

# **Parents' interpretations of report cards: Garbled in transmission?**

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MAYBE IT GOT  
GARBLLED IN  
TRANSMISSION.



Bales

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# Report card marks: Why important?

- Report card notations are important representations of education quality---literally, the “face of” schools for many parents
- Report card grades are higher stakes than large-scale tests---massive effort and expenditure in production
- Central vehicle for communicating student progress to parental households
- Most frequent and obvious form of messaging about schools in community
- Parental confidence in notations may be directly related to confidence in school and district office administration

# Report card marks: Why important?

- In Canada, classroom grades are primary bases for promotion and graduation decisions in every province—not large-scale tests.
- Report card marks are considered for university admission, technical school entrance, or direct entry to work force
- Marks depict effectiveness of educational decision-making and policy.
- The grade or mark is an authoritative decision that represents policies of teacher, school, school district and Ministry---not just student progress

# What is the Pan Canadian picture?

- School board policies align with provincial policies but much variation between and even within school districts
- Much opinion, but very little research about whether report cards fulfill their primary purposes--- indeed, we know little about parents' ideas and preferences about desired report card purposes and content

# What are requirements in reporting?

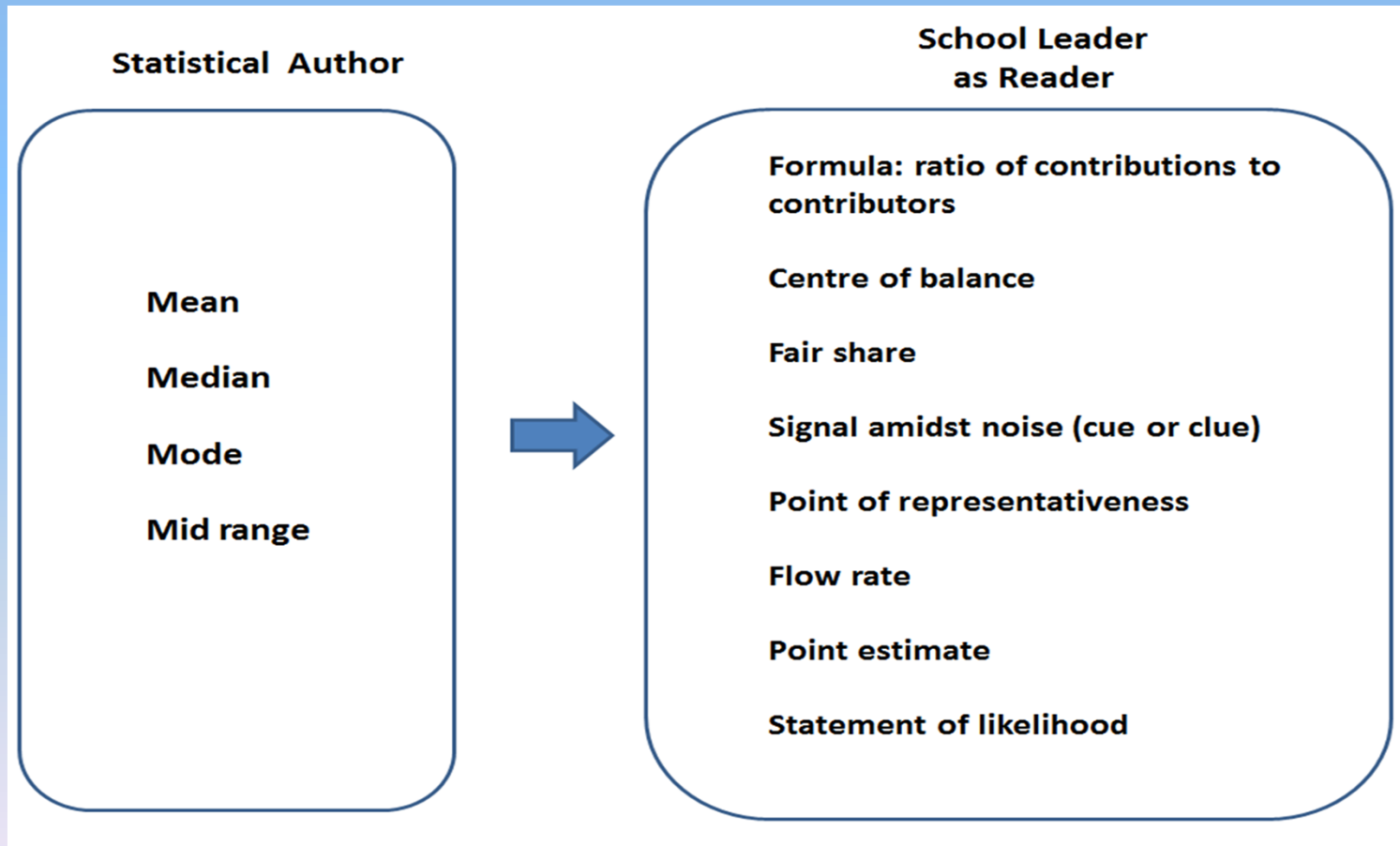
## Pan Canadian picture

- Some variation between provinces in statutory requirements:
  - BC---Provincial policy sets report content, not format
  - AB---Provincial policy sets content, not format
  - SK--- School principal sets content and format
  - ON---Provincial policy sets content and format
  - NS---Ministry introduced template changes in content in 2014-2015

# What do we know so far?

- Little research conducted in Canada and US
- Parents want more information rather than less
- Parents value information on son/daughter's engagement equally or more than achievement
- American study which compared teachers'-parents' meanings: "results overwhelmingly indicate that this school-to-home communication is muddled"
- Teachers, board members and communications specialists have differing views of essential content from parents

# Is student achievement problem primarily a communications problem?





# Which emotions are tied into interpretation of marks?



# Parents interpretations: A mixture of preconceptions, children's interpretations, outright confusion?



"Just so you know: the D's stand for 'Darn good',  
and the F's mean 'fabulous'."

# What is the problem?

- Educators and board members (authors) have many opinions about what information **ought** to be included in the report card. However, there is little understanding of how parents (readers) **actually do** interpret and what they do with report cards
- In short: little research evidence about parents' evidence-based decision-making

# Should we look more deeply before we leap to solutions?



"Is this one of those problems that can be fixed by throwing money at it?"

# What are unanswered questions?

- What are the best scales and information for including in report cards? At what grade levels?
  - Alpha notation A-F ?
  - Numeric notation 45%-100%?
  - 4-point criterion levels?
  - Attendance?
  - Anecdotal or statistical information on engagement?

# How do we best depict student achievement?



**"No, I can't explain my D in math. That class teaches us about numbers, not letters!"**

# What are un-researched questions?

- Do parents respond differently to grades produced by a visible author or invisible author? Does being able to picture the teacher or principal make a difference?

# What are un-researched questions?

How do parents actually read the report card?

- Intuitively or with calculator in hand?
- Quick scan or detailed computation?
- Focus on 3 or four key subjects or attendance or computer-generated comments?
- Do neo-immigrants interpret differently than others?
- Do First Nations parents read the school report card differently than do non Aboriginal parents?



# What are un-researched questions?

- What are parents' actions with report card marks at what times of the year?
  - Pin on refrigerator door?
  - One-on-one talk with son or daughter?
  - Increased attention to homework?
  - Sanctions and rewards?
  - Round filing cabinet?

# What are un-researched questions?

What have Canadian courts and tribunals said about report card marks?

-Can principals over-ride teacher marks?

-Do parents have the right to access marks and assignments?

-Can teachers opt out of completing report cards at end of the year?

-Can school boards refuse to provide classroom grades to think tanks and the mass media? Is rank-ordering students and schools more meaningful to parents?

## **What are un-examined assumptions?**

- Which grades count and which segments of the report card are meaningful?
- Are parent-teacher interviews best conducted in the fall or mid-winter or spring?
- Does parent attendance at interviews automatically decline as the student becomes older? Why?

# What are un-answered questions?

- What written comments do parents find meaningful?



# What are unanswered questions?

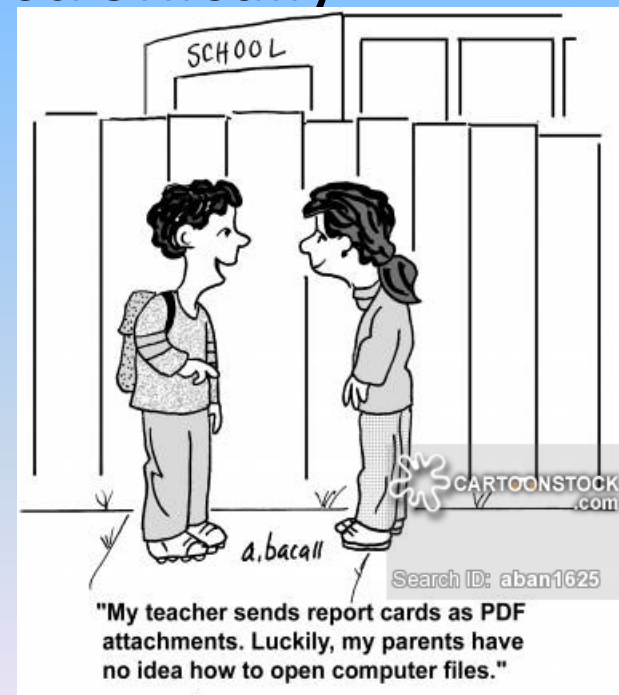
- What delivery method do parents find best for access and reading?
- Do (can) parents interpret electronically transmitted reports?

School backpack?

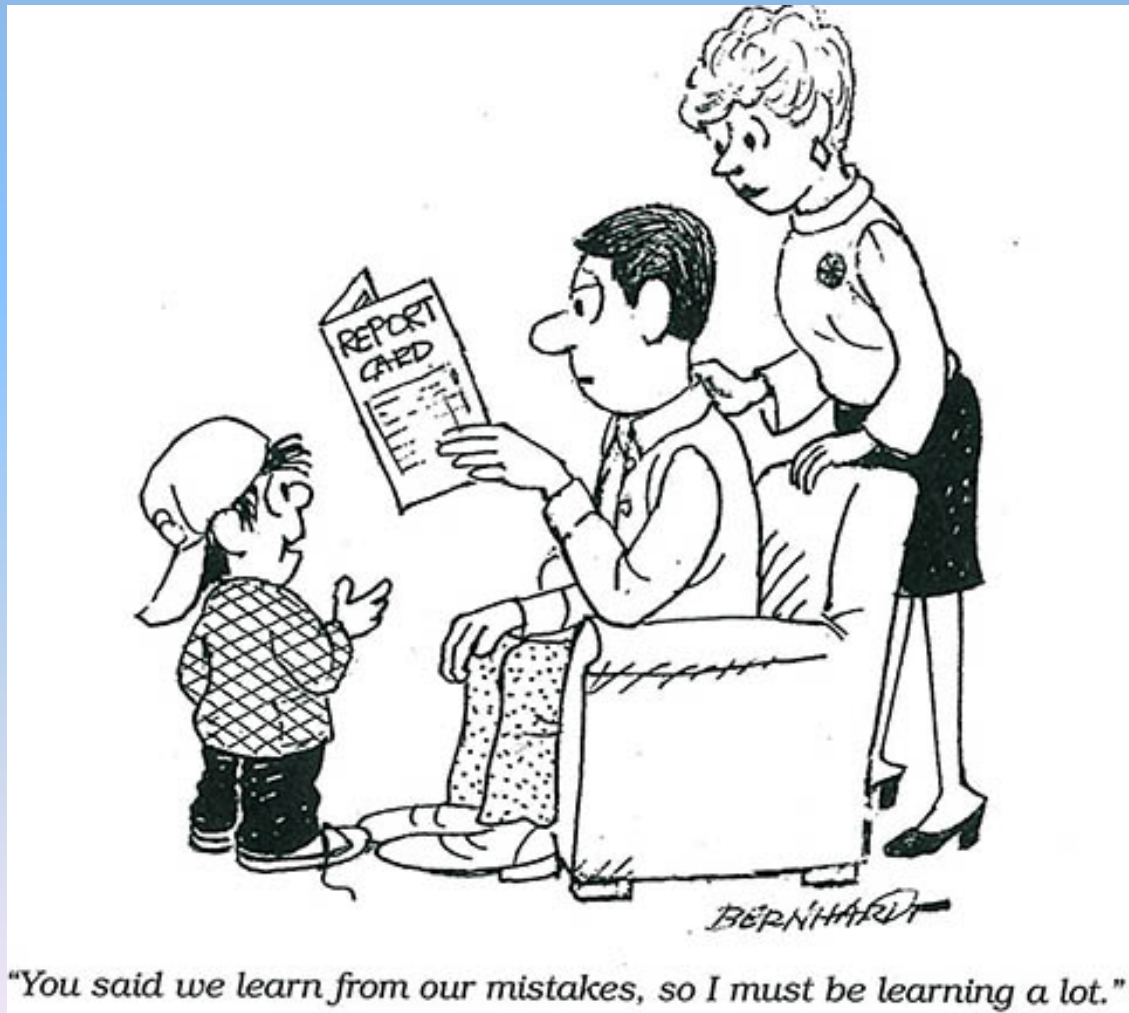
Canada Post?

School software?

Ministry transcript?



# What inferences are drawn when reading the report card?



# What are next steps?

- Both local and national research is necessary in this important zone—central to public confidence in schools, perceptions of education quality, and student improvement
- Much interest over past two decades on large-scale testing and student assessment as **processes**--- but very little understanding of what key audiences think and do with the **products**.

# What could be avoided?





# Questions for Discussion

- What does the school report card look like in your school district? Is it effective? How do you know?
- What messages does the report card convey about your board's priorities? School priorities? Are they your actual priorities?
- Do report cards deliver similar messages to different audiences, or are different report cards required for similar audiences? Why/not?

# Who to contact?

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