

## Nomination Form

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## Executive Summary—North Carolina School Report Cards

**Goal:** "Parent Empowerment Day"—that's the phrase the vice president for the state's largest parent-teacher organization used to describe the day report cards for all North Carolina schools were released. State Superintendent Mike Ward joined Governor Michael Easley in the first state release of the report cards. Never before has so much information about individual schools, districts and the state education system been made so readily available. Class and course size, student testing performance data, teacher qualifications, computer and book access, contact information and more are available on the Web at [www.ncreportcards.org](http://www.ncreportcards.org).

**Requirements:** Governor Easley committed to releasing school report cards when he ran for office. The new federal No Child Left Behind Act requires report cards for schools, school districts and the state. North Carolina law also requires similar reports. State Superintendent Ward, concerned that citizens could be confused by conflicting data, issued a challenge to his staff in the Department of Public Instruction, the Governor's Office education staff and the NC Education Research Council. He wanted one report card for schools that would be easily accessible to citizens and that would meet all the various mandates for reporting.

**Usage:** Approximately one year later, on February 20, 2003, the N.C. School Report Card Web site was unveiled, and in the first two weeks, some 5,000 visitors a day spent time on the site. In response to a direct request from the Governor, principals around the state printed out snapshot versions (also from the Web site) of the report card for parents.

**Consistency:** A state-produced report card brings consistency in design and allows users to easily compare data because every report card looks the same -- only the data are different. Moreover, a central location for all report cards significantly increases usability, allowing parents and other citizens to perform custom searches to compare schools and districts. Just imagine the confusion if 117 school districts and 95 charter schools created their own report cards, without the quality assurance that went into the state report cards. Each report card could be different and comparisons difficult if not impossible.

**Efficiency:** The cost saving to citizens also is considerable. State and federal dollars of approximately \$400,000 were spent to produce the report cards. If local school districts were forced to produce their own report cards, development and production costs could easily have totaled \$13 million.

**Value:** Newspapers around the state publicized the report card release, with the largest papers running multiple stories and guides to using the data. An editorial under the headline, "Read 'Em and Reap," in a large daily paper said of the report cards, "Information that once couldn't be found without diligent digging and frequent phone calls is readily available now." One local school official said, "The whole report is full of all kinds of information to help parents understand what their child's school is like and what issues their school might be facing." Educators also see the report cards as an economic tool to help businesses and others learn more about schools. Principals and parents say the report cards serve as a valuable communication tool.

**In North Carolina, [www.ncreportcards.org](http://www.ncreportcards.org) provides knowledge about schools that equals power for parents.**

## a) Description of Project

**Background:** State law, the Governor, and the Federal No Child Left Behind Act require report cards for every local school, local district and for the state. N.C. Department of Public Instruction staff, the N.C. Education Research Council and Governor Easley's Education Advisor coordinated the development of report cards for approximately 2,200 public schools (including 95 public charter schools), 117 local school districts and the state. The group worked with data owners within the Department of Public Instruction to determine what data were available for the school, district and state-level report cards. The development began in May 2002, and culminated in the release on February 20, 2003. Work already has begun on the next report card release scheduled for Fall 2003 (for the 2002-03 school year).

**Data:** In many instances, data are reported to the Department by central offices in local school districts and local school principals do not know what data are submitted for their schools. For this reason, a process had to be put in place to allow principals to review the data for their school's report card.

**Advisory Committee:** The Governor and State Superintendent formed an advisory committee of teachers, principals, superintendents, and parents to provide guidance on the report cards. This group reviewed the data elements and offered feedback, tested the report card Web site and offered input into materials that were developed to help local school and district personnel communicate about the report cards.

**Local Coordinators:** Another important part of the process involved every local school district superintendent naming a local report card coordinator and a backup coordinator for their districts. These local coordinators were trained in one of four day-long training sessions offered on the data elements of the report card, the review process for principals and superintendents to question/correct any of the data and on communicating about the report cards. Local coordinators were responsible for a review of the report cards by all 2,200 principals in the state for a one-week period in the month before the report cards were released. Following the review, DPI staff worked with the local coordinators to resolve any data issues before the release. This review made for a smooth release since it took the surprise factor out of the release.

**Promotion:** A Web site with materials to help principals and central offices communicate the report card also was set up and was promoted to schools six weeks before the release. The communications resources are at [www.ncpublicschools.org/src\\_communications/index.shtml](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/src_communications/index.shtml)

**Web Site:** The primary work involved development of a Web site, [www.ncreportcards.org](http://www.ncreportcards.org) that offers access to every school, district and the state report cards. Principals also were asked by the Governor to print snapshots of the data for their school to send to parents. These snapshots also were a part of the report card development and are located on the Web site.

**Features:** The site features numerous search functions--including a map where you can click on a county to see the schools there, or a custom search where you select the criteria, such as school size, location, calendar type, etc. Materials to help parents and other citizens learn more about the data also were developed for the site. These include a Guide to Reading the School Report Card, Frequently Asked Questions, and other documents. These materials describe what is included in each of the sections and the source of the information. The Tips for Understanding Your School's Snapshot and FAQ were translated into Spanish.

**Technology Solutions Overview:** The solution for SRC 100 was based on the North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction's current technical architecture: J2EE (see Figure 1 – Application Architecture). Oracle's Business Components for Java (BC4J) framework was also used to provide the base J2EE functionality. The application runs on Oracle Application Server 9iAS, which provided the HTML server, caching technologies and the entire J2EE 1.3 server. Oracle Database Server 9i Release 2 was used as the database backend. The application was divided into user, presentation, business, data and database tiers (see Figure 1 – Application Architecture).

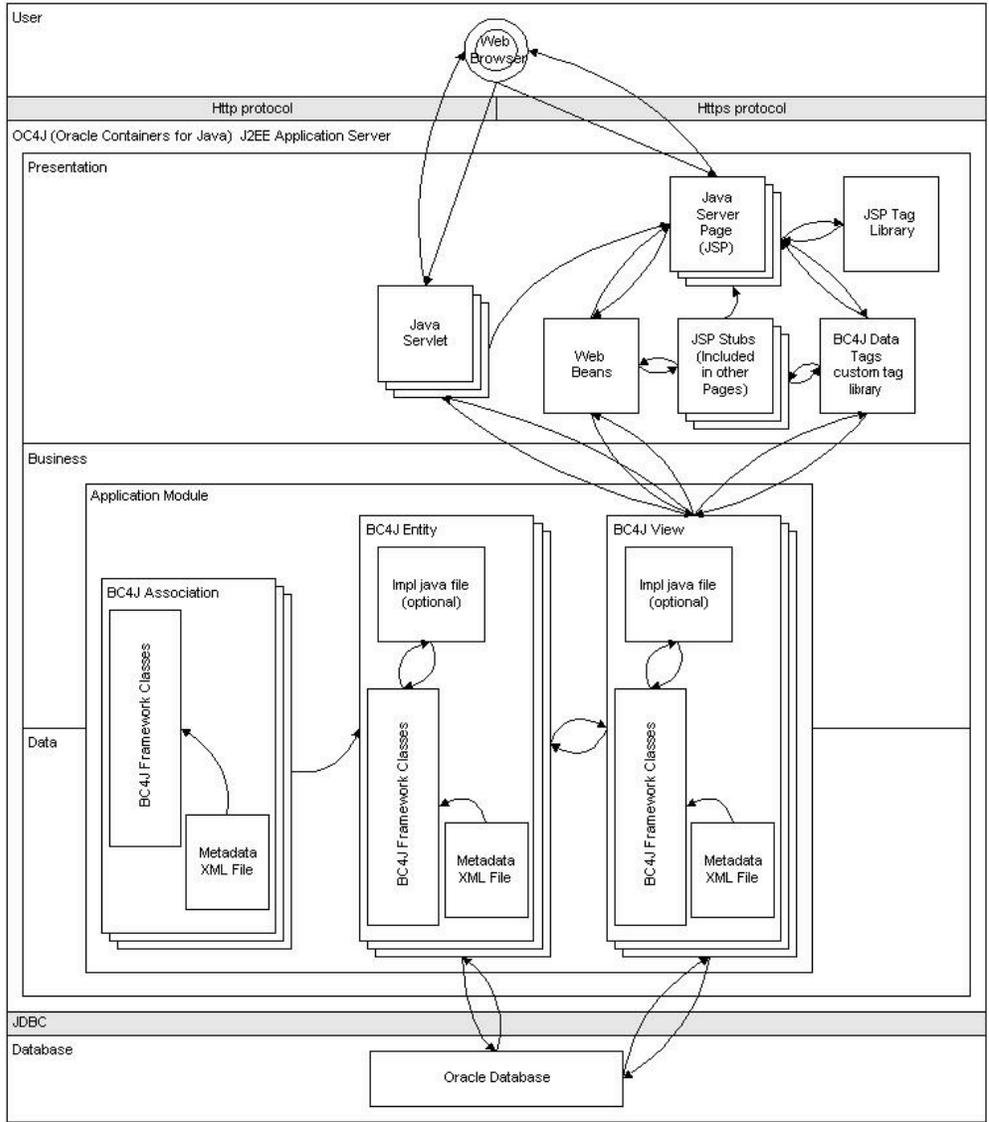


Figure 1 – Application Architecture

b) Significance to the Improvement of the Operation of Government

**Involvement:** More involved parents contribute to better schools. Schools that better prepare students benefit the economic status of a state and in turn, state government. That's the primary

reason that providing more information to parents about their schools contributes to the operation of government. The production of school report cards means the improvement of government operations at the most fundamental level: the state's ability to inform parents about their schools in order to get them more involved. Publishing the data also is resulting in better data collection and consensus about data definitions at the local school, district and state level.

**Evaluation:** Unless parents have information to evaluate what's going well or poorly in their children's schools, schools really are not accountable to the citizens they serve. Parents and students are considered to be the ultimate consumers of our public education system. They need data on which to base decisions, drive discussions and make informed choices.

**Encouragement:** The public says a lack of parental involvement in schools is the biggest problem in education today (Public Agenda). More than half (55 percent) say this is a "major problem," followed by student drug use (51 percent), unruly students (50 percent) and overcrowded classrooms (47 percent). Just as report cards issued by teachers to students are designed to initiate discussion, so are report cards at the school, district, and state levels designed to facilitate public discourse to improve public schools. U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige said, "The department will work with states to implement the report card requirements of No Child Left Behind to provide high-quality, understandable information to parents about their child's school. We will publicize the existence of these report cards and encourage their use. We will also encourage the creation of easy-to-use, online databases of school information and options for parents."

**Recommendation:** The Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, in a March 2002 summary about report cards, recommended that each state develop a standard format and template report cards and provide technical assistance in local report card production. North Carolina state government decided that limited local resources would be used more efficiently if the state actually produced the local, district and state report cards, working as a partner with local report card coordinators. As the Return on Investment shows, the cost savings are substantial.

### c) Benefits Realized by Service Recipients, Taxpayers, Agency or State

**Information:** When parents and other citizens are armed with the facts about public schools, research shows that they will be more involved with their schools. The [www.ncreportcards.org](http://www.ncreportcards.org) project provides parents and other citizens with more information than has ever before been available.

**Usability and Consistency:** Imagine 117 local school districts creating 117 different district report cards and 2,100 school report cards. Charter schools also would create their own reports. The look and feel of each report card would vary greatly, from design to data definitions to data placement. Schools and districts could even conceivably manipulate the data or design to emphasize data that distorts the citizen's view of the schools. A state-produced report card brings consistency in design to report cards from Manteo to Murphy. Parents and other citizens can easily compare data because every report card looks the same -- only the data are different. Moreover, a central location for all report cards significantly increases usability. Users can perform custom searches to find schools or districts with certain characteristics. State-produced

report cards also open up the report cards to a wider audience. Newcomers to North Carolina or those interested in moving across districts can compare schools and districts easily.

**Centrality:** Having a central location for all the report cards in the state offers those citizens who are interested in comparing schools within districts or across districts an easy to use system. It may be fairly easy to compare apples to oranges when you are looking at them side-by-side, but data differences are not nearly so visual. Comparisons between schools could be impossible if each district did their own reporting.

**Better Data:** The report card data are collected from about a dozen different data owners within the Department of Public Instruction. Because schools and central offices of local school districts now know that the data are going to be widely released via the report cards, data owners tell us that the data are much cleaner coming into the Department.

## d) Return on Investment

**Estimation on Return on Investment on N.C. School Report Cards:** The return on investment for the North Carolina School Report Cards is realized through cost avoidance. Each of the 117 local education agencies would have had to provide the information individually to meet new federal legislation. Below are size-based estimates of web development costs the state was able to avoid.

Based on DPI's total \$400,000 development cost, the projections for individual development efforts are identified below:

40 Small School Districts (600 to 3,999 students)

—Based on 10% (\$40,000) development costs

• 40 X \$40,000=\$1,600,000

40 Medium School Districts (4,000 to 9,999 students)

—Based on 25% (\$100,000) development costs

• 40 X \$100,000=\$4,000,000

37 Large School Districts (10,000 to 106,000 students)

—Based on 50% (\$200,000) development costs

• 37 X \$200,000=\$7,400,000

Total Estimation of a Potential Return on Investment of \$13,000,000 \*

- (Cost estimates for the 95 charter schools would increase this amount but these figures are not available.)

### Short-term Payback:

- 5,000 visitors a day to the Web site
- Report Card Snapshot distribution by approximately 2,000 principals to approximately 1 million parents
- Better education data collection system for state

### Long-term Payback:

- Better schools with more involved parents
- Improved economic situation for state from better-educated public