IES Institute of Education Sciences

STUDY SNAPSHOT
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Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic
At Mathematica

The Effect of School Report Card Design on Usability, Understanding, and Satisfaction

The Every Student Succeeds Act requires state education agencies to produce school report cards that present information about school characteristics and performance in a user-friendly way. The District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education partnered with the Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic to test different school report card designs.

The study compared five pairs of design alternatives: moving the link to the explanation of the School Transparency and Reporting (STAR) score from the top ribbon to under the reported score, depicting the points possible for each STAR metric instead of its floor and target scores, displaying the DC average proficiency as its own bar rather than as a line superimposed over the school's score, reporting the year-over-year change in school performance rather than reporting only performance for each year, and marking a school's offerings on a list of all possible offerings rather than reporting only what that the school offers. Some 824 participants viewed one of 32 school report card designs representing every possible combination of the tested design choices. Participants then answered factual questions about the information presented and reported how usable the site felt, how easy it was to find information, and whether they would recommend the site to others.

Key findings

- **Design choices matter.** Some designs had positive or neutral effects on all outcome measures, and others had mixed effects (see table). Effects of different choices are cumulative, and the best combination of design elements improved understanding by 6 percent and willingness to recommend the site by half a scale point. Policymakers should decide which outcomes are critical and evaluate report card designs against metrics for those designs.
- **Treatment effects were similar across user subgroups.** Though subgroups of participants (such as mobile versus desktop users) differed in average survey responses, the effect of treatment factors was similar across subgroups. Designers can use readily available samples to gather input about designs but should focus on the relative rather than absolute performance of design alternatives for usability measures.

Effect of proposed design changes on outcomes

Outcome measure	Proposed design change				
	Change position of STAR link	Display STAR points earned	Put district average in its own bar	Display year-over-year change in school performance	List all potential offerings
Usability	▲ 1.5%			▼ 3.5%	
Ease of finding specific information			▼ 0.3%		▼ 1.0%
Understanding		▲ 1.0%		▲ 1.0%	▲ 2.0%
Willingness to recommend		▲ 0.10		▼ 0.19	▼ 0.11

STAR is School Transparency and Reporting.

Note: Estimates of differences are reported only if there is a 70 percent chance that they are different than 0. Usability and ease of finding specific information are the difference in the proportion of respondents who at least slightly agreed that the report card information was usable or easy to find. Understanding is the difference in the percentage of factual items answered correctly. Willingness to recommend is difference in scale points.

Source: Authors' analysis of data collected for this study (see appendix B).

For the full report with technical details, see https://go.usa.gov/x6tCt.