not only helped create the city's

new report card but also helped shift the agency's own perspective on community outreach. OSSE leaders took what could have been a basic compliance exercise and turned it into a meaningful opportunity to cultivate relationships throughout the city, which is ultimately the goal of any type of stakeholder engagement.

"Any conversation around schools and accountability is going to be an emotional process," said [LINK](#) Director of Strategic Partnerships Josh Lasky. "But if you can figure out how to best channel those emotions and engage around them and build better conversations as a result, that's going to lead to a stronger community."

METHODS

Between October 2017 and September 2018, DQC staff attended two OSSE-led advocate meetings, four community engagement sessions, and one DC State Board of Education update meeting. DQC staff conducted interviews with three OSSE staff members, leaders at the DC State Board of Education, a grandparent of a DC student, and staff members from three partner organizations—[LINK Strategic Partners](#), [PAVE](#), and [Education Forward DC](#).



The Data Quality Campaign is a nonprofit policy and advocacy organization leading the effort to bring every part of the education community together to empower educators, families, and policymakers with quality information to make decisions that ensure that students excel. For more information, go to www.dataqualitycampaign.org and follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) (@EdDataCampaign).