

# Color by Numbers Accountability

By David Warlick

## Introduction

The business of education now has a new storefront -- the World Wide Web. For a variety of reasons, schools and school districts have rushed to establish web pages. Sometimes they provide a wide range of information services for students, parents, and the community at large. Often, they are little more than billboards on the Information Highway. One thing is certain, however, about the World Wide Web. People are increasingly relying on this revolutionary technology as a source of information that they need as consumers, citizens, and as parents.

One method for using the Web to inform the public about the levels of success accomplished by various schools is the online report card. Many districts and states have established methodologies for reporting school success to the public. Kentucky is one state that has systemized the process for all of its schools. Reports can be accessed by district or by entering the name of a school. You can view their product at:

[http://apps.kde.state.ky.us/report\\_card/](http://apps.kde.state.ky.us/report_card/)

There is also at least one services that is providing online report card information on all schools in the nation. **Greatschools.net**, a nonprofit organization funded by various foundations and corporate sponsors, provides access to school report cards for all fifty states, including charter and private schools. Look up your school's report card at:

<http://www.greatschools.net>

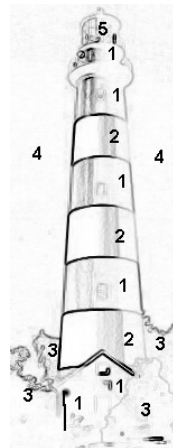
You can learn more about Web-based report cards from a report published by the Heritage Foundation at:

<http://www.heritage.org/reportcards/>

## New Accountability

We use statistical data on student performance in schools to draw a picture of our schools in terms of their effectiveness in preparing students for their futures. Yet numbers are only numbers. They portray neither color nor texture. They provide only the codes by which the picture can be completed.

The colors and textures, traditionally, are gathered by visiting the school, talking with its teachers, and examining what students are learning. A few parents and community members visit their schools frequently as volunteers. Most, however, only see the school during open house and



infrequent teacher conferences. The impressions that most often provide pigment and edge to the picture, to often come from gossip. How can the World Wide Web help to provide color and texture to the accountability picture?

What we do with new technologies, after we have figured out how to use them to do what we were already doing, is to figure out what we can do now that we could not do before. What are the new opportunities, and, related to this article, how can we use the Internet to provide color and texture to the community's impression of your school.

Perhaps the most important quality of the World Wide Web for delivering a richer picture of a school is the fact that a web page is not limited to text, or even images. You have other media at your disposal, such as video, audio, animation. One example of a school that has leveraged this multimedia quality is Beacon School, an alternative high school in New York City with a focus on aesthetics, the arts, and technology.



In addition to a very well designed and interactive web site, Beacon has provided a video through their web site, created by students to portray a day at Beacon. Information that is rich in content and media provides the color that numbers only imply.

This color and texture are important in light of a survey conducted by Beldon, Russonello and Stewart and

Research/Strategy/Management, and reported in the November 1999 issue of *The School Administrator Web Edition*. In their survey of parents, taxpayers, and educators, the two opinion research firms sought to learn what people want most to know about their schools. At the top of the list was **school safety**, followed by **teacher qualifications**. These were followed, in order, by **class size**, **graduation rates**, and **dropout rates**. Only then did the respondents indicate an interest in test scores or "student performance data."<sup>\*</sup>

These findings indicate above all else that it is the quality of the school experience that is important to parents, not just numbers. Performance scores remain important, but it is the school and its culture that surfaces as their chief interest.

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Schroer, Kathryn. "Color by Number: Lighthouse." Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. 9 September, 2001. <<http://chinco.fws.gov/lighthouse.htm>>.

"Take a Quick(Time) Look at the Beacon School." The Beacon School. 2001. The Beacon School. 10 September, 2001. <<http://beaconschool.org/moviebig.php>>.

\* Brown, Richard S.. "Creating School Accountability Reports." AASA School Administrator. 1999. American Association of School Administrators. 10 September, 2001. <[http://www.aasa.org/publications/sa/1999\\_11/brown.htm](http://www.aasa.org/publications/sa/1999_11/brown.htm)>

At the heart *school accountability* is what the students are learning, how they are learning it, and what they are doing with what they are learning? Keeping a portfolio on student work is a method of assessment that has been much talked about and even tried by a number of schools and universities with mixed results. It is another dramatic reform technique that has met with persistent resistance from an industry that is systemized against change.

Yet change continues to be talked about at all levels and through all venues. Recently, on an Internet mailing list for technology staff developers, a discussion arose on 21<sup>st</sup> century skills -- what students need to be taught to prosper in a time of change. A spin-off of that conversation was a concept that became known as the **Digital Desktop**. Following is a brief description of the concept as it has begun to be developed in this online forum.

## **Digital Desktop**

One of the concepts that came out of the discussion on 21<sup>st</sup> century skills was the idea that students will be constructors of information and knowledge, not just consumers. It was suggested that all students should have their own web site through which they would publish what they are learning. It would begin in Kindergarten, where students would post pictures with text annotations that draw relationship between the pictures and what they are learning. The pages would grow in sophistication each year.

It is important to note that this idea is not new. Many schools and school districts have experimented with online portfolios with varying degrees of success. We should be reminded of the frequently used analogy that...

**Testing is comparable to pulling a carrot out of the ground to see if it's growing well. It doesn't do the carrot any good and isn't a very good measure of growth.**

The accountability method must have some intrinsic value to the person who is offering services for assessment. It should fulfill needs in the student that are both personal, and of instructional value. For this reason, each student web site would have at least these three sections:

- Student portfolio,
- Expression canvas, and
- Work resource page.

## ***Personal Student Portfolio***

This section would consist of a series of pages that include selected samples of student work. It would include reports, letters, essays, and digitized images and other graphic works. Each submitted work would be accompanied by a rubric indicating the student's attainment of assessment standards. Students would have the option of improving their work and asking that it be re-evaluated.

## ***Personal Expression Canvas***

This will essentially be a vanity page. Students will be able to create, maintain, and adapt this page as a personal expression of their interests, impressions, and perspective on the world around them. Policies would have to be established and enforced to protect the identities of the students, but sufficient freedom must be provided to students that they use this tool for expressing their individual identities.

## ***Personal Work Resource***

The traditional library is a shared experience. When information is tied to paper and books, it remains a place where rules and techniques exist and are enforced to ensure equity and practicality.

However, when information is digital, when it is tied to the electrons rather than atoms, then it is freed to be copied, transported, and virtually available any place, any time. Rules and techniques for accessing and using information become malleable and far more personal.

This section or page will become, in a sense, a personal digital library. It is a tool that students construct, continue to adapt to their needs, and **use** in their continued studies. It will include links to their favorite online dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference tools. It also includes links to their most successful search engines and tutorials and tips on using those search engines. This page would also include a growing library of links that students collect and continue to refer back to as their studies and sophistication grow.

The accountability that will satisfy the community will be that which allows them to look over the shoulders of their students and to see what they are learning, how they are learning, and what they are doing with it.

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