

Reporting with confidence

Re-modelling school reports

Completing a child's school report can be a daunting task! Teachers are anxious to report honestly, but at the same time want to be positive and take account of the mismatch there can sometimes be between a child's effort and achievement. They also face the issue of committing assessment information to paper in a way that gives a comprehensive and holistic view of the child and yet can be easily and accurately interpreted by the parent at home.

Designing a report card that addresses these and many other concerns, as well as reflecting the changing needs of the curriculum, children, parents, teachers and schools, is undoubtedly a formidable challenge. But despite these obstacles, the principal and staff of St. Joseph's National School in Dundalk embraced the prospect of re-modelling their school reports in a step towards improving teaching and learning in their school. We went to Dundalk to see how they got on. Completing a child's school report can be a daunting task! Teachers are anxious to report.

Q. Why did it all begin?

The impetus for change came from within the school itself. Since the advent of the revised curriculum we became increasingly disenchanted with our much outdated annual school report card. This limited the appraisal of the child to an assessment solely of the child's learning. Another reason for the change is that we have altered, very deliberately, our perception of the role of teacher and parents in the education process. We are building a community of learners here, where teachers, parents and outside agencies promote a vision of our pupils as active strategic learners – aware not only of what they learn but also how and why they learn. We wanted report cards which reflected our belief in the potential of our pupils and parents to complement, support and enrich teachers' work in developing autonomous learners.

Q. What areas did your reports cover?

There were a number of areas we unanimously agreed upon:

- A comprehensive and holistic view of the child as a learner.
- Information that is easily accessible.
- Simple concrete ideas for parents to help their child.
- Short and long term targets for future differentiated teaching and learning.
- A standardised approach with regard to teacher judgement and assessments.
- Pupil self-evaluation.
- An access point for support teachers to provide an evaluation.
- Assessments both of and for learning that could be shared with other relevant professionals.

Q. What was the purpose of child involvement in the report cards?

We believe that an invaluable part of learning is about children understanding **how** they learn. As such, child involvement and selfassessment is vital. Each child in our school has an A4 report booklet that spans their primary school years. There is a space on the cover of the booklet to include a photograph of the child in junior infants and again in third class. This both personalises the report cards and fosters a sense of the child's ownership of the contents. Completing a child's school report can be a daunting task!

Teachers are anxious to **What do parents think about the new reports?** The feedback received after the report cards were initially used at the parentteacher meetings was extremely positive. Subsequently, we made a number of changes to the report cards based on the recounted experiences of children, parents and teachers. The NCCA's draft report card templates also helped to inform the revisions. Anecdotal evidence suggests that parents are happier with these new reports. Our scheduled 'Children Show the Way Day', when 90% of parents visit the school, will offer us an opportunity to hear what parents think. What has struck us, though, is that this is the first time that parents have quoted specific targets and observations set by the teachers. They feel it has given them a focus for working with their child at home. They also say that it will enable them to have meaningful discussions with the class teacher throughout the year.

Q. Did you develop the same card for all pupils, and for different times of the year?

From a practical point of view we wanted to produce a report card that could be easily produced and housed in one complete booklet. The colour coded duplicable report cards

are banded together according to class level; infants are blue, juniors are green, middle years are yellow and senior classes are pink. There are two report cards for each class, one to be used at the parent-teacher meeting and an identical one to be used at the end of the year.

Q. How do teachers feel about the new reports?

We have a dynamic work ethic in the school that unifies the staff. We see each child's successes and difficulties as ones which belong to an entire team of teachers. This sense of mutual responsibility has led to a systematic, structured and informed approach to teaching. Teachers, as part of a professional team, build upon the successes and support the struggles. As such we have shared values and a consistent teaching approach throughout the school. Having a uniform reporting system makes sense.

Q. Were there difficulties in managing the change?

The identification of the need for change developed within the school. All teachers were involved in the process of revising the report cards. It was not a change that was imposed on them. Assistant principals in our school have the responsibility as Heads of Department at non-mainstream, infant, junior, middle and senior class level. Frequent meetings within and between departments ensured that all members of staff were included in the decision making.

Q. Did the work of the NCCA contribute to the development of the report cards?

Preliminary work had already begun on the key elements that the new school report should contain prior to accessing the NCCA's draft report card templates. When it was discovered that the NCCA was also involved in developing report cards it gave our whole project new energy. The perception was that the process we were involved in now had outside validation of it being worthwhile. We also referred to '*Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum*' when finalising the report cards.

The guidelines helped to clarify a number of issues for us. Taking the standardised tests results for example, class teachers were encouraged to be guided primarily by their incidental assessments and recorded classroom observations.

Q. If you were to do the work again what, if anything, would you do differently?

Whereas we don't anticipate that we will have to go through this process again for quite some time, our reports will continue to be updated and improved. For example, through focused staff consultation each department came up with a menu of targets in the areas of literacy, numeracy and social development for teachers to choose from. They also agreed on specific achievable targets for parents to focus on at home. These will be modified bi-annually or annually.

Q. What would you say to other schools who wanted to develop similar cards?

Ownership of the final product is vital if you want the project to be a success. To achieve this, it is imperative that all those involved in completing the report are involved from the beginning, that everyone has the opportunity to voice their views, have their opinions heard and, in a concrete way, see their input reflected in the redrafted reports.

A community of learners

On a final note, it is a particularly nice touch to see the inclusion of the phrase 'Your child is a valued member of this school' on each report card. From the warm, vibrant and enthusiastic atmosphere that welcomes you on arrival at the school, it is obvious that their desire to build a community of learners is being realised.

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