



Susan Shafer
Performance Evaluation Services

55 Water Street
Mail Drop 44-1-1
New York, NY 10041
212 438 2193Tel
212 438 2153 Fax
susan_shafer@sandp.com

School District Reports February 2006

I. Background

Beginning in 2001, Standard & Poor's provided district reports to educators, policymakers and parents in Michigan and Pennsylvania. In both states, Standard & Poor's staff worked with school district officials and other key education constituencies to successfully release these reports. The information included in this document comes from the lessons Standard & Poor's learned by working with organizations like the Michigan School Public Relations Association (MSPRA).

On Wednesday, February 22, as part of its work with the National Education Data Partnership (NEDP), Standard & Poor's will release district reports in Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Maryland, Missouri, South Carolina and Wisconsin. These reports will be made publicly available on www.schoolmatters.com.

District reports for additional states will be released in subsequent months.

II. About District Reports

First and foremost, the district reports should be used diagnostically, and are not meant to be punitive. The reports are designed to provide administrators and school board members information they can use to improve student achievement, taking into consideration the district's unique demographic challenges.

The Standard & Poor's reports:

- Are new to most states (except for Michigan & Pennsylvania);
- Take a multi-year, multi-faceted look at each district's performance analyzing student performance along with financial and demographic data;
- Are based on district-reported data collected from a variety of public sources, including state departments of education, the National Center for Education Statistics, The College Board, ACT, Inc. and Census data.
- Can promote a community-driven dialogue on education, foster public engagement in education issues, facilitate data-driven decision-making and support accountability.

III. Tips and Ideas for Report Use

Ultimately, it will fall upon state and district leaders to help their communities digest and act upon the information found in these reports. To support those efforts, Standard & Poor's has distilled the following tips from the experiences of state and district officials in Michigan and Pennsylvania to help "message" the reports in a productive and proactive manner.

For Relatively High-Performing Districts

- Message: Tout performance relative to other districts, which can be found in the "Summary Analysis" portion of the report (e.g., well-above average performance and average core spending).
- Message: This is an in-depth analysis of school district spending and student performance in a demographic context. It does not look solely at how our district is performing; the report also compares our district's data to meaningful performance benchmarks, such as the state average to show progress and explain how we are doing relative to other districts in the state.

- Message: While we are pleased with assessment, we are continuously striving for improvement. This independent, third-party look at our district will help us achieve that goal.

Tactics:

1. Issue a news release for the local media;
2. Prepare a superintendent report to the school board to tout the good news;
3. Superintendent sends a note to parents in next the district newsletter or post on the district's website touting analysis. Prepare and send a letter to teachers thanking them for their hard work; and
4. Schedule a meeting with community leaders and groups such as PTAs to address report implications internal and external to the school district. The graphs in the report can be copied into a power point presentation.

For Average or Below Average Districts

- Message: We are continually striving for better performance.
- Message: This report is another diagnostic tool we can use to improve.
- Message: This report is not ranking or rating of school districts. Reporters or others would be wrong to characterize it as such.
- Message: Reports are not meant to be punitive –this helps verify what we have known and allows us to continue down a path of improvement.
- Message: School district officials are interested in an open dialogue with the community about school improvements. This helps highlight the issues we as a community need to address.

Tactics:

1. Highlight improvements –nearly every district report has good news and shows that improvement is being made –use these reports and the district's data on SchoolMatters.com to identify good news about the district's performance.
2. If media calls, provide 1-page fact sheet on improvements.
3. Use the report as a spring board to advocate for changes. This third-party, independent look at your district can serve as the evidence you need to get the community to support the agenda you've created to promote change.
4. Prepare talking points for superintendent in anticipation of media calls.
5. Brief key constituencies about the report and inform them of improvements that have been made throughout the district and let them know how you intend to use the report – create cheerleaders for your efforts and advocates for your cause—to improve student performance.

Finally, regardless of which of the above categories your district falls, like all successful communications initiatives, Standard & Poor's report and your district's response require advance planning to take advantage of the opportunity to develop a positive message and effectively reach the essential audiences for your district.

IV. Standard & Poor's Contact Information

Susan Shafer
 Director, Marketing and Communications
 School Evaluation Services
 (212) 438-2193 – phone
susan_shafer@sandp.com

Jackie Lain
 Director, Public Affairs
 School Evaluation Services
 (202) 383-3708 – phone
jackie_lain@sandp.com

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