

# How school report cards can backfire

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Rebecca Jacobsen, Michigan State University, argues that government attempts to grade educational institutions can backfire when done for political or policy purposes. Credit: Michigan State University

In the wake of President Obama's "college scorecard," new research finds that government attempts to grade educational institutions can backfire when done for political or policy purposes.

Rebecca Jacobsen of Michigan State University studied the effects of publicizing performance data for K-12 schools, which was mandated by

No Child Left Behind in 2001. While Jacobsen believes school [report cards](#) are warranted to keep the public informed, she said too often the information presented is unclear or misleading to parents and can ultimately erode trust in the schools.

And now comes the president's interactive scorecard for colleges and universities. In his February State of the Union address, Obama said the scorecard compares schools "based on a simple criteria: where you can get the most bang for your educational buck."

Jacobsen, assistant professor of [teacher education](#), said attempting to determine the value of a college or K-12 education with a set of data can be a dangerous proposition.

"It can be scary, because they're trying to give you a prototype that attempts to get at the value of an education," Jacobsen said. "But how do we determine value? I may value the network I develop, while someone else may value the diversity of courses or another facet of the [educational experience](#)."

While K-12 schools may share a more common mission than colleges and universities, the data used to grade any educational institution can have unintended consequences.

"It's a growing problem," Jacobsen said. "Policymakers and state legislators have realized they need to put the data out there in a way that's clear, but sometimes those efforts toward clarity are actually backfiring."

In New York City, where K-12 schools are given a simple letter grade, education officials in 2010 capped the number of schools that could receive an "A." Consequently, many schools saw grades fall even though student performance did not necessarily drop.

The result, as Jacobsen discusses in the March/April issue of *Educational Policy*, was a drop in parent satisfaction with the schools. In addition, increased grades did not boost parent satisfaction, suggesting the psychological effect of declining grades has a larger effect than seeing a school maintain or improve its performance.

Raising the bar on student performance has been shown to spur academic achievement in school districts, making it an appealing policy, Jacobsen said. But little attention has been paid to how the public is influenced by the report cards that publicize the results.

Long-term consequences of decreased parent satisfaction could include a decline in enrollment, donations and volunteers, and even a drop in housing values, which are tied to the community schools.

Many states and [school](#) districts have changed their grading systems from year to year. Jacobsen said they should pick one system that's easy to understand and then focus on parent outreach.

"In our rush to produce data of all shapes and sizes and then reshape these data for policy or political purposes, we cannot forget to consider how the public is interpreting these data," Jacobsen said. "Parents want one clear number, and I don't think we should monkey with that number."

Provided by Michigan State University

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