

# The CERCA School Report Card: *Communities Creating Education Quality*

Final Report



**CERCA**

*Civic Engagement for Education  
Reform in Central America*

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# Abbreviations

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<b>AED</b>	Academy for Educational Development
<b>AG</b>	analysis group
<b>CERCA</b>	Civic Engagement in Education Reform in Central America (Compromiso Cívico con la Educación en Centro América )
<b>CSA</b>	Community School Alliances (Ghana)
<b>EDUCO</b>	Educación con Participación Comunitaria (El Salvador)
<b>EFA</b>	Education for All
<b>EQUIP2</b>	Education Quality Improvement Program 2 (USAID)
<b>MIDEH</b>	Proyecto Mejorando el Impacto al Desempeño Estudiantil en Honduras
<b>PREAL</b>	Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas
<b>PRONADE</b>	Program for Autonomously Managed Educational Development (Guatemala)
<b>SRC</b>	CERCA school report card
<b>USAID</b>	U. S. Agency for International Development



# Executive Summary

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The CERCA school report card (SRC) model was developed with schools in the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua in 2004 and 2005. This document summarizes the major findings, successful procedures, and implications of the experience for the region. The SRC model is a participatory approach by which the local education community — parents, teachers, students, and community leaders — jointly analyze the status of their schools and define school improvement and monitoring plans, with a focus on classroom quality. The education community collects and analyzes information about their schools using simple indicators and self-assessment tools. The SRC promotes a sense of shared responsibility through a non-confrontational but effective accountability approach.

The SRC was developed through the Civic Engagement for Education Reform in Central America (CERCA) project, a regional activity funded by the U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by the Academy for Educational Development (AED). CERCA develops opportunities for parents and local communities to engage actively in supporting school quality.

## *Major Findings*

**The CERCA SRC successfully mobilizes communities.** The SRC generated great interest in local school communities. Across all participating schools, an average of 306 individuals participated in the assemblies to discuss findings. In one case, more than 1,000 participants gathered at the community dialogue session. These results contrast with an average attendance of 113 individuals within a control group of 36 schools that did not apply the SRC approach.

**The SRC successfully addresses educational quality issues, based on the communities' own realities and contexts.** Ninety-seven percent of resulting action plans included actions related to education quality, and these actions made up 85 percent of all actions taken by the schools participating in the field testing. In all schools, actions for improving achievement in reading and writing predominated, accounting for 32 percent of all actions, while 6 percent of actions were related to improving math skills.

**The SRC generates results within a short timeframe, and communities want to sustain the model in the long term.** School communities in five countries completed the SRC process in periods ranging from six weeks to three months. Ninety-seven percent of participating schools plan to continue using the methodology, and they will implement actions for school improvement in 2006 without support from CERCA.<sup>1</sup>

**The SRC successfully builds local capacity to design and monitor actions that address issues tackled by school management plans.** In all communities, analysis group<sup>2</sup> (AG) members learned how to collect and analyze school-related data and carry out actions to improve the education provided by their schools. At the end of the process, personnel from participating schools adapted and incorporated the resulting SRC action plans into their school management planning for 2006. The SRC was seen as a way to empower communities to develop their own school management tools.

**Parents especially value the SRC as a new way to participate in their children's education.** All parents—even those who could not read or write—took on new roles, such as actively participating in AG discussions, monitoring the attendance and punctuality of students, and creating appropriate learning settings for children to do homework in their homes.

**The SRC process is cost-effective, in comparison to other programs.** The CERCA SRC provides minimal external facilitation support as the main incentive, and it has no recurrent costs: communities continue the process with their own resources. The implementation cost—estimated at \$1,100 per community in 2005, and an average of \$5 per beneficiary—was lower than costs for educational community participation activities in Ghana and Guatemala supported by USAID, for similar one-year implementation periods.

**Expansion of the SRC will require active ownership and support from ministries of education.** The approach can be sustainable as processes become part of the school community culture. Nevertheless, the involvement and agreement of ministries of education will be required to expand this bottom-up approach.

**Periodic follow-up with schools that participate in the SRC is important for sustainability and analysis.** Follow-up with the 36 participating schools is essential to determining the SRC's impact, in terms of pedagogical changes in the classroom and behavioral changes in the community.

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<sup>1</sup> CERCA ends in September 2006.

# The CERCA School Report Card: Communities Creating Education Quality

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The CERCA school report card (SRC) has been developed through Civic Engagement for Education Reform in Central America (CERCA), a regional project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by the Academy for Educational Development (AED).

The SRC model was developed with schools in the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua in 2004 and 2005. This document summarizes the major findings, procedures, and implications of the experience for these countries. It also provides guidance for governments, donors, and school communities wishing to implement the SRC and include it in their educational improvement plans. A sister document, *School Report Card Implementation Manual* (CERCA 2006), offers a step-by-step guide for developing the SRC in local schools.

Traditionally, parents in Central America have had few options for, and little knowledge of, the education of their children, especially in the absence of standardized testing and school reporting. Furthermore, due to scarce economic resources, most parents have had limited capacity to express complaints about, and almost no power to influence, the schooling of their children.

Increased information and a greater civil society voice in education are imperative to the task of establishing accountability within the decentralization process occurring in the region. However, many specialists note that education systems in Central America are neither accountable to users of schools nor responsive to policy initiatives of central governments. Some reasons for this lack of accountability in public education include poor management, confusing roles, weak incentives, users' lack of voice, and, particularly, insufficient information (Winkler 2003).

The CERCA SRC promotes a participatory approach in which the local education community—parents, teachers, students, and community leaders—jointly analyze the status of their schools and define school improvement and monitoring plans in terms of classroom quality. The education community collects and analyzes information about their schools using simple indicators and

self-assessment tools. The SRC strategy promotes a sense of shared responsibility through a non-confrontational but effective accountability approach.

The SRC relies on the use of facilitators to help local communities make informed decisions about improving their schools. Facilitators may be school directors or other personnel in supervisory outreach positions in education ministries, or they may be community promoters hired by implementing organizations to develop the SRC in local communities.

The CERCA SRC approach differs from other recent efforts to provide communities with information about their schools because it involves teachers, parents, community leaders, and students working jointly to collect and analyze information and act upon it. This approach is rooted in the voluntary nature of community participation and in the belief that communities have the capacity to understand and respond to their own situations. School communities are offered no external incentives other than limited technical assistance in facilitating the SRC processes.

## *CERCA and the SRC*

CERCA was a regional project that built sustained support from local actors to improve education. The project focused its efforts on developing policy-relevant knowledge and constructing strategic options for actions that promote local stakeholder engagement in educational improvement. CERCA worked in five countries—Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic—and aimed to create conditions for parents and local communities to engage actively in education policies and create conditions that increase school accountability and education quality. CERCA’s main objective was to create a shared knowledge-base for policymakers and education constituencies at all



**Picture 1. A mother presents SRC findings to her community.**

levels to use in facilitating the sustained active engagement of parents and communities as stakeholders in a responsive education system.

Informing a community how its schools are being managed can strengthen its voice to demand better quality education for its children. To do this, CERCA developed the SRC model, gathering lessons from the experience of implementation in actual school conditions. The SRC is an approach to help inform local stakeholders about the status of their schools, and it is a tool to involve them in promoting quality improvement. Many education policies currently being implemented in Central America, such as decentralization and autonomous schools, could be strengthened through this type of participatory process focused on quality improvement.

In August 2004, CERCA and EQUIP2 (also funded by USAID and implemented by AED) partnered in the development of a model for a school report card appropriate for use in Central America. EQUIP2 provided an analysis of previous school report card experiences and designs and relevant approaches from other countries. Local authorities, experts from the region, and members of CERCA national groups from also provided insights for the development of the SRC.

### *Field Test in 2004*

In 2004, a field test of SRC methodology took place in eight schools—two in El Salvador, three in Guatemala and three in Nicaragua. The field test included the following goals:

- 1. Design a set of procedures for implementation and draft instruments to guide activities in the schools.** Several workshops were held to define basic indicators, instruments, and procedures, with the help of specialists from Central America, Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL), Namibia, and the AED-CERCA team.
- 2. Local facilitators were trained to work side by side with school communities.** School communities, represented by parents, teachers, students, and community members, identified areas of concern and developed strategies for collecting data and analyzing the situation of their

“I haven’t had a similar experience. Before, the school plan was primarily a responsibility of the teachers. The [CERCA] school report card promotes greater involvement by parents who do not often participate.”

— School Principal, Honduras

schools. Local facilitators were trained to help communities design strategies to assist the SRC efforts.

3. **Design strategies for dissemination of findings.** Community representatives designed strategies to provide feedback on their findings to the community at large. They also identified actions to be undertaken by the community to address needed change.

In the three countries, the SRC process was successful in empowering community members to collect and analyze school-related data. Within two months (between mid-August and mid-October), eight AGs were established by community actors, and data were collected, analyzed, and presented at community gatherings. The effort also resulted in communities proposing a number of action strategies. Additionally, great interest was created: up to 1000 people participated in the community dialogue session, with an average of 300 persons per school. The field test was expanded to a greater number of schools and five countries in 2005.

### *Past Experiences with Other School Report Cards*

In the past, school report cards have been used in different countries as a mechanism to create accountability and increase transparency and civic participation in education management. Traditionally, report cards have had three main purposes (Winkler and Sevilla 2004). They seek to

- ♦ provide a useful and easily understandable management tool, especially at the school level
- ♦ stimulate parental involvement and citizens' demand for school performance
- ♦ motivate education reform at all levels — school, community, region, and nation

To design the CERCA SRC, over 10 report card experiences from around the world were reviewed. These report cards had different purposes — for example, developing and monitoring information systems, setting goals and holding users of public services responsible for results, and promoting community participation. Within this context, it is important to highlight programs in Brazil, Namibia, and Ghana, and another by UNICEF. These were similar to the CERCA project, and they targeted parents as the primary audience (table 1).

**Table 1. Report Card Experiences around the World**

Program/ Characteristic	CERCA SRC	Namibia – School Self Assessment	UNICEF Quality School Grid	Brazil - Paraná	Ghana – School Performance Appraisal
National regional Impetus			√	√	√
External Data Analysis			√	√	√
School Feedback	√	√	√	√	√
External Monitoring/ Follow-up					
Local Impetus	√				
Local Data Analysis	√	√			
Community Feedback	√				
Local Action Planning	√	√			
Local Monitoring/ Follow-up	√				

Source: CERCA, modified from EQUIP2, 2004.

The four cases outlined in table 1 focused mainly on highly participatory schemes and school-level actions that could be taken. In each case, however, data collection strategies and analyses were conducted outside the community, with schools and communities serving as sources of information and recipients of reports.

Only in Namibia did stakeholders develop the capacity to conduct their own report cards and—most importantly—the capacity to link the results to a school improvement plan. In addition, the Namibia project had the highly desirable result of being sustainable, due to its bottom-up approach that built the capacity of local school management councils.

CERCA’s approach is similar, but the project has taken the bottom-up approach to community participation several steps farther. Rather than limit information to school management councils or a similar group, the SRC is shared with students

and with the whole community, as both are vital parts of the process of building local capacity. In addition, the community develops its own objectives and procedures for monitoring the results of actions undertaken.

Another approach was used by PREAL in its progress reports (*informes de progreso*). These are developed by a team of international experts as instruments to quantify the performance of national education systems. Recommendations for national policies that could resolve problems are identified through cross-national comparisons. PREAL's reports on Colombia have reached the municipal level, but they do not address school-level needs. The CERCA SRC is a strategy that complements and supports such reports by giving local voice and validity to national and municipal work.

The CERCA SRC was conceived to include the following objectives:

1. recognize the capabilities of local communities to collect and analyze information regarding the status of their schools
2. develop simple indicators that focus on education quality so that parents, teachers, and students can jointly discuss coverage, efficiency, and equity matters
3. encourage school communities to take consensual decisions about improvement actions and assign responsibilities among parents, teachers, and students
4. promote local school communities to monitor the progress of defined actions
5. support information- and knowledge-sharing among school stakeholders—students in particular—so as to involve these actors in the process of improving education quality

# Implementation of the SRC

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The CERCA SRC consists of a series of steps that are generally carried out over the course of a school year:

**1. Formation of the analysis group.** AGs are meant to coordinate, guide, and develop the SRC steps. Their membership comprises students, teachers, the school principal, and parents, and each group has seven to fifteen members. Communities determine the selection process, usually through elections held by each peer group.

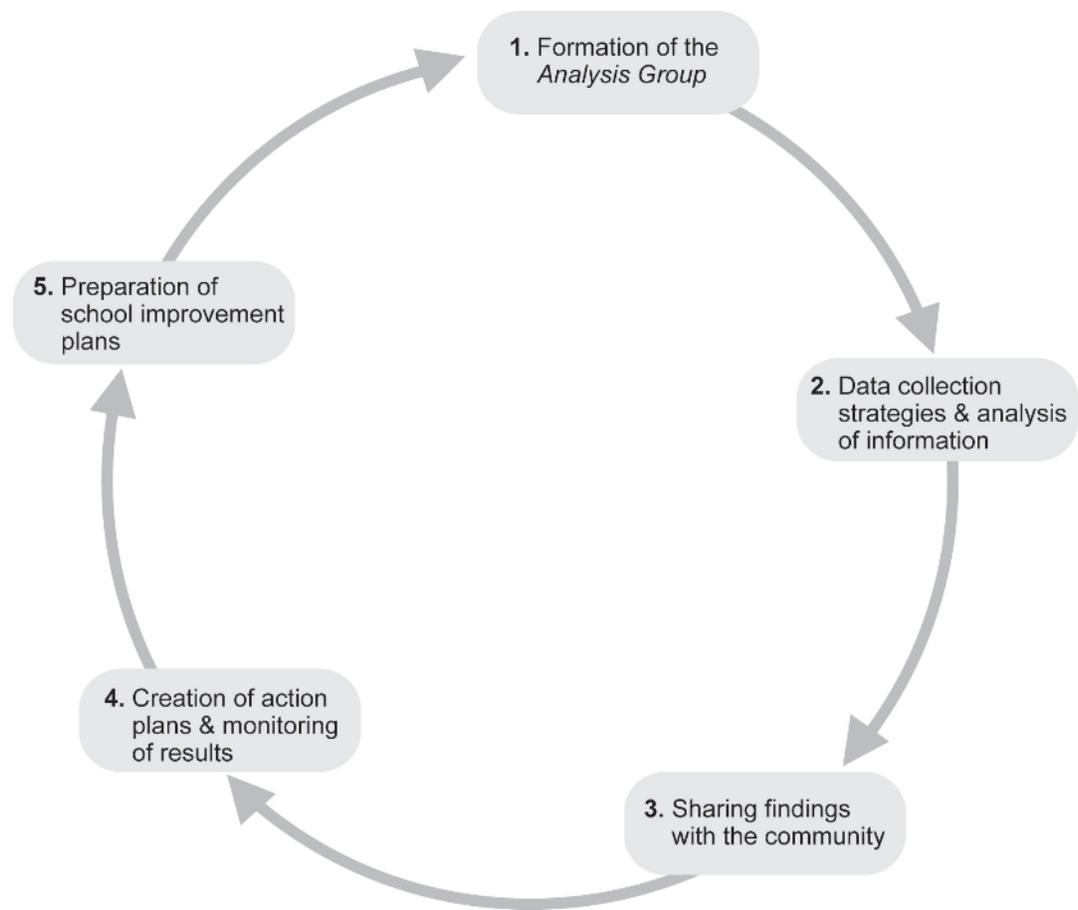
**2. Collecting data collection and analyzing information.** AG members decide how to collect information on the status of the school, using a number of indicators that are related to four categories: 1) general characteristics of the school; 2) access to services and resources; 3) processes such as attendance, planning, and parental participation; and 4) results, such as coverage, efficiency, and quality of teaching and learning. The indicators are simple; they are presented using real numbers, not percentages, and they are designed and validated with communities so all its members can understand them, regardless of their educational backgrounds. After collecting data, the AG studies findings and prioritizes areas of weaknesses in terms of those that can be addressed by the community and have an impact on learning.

**3. Sharing findings with the community.** The whole community is invited to a school celebration where the AG uses a variety of media, including pictures and stage performances, to present findings. Community members provide input on priorities and action strategies. The actual presentation of the SRC takes place at this step.

**4. Creating action plans and monitoring results.** Based on the input from the community, an action and monitoring plan is finalized. The plan outlines objectives, strategies for carrying out actions, individuals responsible for actions, deadlines for completion, and targets to measure results. The structure and process used to develop these plans are used as input for school improvement plans.

**5. Preparing school improvement plans.** The school director, with the help of members of the AG, organizes the action plan within the categories normally found in the school's annual plan: organizational, financial, pedagogical, and administrative. Meetings of local education authorities and the school working group are held to align activities with district plans.

**Figure 1. The SRC Process**



Source: CERCA, 2005

### *Schools Participating in the Field Test*

The SRC process was initiated in 2005 in 36 schools that ranged in size and student and teacher populations— from 58 to 672 students and from 2 to 20 teachers. Most of these schools—almost 30—were in rural areas. Five were peripheral urban schools in local municipal centers. All schools were characterized as being located in poor or working-class communities.

Most schools were public schools, and each had a management council that included the school director, teachers, and parents. In six communities (two in Guatemala and four in El Salvador), schools were managed by community-member committees associated with PRON ADE and EDUCO, respectively. Schools in Honduras were part of the MIDEH project, which was designed to help schools to achieve the 2015 Education for All (EFA) criteria. In Nicaragua,

“I am excited about participating in the SRC because I want to support my children. The school principal says that I can be part of the SRC though I do not know how to read and write. What I like about the SRC is the chance to express my opinions, analyze information about the school, and work together finding ways to improve.”

— Parent, Guatemala

schools were involved in a private sector school - support project. In other countries, schools were not part of large-scale education improvement projects.

## *Facilitator Training*

Local facilitators conducted the SRC process in each country. They were experienced in working with different age groups and eliciting group involvement through participatory techniques, and were also familiar with primary schools and classrooms. Previous teaching experience proved to be advantageous for the facilitation process.

A week-long training workshop for facilitators, provided at the beginning of the school year, presented the design and objectives of the SRC, the facilitator’s role, criteria for schools selection, the SRC process, and the tools and concepts that would be employed. The participatory methodology allowed facilitators to identify common strategies for their work with communities and to identify local implementation challenges and solutions.

At the end of the SRC process, a regional meeting was held to share facilitators’ experiences and document their feedback on lessons and best practices for future SRC implementation.



**Picture 2. The facilitator team shares experiences during the final workshop .**

## **Facilitation Strategies**

Two principal facilitation strategies were employed: facilitators either directly guided the process with communities or they acted as “assistants” to school directors, who assumed leadership of the process.

The first strategy was used in all countries except Guatemala, where the facilitator guided the process throughout the implementation period, organizing and scheduling meetings and activities. All AG members participated in the analysis, and the process was facilitated by a person external to the group. The facilitator coordinated discussions, making sure that all members participated and time was available for participants to reflect on information presented. Facilitators also provided support to summarize the data gathered by AGs and used small-group work to ensure that individuals investigating areas of the school became familiar with all areas under study.

The second strategy was applied in Guatemala, where the facilitator worked as an assistant to the school director, who took the responsibility of facilitating meetings. A one-page director’s manual was used as a guide. The facilitator and the director discussed the organization of the activities prior to meetings, and the director took the lead in the coordination of discussions and products.

Under both strategies, facilitators coordinated the meeting schedule and found ways to ensure that students did not miss classes while teachers participated in AG meetings.

## ***Selection of Analysis Group Members***

Who participated in the SRC was generally determined through a series of democratic elections held by students, parents, and teachers as individual groups. However, variations were allowed, including requesting volunteers from various groups, including from student government or community management committees. In all cases, however, participation was voluntary.

The number of AG members ranged from seven to fifteen. Larger groups were set up when members agreed to invite the participation of key individuals who could contribute to the process or benefit from it. The AG sometimes brought in members of the school management committee, as well as parents who were considered important school collaborators. In one school, sixth graders were brought in whose teacher thought they would benefit from the experience.

In some cases, individual members of school management councils participated in the SRC. Others chose not to, due to the workloads imposed on members of these organizations. However, council members participating never took on leadership roles—again, because of their existing obligations. This suggests that school management organizations are not the most effective mechanisms to lead SRC implementation; their members have different and time-consuming responsibilities. However, these organizations can play an important role by reporting SRC actions and results at their meetings. Additionally, they can monitor actions carried out by specific action groups formed as a result of the SRC.



**Picture 3. Analysis Group members discuss lesson planning and school resources .**

Completion of the CERCA SRC process—from its start through the development (but not implementation) of the action plan—generally required between 10 and 15 sessions. One or two sessions were needed to explain the SRC and select AG members. Eight to ten sessions were needed to discuss indicators, ensuring that all group members understood them and the measurement and data collection strategy being used, since all were likely to participate in data collection in all areas of the information guide (see annex 2). One to three additional sessions were needed to plan future actions and prepare the community presentation, and another one or two sessions might be needed to prepare the action and

monitoring plan. The following example illustrates how community members could use information they gathered to improve school accountability.

### **Example 1. The SRC and Accountability**

The analysis group met to discuss the results of their student survey, whose goal is to find out if parents participated in their children's learning.

While presenting the results, a father exclaimed: "I don't understand! The director said there were 32 students in sixth grade. However, when I asked the students to raise their hands if their parents helped them with their school work, only 28 students were in the class. I asked if any were absent, and they said no. The teacher confirmed that all students were present. Colleagues, we need to know the real numbers. Can someone explain? I don't understand."

A teacher in the group explained that enrollment statistics are kept high to maintain a certain level of human, physical, and financial resources.

A mother responded, "But it shouldn't be like that; you should report the real enrollment!"

"Yes!" said the father who presented the case, "We have to wait until the next meeting and have the director explain; then we have to reach a solution as a group. We can't have bad data; we need to adjust them. Otherwise, why does this group exist?" The meeting ended with all in agreement.

At the next meeting, the group was organized by grade level. It analyzed information sent monthly by the director to the departmental education office, along with the grade records of teachers. The group visited each classroom to take attendance and note absentees.

Finally, group members met, compared results of their findings, and identified incorrect data. The director agreed with the corrections and admitted that her books were not up-to-date.

Example 2, from a school in Honduras, illustrates the importance of participation by students and the insight they provide into classroom activities. Student perspectives were particularly important to the AG in the action-planning phase.

## Example 2. Student Participation in the SRC

The AG discussed student access to learning materials. Its adult members asked student members if they had sufficient materials. The students responded that the problem was not the lack of materials, but rather their classmates' lack of respect for the property of others. All students said they had lost personal supplies, and one stated that even the teacher had materials taken without her permission.

The group talked about concrete actions that could be taken to improve the situation, including closing classrooms during recess and encouraging students to put away their belongings carefully. However, the students insisted that the problem was the lack of respect exhibited by their classmates. The group concluded that at the root of the problem was a more fundamental issue of values, and that efforts must be made to teach the importance of respecting others and make families more aware of the importance of values. A teacher added that the school library had several good books on teaching values.

As they had raised the issue, the students were selected by the AG to present findings to the community. After they identified the problem through socio-drama, community members began to comment; they said it was the first time that such important issues have been raised at school meetings. After the discussion, several community members agreed to work with the AG to create materials that would motivate a combined action by parents and teachers to promote respect for others and their property.

## *Data Collection*

A guide to collecting information was tested and modified in accordance with community needs. It included the following main categories:

1. **context:** identification of the school, access to services, and partnerships
2. **input:** class size, access to resources, and access to social services
3. **processes:** ongoing classes, student and teacher attendance, school plan implementation, and parent participation
4. **results:** coverage, quality in the classroom, and efficiency (see annex 2)

The guide referenced many sources of information, such as physical evidence, testimonials, perceptions, self-evaluation, school registries, results of local classroom tests, and official education statistics.

### Example 3. SRC Data Analysis

In a semirural school in El Salvador, the AG was discussing information gathered about the school. A female teacher tasked with providing basic information has listed the name, location, address, and type of school and wrote down the number of students at each grade level:

- 60 in first grade
- 33 in sixth grade
- 15 in ninth grade

Community members, teachers, and students all stated they were unaware that almost half the students are lost by sixth grade and three-fourths are lost by ninth grade. This finding led them to discuss why students leave school.

A mother indicated that it “becomes expensive, as older students have to buy their materials.” The male student in the group agreed, adding that this cost means that students have to get paid work.

A teacher noted that students fall behind and lose their initiative after two months away from school to plant or harvest. She remarked that Sergio, the student who had spoken earlier, should be congratulated. He was 18 years old and completing sixth grade, whereas others too embarrassed to be seen with younger students had dropped out. The facilitator asked what can be done, and AG members said that it was a community responsibility to instill the value of education in parents and young students.

Sergio said he works in the mornings on a farm and that his workmates say that the school’s after-school catch-up program for trash collectors and cane cutters is wonderful.

The group continued the work, moving on to a discussion of centers of influence on the school, including a nearby dump and the community water source. The group referred to sickness caused by flies and periodic contamination of the water source, which resulted in absenteeism and students eventually dropping out of school. The group went on to discuss previous strategies and additional efforts that might eliminate the dump and protect the water supply.

*Discussion:* Information presented in a simple way, interpretable by all members of a group, can be very powerful. This is especially true when it relates to an issue such as school dropouts, since the community can act. Such information helps to focus community action; it is within the experience of all group members, and all have ideas about how to deal with the situation.

AGs were encouraged to use graphs, tables, and a variety of instruments to communicate their findings to the community. Facilitators made AG members aware of options for describing a school's situation, including creating a map of its context and maps of its classrooms.

But each SRC was unique; each school had its own reality, priorities, and particular way of expressing needs and sharing them with communities.

### *Community Dialogue to Present SRC Findings*

The community dialogue was designed to expand involvement of the community in the analysis of findings and the quest for solutions to identified needs. In most cases, the SRC was presented in school assemblies, where the community was invited to discuss findings. These discussions were facilitated by the AG, who encouraged the community to make decisions and then take actions to improve the quality of their schools.

Thirty-five of the thirty-six communities that began the SRC process in 2005 held community dialogues to present the SRC results. Due to time constraints, the remaining community delayed the presentation until the start of the following school year.

Preparation of the presentation took between one and three sessions. If action planning and priority setting had occurred simultaneously with data analysis, the action plan was finalized during the planning of the presentation to the community. In communities where data analysis preceded action-planning, two or three sessions were needed to develop the action plan. Additional sessions were then carried out to plan and, in some cases, rehearse the presentation.

A single session sufficed to develop both the content and the logistics for the presentation. A few other sessions might be needed to assign roles, often to small groups, so AG members could plan data presentations, organize a snack for participants, or obtain loudspeakers or other audio equipment. Example 4 shows the role assumed by a mother in a rural school in Nicaragua during the community dialogue process.



Picture 4. Community members share SRC findings.

#### Example 4. Presentation of the CERCA SRC to the Community

Maria, the mother of a fifth-grade girl at a rural school in Nicaragua, was invited to join the AG because she had frequently made a snack—rice with milk (*arroz con leche*)—for students in her daughter’s class.

At first, Maria did not participate much in group discussions. However, as she visited classrooms and recognized how much the teachers had to do, she began to make suggestions. During the planning of the community dialogue, Maria offered to present the findings on student learning. Since she had never spoken in front of a group, she asked AG members to review her presentation and recommend improvements.

During the community dialogue, Maria made a confident presentation. She explained she had been apprehensive; her only previous experience in the school involved preparing snacks for children. She expressed her concerns about lack of parental control relating to students completing homework assignments, the absenteeism and tardiness of many students, and the low grades of a large group of students. She described many ways of collaborating with the school, including visiting classes and helping teachers with materials, monitoring student attendance, and participating in vacation classes for students behind in their studies.

Maria ended her presentation by saying, “I invite all those present to help find solutions to the school’s problems.”

Community dialogues typically lasted two to three hours. At each session, data was presented, using charts with written or graphic images ; often different colors were used to represent the positive or negative status of specific areas . In addition, socio-dramas were used to illustrate findings, and school situations were acted out. These methods were often used within the same general presentation.

In all countries, attendance at community dialogues averaged 306 participants and ranged from 32 to 1,010 participants. Generally, lower participation occurred when the AG limited participation to students or community delegates, or simply when a community or school was small. School communities perceived these dialogues as special celebrations for which they prepared folklore demonstrations and other festive cultural expressions.

To present findings, a graph or a dramatization might be presented for each area investigated during the SRC process . This was followed by discussions of the action plan and a session for questions, answers, and comments. The information was well received by participants, who often suggested additional action strategies.

Ideas and opinions of the large group were solicited in a variety of ways. As shown in picture 4, one approach was to use balloons with findings written on a piece of paper inside each. The balloon was passed among participants, and the person holding it when the music stopped offered ideas for actions to resolve the situation identified on the paper inside.



**Picture 5. A mother presents ideas on how to encourage children to read at home.**



**Picture 6. A father presents findings about school infrastructure.**

## *Implementation of Action and Monitoring Plans*

In addition to an information-sharing process with the education community, the SRC builds in a decisionmaking process that is action-oriented. This is the most important feature of CERCA SRCs: actions related to school quality are prioritized and carried out by school communities. Thus, in 2005, an additional component was added to the facilitation process to include action planning and monitoring plan results.

"This is the first time that I have participated in this work. We [community members] have never participated in something similar before."

— Mother, Nicaragua

Action plans are envisioned as simple. They list priority actions to be undertaken by the education community, and they can include a narrative on the actions planned. Action plans can be enriched by including a description of actions as carried out, qualitative changes observed by the AG, or measures taken to monitor their implementation and achievement of results.

The following questions were used by the AG to identify and prioritize school needs and define actions:

- What is needed most?
- What could the school community accomplish with existing resources?
- What could contribute the most to improving the children's education?

Of 35 schools that conducted community dialogues, 33 developed action plans. The two schools that did not develop action plans cited as reasons the heavy administrative demands by the ministry of education. However, both these schools are considering developing plans in 2006.

Notably, 97 percent of all action plans included actions related to education quality—actions that directly involve student learning by focusing on reinforcing content-knowledge in core subjects, along with actions that indirectly involve student learning by improving learning contexts and processes or parent participation in learning.

The average number of actions developed was three, and the total number of actions ranged from one to nine. In all cases, actions entailed strategies involving a number of concurrent activities to achieve desired results. These activities were generally accompanied by certain intermediate results.

Table 2 was derived from a rural school in Guatemala and table 3 from another in El Salvador. The first school adopted a plan for carrying out the specific action of improving homework by involving parents in the process over a period of six weeks. The plan was discussed as part of the community dialogue, and parents agreed to carry out the activities and meet the established timelines. Multiple activities were designed to resolve the problem, and AG student members visited parents' homes to ensure compliance with the plan.

**Table 2. Action Plan in a Rural School in Guatemala**

<b>Problem Identified</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Responsible</b>	<b>Time</b>
Failure to complete homework in all grades owing to a lack of parent interest	Involve parents in reviewing and assuring that assigned homework is complete	1. Establish a set time, such as immediately after lunch, for children to do homework	Parents	Daily from Sept. 8 to mid Oct.
		2. Create an adequate place inside the house for school materials to be kept and homework to be completed	Parents	Weekend of Sept. 10 and 11
		3. Visit all homes of students to verify the presence of a work place	Students	Monday, Sept 13
		4. Review homework to see that teachers marked it as completed	Parents	Daily, until end of school year
		5. Review and stamp homework that is acceptable	Teachers	Daily, until end of school year
		6. Prizes for students who complete all homework	Teachers	Closing ceremony, Oct. 2005

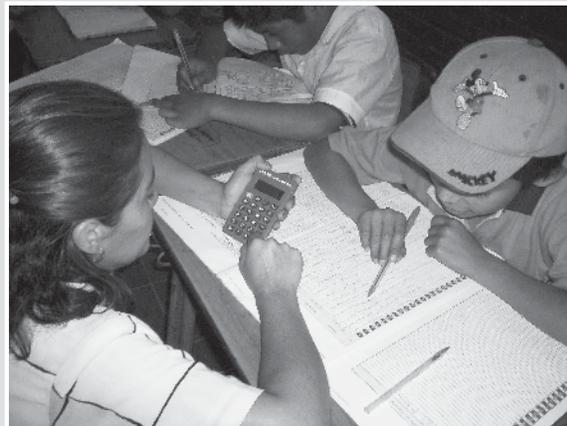
In the Salvadorian school, the greatest problem identified was low reading achievement. In this case, the action was one of six developed in the action plan, and all were designed to take place during the 2006 school year. Activities in the plan included mothers serving as volunteer tutors for the lower grades, as well as training teachers in participatory methods for upper grades. The action plan called for the school director to request a specialist in pedagogy from the Ministry who would train the teachers. This request was made to the Ministry outreach provider or inspector, when that individual visited the school. A pedagogy specialist from the outreach division was to provide training. The plan also included teachers visiting colleagues' classes to provide feedback on implementation of the training. Table 3 illustrates that what was called an action

in one school was called an activity in another. However, in both cases, multiple steps that involved various members of the community were planned to reach the desired outcome.

**Table 3. Segment of Action Plan in El Salvador**

Activity	Actions	Time	Responsible
Improvement in reading and writing	For first cycle: Formation of mother-facilitators to help in reading and writing instruction	January 2006 through school year	Teachers of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades and mothers
	For second cycle: Use of participatory teaching methods	Each school period in 2006	Pedagogy specialist and director
	Training teachers in participatory methods	January 2006 April 2006 June 2006	Pedagogy specialist from the Ministry of Education and director

All action plans encompassed monitoring plans to determine if objectives were reached within designated periods. In the short-term plans of the Guatemalan school, monitoring consisted of counting the number of homes with adequate locations to do homework and the number of students whose homework was stamped as completed. Monitoring plans relating to longer-term actions for the school in El Salvador listed objectives for certain periods, along with objectives in terms of percentages of the population expected to reach certain criteria. Table 4 shows the portion of the action plan in the Salvadorian school that corresponds to the actions shown in table 3.



**Picture 7. A student and a mother verify the school's attendance notebook.**

**Table 4: Segment of Monitoring Plan (El Salvador)**

Action	Responsible	Time	Objective	Measure
Improvement in reading and writing				
First cycle: Formation of mother-facilitators to help with reading and writing instruction	Teachers and 6 mothers of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade students	Two months	50% of students in the first cycle reach an average grade of 6 in reading and writing	Comparison with student grades in October 2005
Second cycle: Use of participatory teaching methods	Student government and teachers	Each school period	50% of students motivated to learn and participating in class	Monthly register of student participation in reading and writing classes
Training teachers in participatory methods	Teachers and pedagogy specialist from the Ministry	January April June	8 teachers applying participatory methods in their classrooms	Survey of student satisfaction with teaching

Only one action plan did not include actions related to education quality, and it belonged to a school where the community felt that student health needed to be improved in the short term, prior to implementing other types of actions. This school's action plan focused on changing personal hygiene practices within the community, and the school reported that 50 percent of households had adopted new health practices within two months of implementation.

### **Actions to Improve Quality of Learning**

Actions related to education quality accounted for 85 percent of all actions in SRC school action plans. Actions related to quality included achievement, parent involvement, attendance and punctuality, discipline, and aspects of construction – such as improved lighting for reading – that directly affected learning. In all schools, as shown in table 5, actions for improving achievement in reading, writing, and math predominated, accounting for 38 percent of all actions. Thirty-two percent of all actions were related to improving reading and writing skills, while improving math achievement made up 6 percent of all actions, and included similar strategies to those developed for improving reading.

Some of the actions to improve reading skills included the following:

- Encourage the production of texts by establishing a school bulletin board exhibiting students' products.
- Use student tutors to assist children in the early grades to improve reading fluency and comprehension.
- Train mothers to assist teachers in providing and encouraging reading practice in early grades.

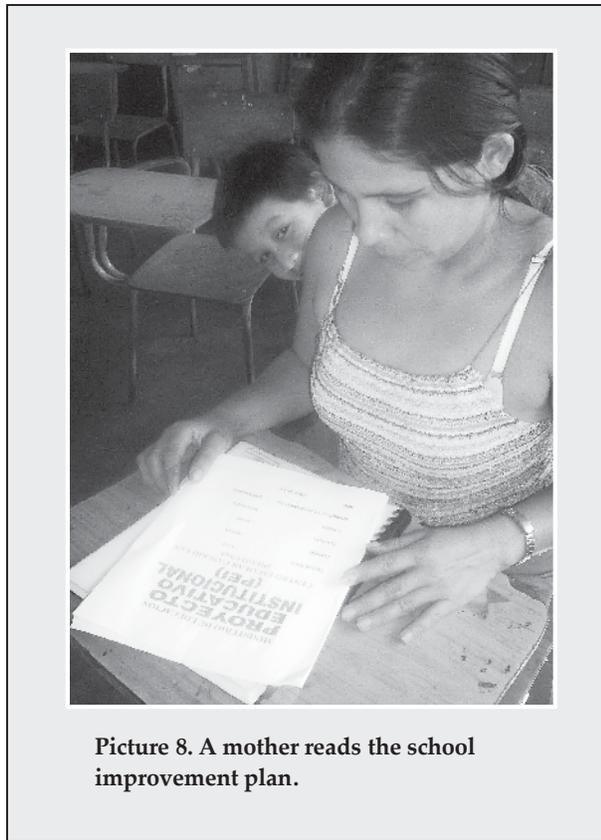
**Table 5: Distribution of Actions in CERCA SRC Action Plans**

Country/ Actions	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras	Dominican Republic	Nicaragua	Total
Achievement— Reading	7	17	4	2	4	34 (32%)
Parent involvement	8	5	5	1	2	21 (19%)
Attendance/punctuality	4	5	3	1	1	14 (13%)
Construction	1	2	2	1	4	10 (9%)
Discipline	1	5	3	0	0	9 (8%)
Achievement—Math	0	0	3	2	2	7 (6%)
Administration	0	2	1	1	1	5 (5%)
Democratic behavior	0	2	0	0	1	3 (3%)
Hygiene	1	0	0	1	1	3 (3%)
Mini-enterprise	0	0	0	0	2	2 (2%)
Total	22	38	21	9	18	100%

### **Actions to Promote Parental Participation**

Strategies to promote parent involvement made up 19 percent of all actions specified in action plans. These actions were also related to achievement; they involved parents assisting students with homework to improve their academic skills, along with increasing parental awareness that student attendance and punctuality are vital to the comprehension of school subject matter. Example 5

illustrates a strategy developed by one school to encourage parent involvement in improving their children's reading skills.



**Picture 8. A mother reads the school improvement plan.**

Other strategies for involving parents included the following:

- Have students write letters to parents asking for help with their studies. (These letters, delivered by the local post office, were often the first personal letters parents had received.)
- Draw on parents as tutors to visit the homes of parents whose children have attendance problems.
- Involve local religious leaders, and ask them to promote parent participation in children's school life in their churches.

All actions related to administrative changes also involved parental participation. To promote such participation, the AG sometimes helped the school council to plan quality interventions and involve parents and students in planning annual school activities.

### Example 5: Actions to Improve Reading

In a school of about 600 students, AG members—three teachers, three students, and three parents—reviewed students’ grades, observed classrooms, and asked students about their homework to determine what they are learning. They met to discuss what was learned.

The group talked about issues relating to reading in the classroom, analyzed whether or not students have materials besides textbooks to read, and estimated the amount of reading they do at home. The group decides that reading is deficient at all grade levels and must be strengthened. This empowerment needs to result not only from classroom activities, but from support by students’ families.

A mother in the group asked, “What can I do if I don’t know how to read?” A teacher responded, “Look for someone in the family that does know how to read to help your boy. It can be an uncle, a brother or some other family member .”

The group then discussed a number of strategies to promote reading, which they call “The Reading Race.” During several additional meetings, other strategies were discussed, such as creating a space for reading in classrooms; conducting reading and writing exercises with stories, poems, and letters; and regular testing of progress. These were turned into activities and incorporated into an action plan whose most important activity was promoting reading at home.

Over 1,000 participants attended the AG’s presentation of SRC’s findings to the community. To promote reading at home, an action recommended was that teachers should photocopy reading excerpts onto a sheet of paper every Friday and ask that a family member and the student read it together over the weekend. Students would be tested every Monday on their understanding of the readings. At the end of the meeting, parents agreed to identify a family member to read with the student over the weekend.

On the Mondays that followed, students responded to questions about their readings in all grades, and their teachers said that the most stimulating aspect of this activity was that students showed enthusiasm. They declared, “I read with my dad;” “I read with my mom;” or “My brother reads with me.” Over the next weeks and through the end of the school year, students eagerly asked for their reading assignment each Friday. An informal AG survey of parents verifies that over 50 percent of the families in the community were reading regularly with their children. Although the activity was interrupted by the end of the school year, it was included in the action plan for 2006.

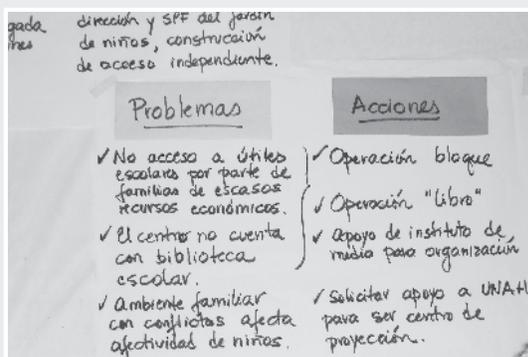
## Actions to Improve Classroom Discipline and Democratic Behaviors

Strategies for improving classroom discipline and improving democratic behaviors made up 11 percent of total actions. The strategies included

- students electing student government representatives
- students developing classroom behavior norms
- students choosing certain values to be promoted in the classroom

## Other Actions

Strategies related to health, construction, and setting up small businesses at school made up 15 percent of actions. With the exception of setting up small businesses, these strategies generally related to education quality, since the SRC recognized that constructing spaces conducive to learning, repairing desks and lighting, and improving health standards all contribute to quality learning.



Picture 9. Example of an CERCA SRC Action Plan Made by analysis group Members.



Picture 10. A mother presents the reading goals for first grade students.



# Analysis of CERCA SRC Results

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All schools with action plans reported results in terms of activities undertaken during the 2005 school year, and all schools planned to continue the SRC in the ensuing school year. This continuation took several forms. In El Salvador, for example, the SRC process was incorporated into the annual school plans for 2006 required by the Ministry of Education. In some cases, SRC results were used to inform the content of these annual plans; in others, the SRC process was formalized as activities within the plan. In two schools, the action plan itself was submitted to the ministry of education as the 2006 school improvement plan. In other countries, medium-term action plan activities and repetition of the SRC were incorporated into the schedule of activities for 2006.

Of the 33 schools with action plans, 26 (79 percent) reported improvement during the year. Outcome data was reported for schools with short-term objectives, including the following results at individual schools:

- 100 percent of homes had an adequate place to do homework
- 70 percent of students did homework regularly
- 90 percent of parents limited students to two programs and one hour of television viewing
- 75 percent of students improved their scores in reading and writing tests
- 50 percent of parents read to students

Results relating to long-term strategies included the following:

- students developed norms of student conduct that were posted in all classrooms
- teachers, parents, and local organizations collected books for the library
- textbooks were reviewed by teachers, parents, and students
- groups were organized to conduct home visits and talk to parents
- lighting in classrooms was improved
- classrooms were reorganized for small-group learning
- tutors were identified and became active

- a craft sale was organized and school materials purchased with resulting funds
- computer laboratories were obtained through donations from local businesses.

Several unexpected results emerged from the SRC experience. In three schools, the staff was unsure that the SRC could be carried out because of the complete disassociation of the community from the school. However, the SRC succeeded in reintegrating the schools with the communities by motivating proactive discussions among community members. In at least five schools, the SRC process gave teachers, students, and parents a channel to discuss school conditions with authoritarian school directors, and this led to more participatory decisionmaking. As shown in the Dominican Republic (example 6), the SRC was used to motivate learning and community integration.

### **Example 6: Arts Education**

The SRC was developed in a rural school whose community was known for its folklore and handicrafts. During their review of the situation of the school, the AG decided that focusing on arts education would motivate students in all their academic subjects and create greater integration between the school and the community.

The action plan developed recommended inviting personnel from the town cultural center to teach aspects of local Dominican folklore and culture and train students in local painting styles. The school also displayed student's art work for community members. The SRC was successful in positioning arts education as the school's focus area.

The SRC also encouraged the integration of schools and communities when several municipal and departmental authorities invited AG members to discuss the process with groups of school directors who might have an interest in carrying out SRCs. In one education department in El Salvador, school directors who had participated in the SRC formed a network to consider possibilities for joint actions and expanding the SRC in their region.

### *Comparison with Similar Schools*

A control group of schools that did not experience the CERCA SRC process was identified. The objective was to compare schools with similar characteristics to those participating in the SRC, including efforts made to encourage community participation in the 2005 school year. Table 6, which summarizes this comparison of SRC and control group schools, highlights the higher percentage of SRC schools with actions for quality, the larger numbers who attended community

meetings, and the uniqueness of CERCA SRC monitoring plans. This is important, because actions in Central American schools are often limited to a single routine council action, such as preparing meals or painting at the start of the year. A greater number of activities, therefore suggests greater participation.

## *Community Dialogues*

As previously discussed, SRC community dialogues presented and discussed findings about the status of schools in terms of infrastructure, resources, efficiency, and quality. However, in control group schools, meetings were purely informational; they were held at the start of the school year to introduce staff, distribute student grades, or celebrate occasions such as independence day or mother's day. Attendance at meetings at control schools ranged from 35 to 650 participants and averaged 113 attendees, compared to the average of 306 participants in SRC schools.

## *Actions to Improve Quality*

Sixty-four percent of the control schools carried out actions for school improvement, but most of these related to general construction — such as building kitchens or latrines — rather than education quality improvements. Only 11 percent of control schools developed measures to improve education quality. These totaled 18 percent of all actions, and some responded to strategies and programs supported by local NGOs.

The low percentage of actions related to quality in control schools contrasts sharply with the 85 percent of all actions carried out in SRC schools, where teachers, parents, and students were actively involved in school educational quality improvement. No control school had a formal means for measuring results of school improvement activities, whereas all SRC schools had monitoring plans.

## *Student Participation*

In CERCA SRC schools, students were involved in all SRC activities, whereas student involvement in control schools consisted of student government representatives attending school management meetings, along with students assisting in infrastructure improvements, such as painting the school. In only one control school were students involved as tutors in improving education quality.

**Table 6. Overall Actions: CERCA SRC and Comparison Schools–2005**

<b>Group/Activity</b>	<b>SRC Schools</b>	<b>Comparison Schools</b>
Largest meeting	1,010	650
Average size of meetings	306	113
Average number of actions	3.00	1.25
Percentage of schools with actions for quality	97%	11%
Percentage of actions related to quality	85%	18%
Percentage of schools with monitoring plans	100%	0%
Student participation in meetings and actions	100%	42%

### *Incorporation into Ministry Strategies*

As previously discussed, SRC activities were coordinated with ministries of education, either directly or through ongoing projects. Also, local education officials generally assisted with the selection of SRC schools. In Guatemala, for example, school directors played an important part in the SRC process in all countries and took the lead in the facilitation.

El Salvador's Ministry of Education and the *Gerencia de Seguimiento a la Calidad* supported the SRC, helping to define the role within the process of pedagogical support personnel. After representatives observed the process in several schools, two one-day workshops were held to discuss the role of the supervisor or pedagogical support personnel in implementing the SRC. It was agreed that the SRC would be used by support personnel to review school improvement actions defined by the school and decide, with the school director, where the ministry could provide support. This seemed to be the most relevant and practical role for these support personnel who, because of their extensive duties, can visit individual schools only once or twice a year.

### *Financial Considerations at the Community Level*

Over 10,000 individuals attended community dialogue sessions in participating schools. To determine the impact of SRC process on individuals, surveys were conducted with a sample of participants who were selected at random during dialogue sessions at individual schools in each country. "Beneficiaries" were

considered those individuals who articulated the new content on education quality they had learned or described the actions they had undertaken to improve quality as a result of the SRC. Seventy-seven percent of participants met these criteria. The total cost of the project implementation, which included facilitators' salaries, materials, travel costs and training, was divided by the number of beneficiaries to determine an average cost of US\$5 per beneficiary. Given the large number of beneficiaries in each community where a school report card was implemented, the average cost was US\$1,182.

As with any school-based intervention where costs are calculated on the basis of an individual student, the costs for achieving community empowerment are higher for smaller school communities than for larger ones. However, as the SRC was limited to medium-sized schools with populations of about 500 students, the effectiveness of the process in large schools remains untested.

The costs of the SRC are one-time rather than recurrent; all schools use their own resources to continue the implementation of the SRC in the 2006 school year, without facilitation support from the program.

An investigation of previous school report card efforts in other developing countries revealed almost no information on the financial costs of empowering communities to address education quality in their local schools. This appears to be a result of school decentralization efforts that are structured from the top down, focusing on information provision or the administrative aspects of decentralizing schools.

Limited data suggest the cost of implementing the SRC is somewhat lower than for other school community empowerment efforts. In Guatemala for example, a 2003 program to train 912 female community leaders in 47 rural communities during a school year, reported recurrent costs of US \$12,239. Costs included training costs, salaries for the trainers, travel costs and materials for the community leaders. Dividing these costs by the number of beneficiaries, the cost per beneficiary is US \$12.67, or more than twice that of CERCA SRC.

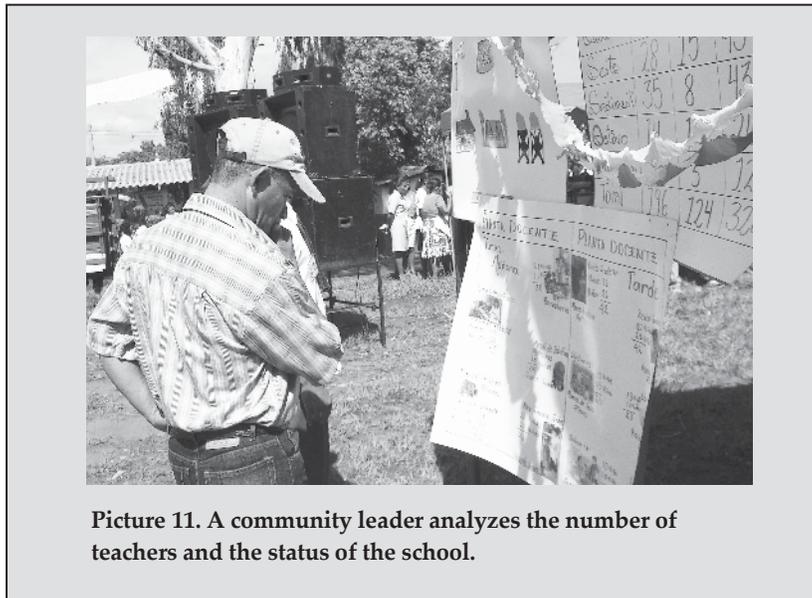
Another example is the Ghana CSA project, where schools were provided with US \$1,500 grants and facilitation support that included four or five facilitators to develop a school performance improvement plan and ongoing outreach over a two-year period. In addition, each community was provided with specialized training for the school management committee and the parent action group. Though cost data are not available on this training, it can be estimated at a minimum of five days of training for each group and 10 days of facilitation by trainers who earned US \$10 a day. This estimate yields a cost per community of US \$1,700—slightly more than one-third higher than the per-community costs of the SRC.

Outcomes could not be compared. In Guatemala, only information on numbers trained was available, and the impact of the program in Ghana was judged with locally derived criteria. Thus, cost analysis is preliminary; more research into costs of community participation activities is needed to provide useful information for local decision making.

## *Sustainability*

The SRC is voluntary; it offers no incentives other than an average of four days of technical assistance for each participating school. Despite this lack of incentives—and even in an environment where schools have learned to expect that projects will not provide them with material benefits—only one school dropped out of the program during the school year. This high participation rate suggests that communities find the SRC process valuable once it is implemented. As shown in the discussion of the AG process, the value of involving parents, teachers, and students in determining the status of their schools and gathering baseline data to monitor change was viewed positively by all groups involved.

That schools developed their own plans and timetables for carrying out actions in the 2006 school year shows a high degree of local ownership. In all communities, a cadre of parents, teachers, and students learned to collect and analyze data, as well as develop strategies to use local resources to solve problems and monitor the results of actions taken. For example, in Guatemala, the facilitator suffered an accident before most of the community dialogue had been held and action plans implemented. Nevertheless, the community held the dialogues, developed action plans, and monitored results with only occasional telephone contact with the facilitator.



# Conclusions

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## *Results*

**The SRC process successfully mobilizes communities.** An average of 306 people participated in community dialogues to discuss SRC findings across all schools. In the largest school, over 1,000 people participated in the session. This compares to an average of 113 participants at school-community meetings at non-SRC control schools.

**The SRC successfully addresses education quality and efficiency issues.** Ninety-seven percent of participating schools with action plans initiated activities to improve education quality during the 2005 school year. Actions related to education quality made up 85 percent of all actions taken, which compares favorably with the 11 percent of activities of non-SRC schools that were related to education quality.

Among examples of short-term results related to quality in SRC communities were the following: parents established an adequate place to do homework and read with students; students developed norms of conduct for the classroom or served as tutors for younger children; and teachers studied participatory methods, organizing classrooms into small groups and training parents as tutors.

Examples of actions related to efficiency included the visits by teachers and parents to homes of parents of habitually tardy or absent students ; discussions of schooling at church meetings; and school-age children not enrolled in school identified.

**Community dialogue sessions and action planning also contributed to understanding education quality issues.** Most of the more than 10,000 community members who took part in the process demonstrated an understanding of education quality issues as a result of their participation.

**The SRC process generally took between six weeks and three months, and it generates results within a relatively short time.** Although many schools completed the process near the end of the 2005 school year, 79 percent initiated actions before the end of the year, and all schools incorporated the SRC in to their school management planning for 2006.

## *Sustainability and Costs*

**The SRC has effects that last beyond its implementation period .** Ninety-seven percent of the 36 communities in five countries carried out the SRC process, and they plan to continue implementing actions for school improvement in 2006 without support from CERCA. The SRC process has established a cadre of parents, teachers, and students who have learned to collect and analyze data, develop strategies to use local resources to solve problems, and monitor the results of actions taken. In one country, the SRC successfully carried out action plans despite the loss of the facilitator, and in two other countries action plans went forward though facilitators could not reach the communities for several weeks. The value of involving parents, teachers, and students in determining the status of their school and creating baseline data to monitor change was viewed positively among those involved in the AG process.

**Local communities can successfully plan and monitor actions to improve education quality.** Across all countries, the SRC process was successful in building the capacity of community members to collect and analyze school-related data within a relatively short time. The effort also led to the planning of a number of actions formalized in an action plan, which comprised activities, timelines, the identification of persons responsible for implementing activities, and a monitoring plan. The transfer of knowledge gained in planning and monitoring was demonstrated in the subsequent ability of school personnel to adapt their SRC action plans to 2006 school management plans.

**The SRC contributes to community solidarity .** The process of involving parents in analyzing and planning improvements for their schools helped to reinitiate contacts between schools and parents in several communities. In other communities, members who had not participated in school functions because of lingering resentments associated with past civil conflicts worked together successfully. As SRC action plans continue in 2006, such new relationships appear to be long-lasting.

**The SRC process appears to be cost-effective, though there is limited availability of comparative data.** The SRC is relatively inexpensive because its only incentive is minimal external facilitation support. The recurrent average cost per beneficiary is US \$5, and the average cost at the community level was US \$1,182. Though only limited data are available, these costs appear to be lower than those of other USAID-supported community participation activities. Available data from Guatemala from a woman's leadership program indicate that per-beneficiary costs were more than twice those of the SRC, and per-community costs for the Ghana CSA appear to have been one-third higher than those of the CERCA SRC, at a minimum. Furthermore, costs for CERCA SRC in a

participating community are one-time; further implementation is carried out without external facilitation support. Given the lack of data on the costs of community empowerment in education, it is important to monitor the results of actions on school internal efficiency so that comparisons can be made between programs that focus on education quality.

## *Implementation*

**SRC facilitators must work within a school's time constraints and have an understanding of education quality issues .** Key characteristics for successful SRC facilitation were previous experience with teaching and learning at the primary level and the flexibility to adapt to schedule changes . Such changes may be caused by ministry of education activities, community emergencies , or natural disasters.

**Students can make important contributions toward improving education quality.** Students made particularly important contributions to issues related to classroom processes and interactions , and they took active roles in data collection, community presentations, and action plan implementation. Both parents and teachers accepted the participation of students in AGs and suggested that the SRC would not be complete without student participation.

**School directors play an important role in the SRC implementation process .** Cooperation of directors must be sought to effectively carry out the SRC process, and directors should be considered potential resources as advocates of its implementation.

**Existing local school management structures are generally not appropriate for leading the effort.** AG members were voluntary participants who were elected through a democratic process. Some members of existing school management bodies chose to participate in the SRC, but others did not because of workloads imposed by their membership in these organizations. In every case, these obligations caused members who participated to abjure a leadership role. These results suggest that existing management structures are not good mechanisms for implementing the SRC, given their different responsibilities and time requirements. However, more research is needed on alternative options.

## *Recommendations for Future Implementation*

**Expand the SRC effort wherever there is interest in implementing an effective community-level tool for improving education quality.** The success of the SRC in implementing community-led actions to improve education quality in different types of schools across five countries suggests it can be a valuable tool to aid education decentralization efforts. Thus, the SRC should be offered as a strategy to ministries of education that are attempting to develop community participation in education, both throughout Latin America and in other comparable contexts.

**Future development of SRC efforts should continue to involve teachers, parents, and students working collaboratively.** The high value placed on contributions made by students throughout the SRC process in all countries suggests that the current implementation structure should be continued. Since school management organizations usually do not include students and their members do not have time to take on the SRC, the process continues to be developed as a tool that complements school management efforts.

**Begin the SRC process early in the school year.** In all countries, the SRC did not begin early in the school year because of the time needed to negotiate agreements with ministries of education. This led to less than complete implementation of the action plan and incomplete results in a few communities. The SRC should begin early in the school year to ensure that communities can implement all actions and monitor all results.

**Maintain the SRC's focus on educational quality.** The SRC process is effective for mobilizing communities. In poor rural communities, where economic and health crises and natural disasters are common, it is tempting to apply the SRC process to deal with needs generated by these crises. However, the success of the SRC in addressing issues of quality and efficiency depends on maintaining its focus on quality. A detailed study that investigated the potential implementation of the SRC under different conditions and for other contexts would be valuable.

**Work with the section of a ministry of education or departmental education office tasked with school-community relationships.** Those sections of the ministry of education charged with visiting schools and communities to provide administrative and pedagogical support are ideal coordinating bodies for the SRC, given their objectives of community empowerment to support education quality. As school directors usually have local responsibility for community outreach, they work with supervisors and other outreach personnel. Thus, directors are key actors in efforts to coordinate with ministries of education on the SRC.

**Conduct follow-up with schools that participated in the SRC during 2005.** To determine the SRC's impact in terms of pedagogical changes in the classroom and behavioral changes in the community, it is extremely important to follow up with schools that participated in 2005. This follow-up can be accomplished at minimal cost if it is tied to ongoing data collection or the technical support efforts of the ministry of education. In cases where such field data collection is not possible, impact can be measured at little additional cost with secondary data, such as ministry of education school statistics.

Given the variety of strategies for addressing education quality and efficiency in different communities and the lack of standardized test results, an aggregate or comparative measure of improvement in quality is not possible. Efficiency indicators should thus be used to measure education quality. Internal efficiency can be used as a proxy measure, since it reflects quality improvements in terms of increased promotion.



**Picture 12. A student shows her support for the role of student math tutors.**



**Picture 13. A mother reviews school attendance records.**



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Annex 1:

# List of Participating CERCA SRC Schools (2004–05)

Country and number of actions	School	State
Guatemala (15)	Escuela Nacional Mixta Bilingüe de Autogestión Comunitaria PRONADE Caserío Chiyaquilicaj Patz'ij (COEDUCA)	Sololá, Nahuala
	Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta (EORM) El Arado	Sacatepequez Sumpango
	Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta (EORM) El Arenal	Jalapa
	Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta (EORM) Aldea El Paraíso	Jalapa
	Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta (EORM) Las Azucenas	Jalapa
	Escuela Nacional Rural Mixta de Autogestión Las Crucitas	Jalapa
	Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta (EORM) Caserío Palanquix Loma	Sololá, Nahuala
	Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta (EORM) Patz'ité	Sololá, Nahuala
	San José de Sinaché	Quiché
	Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta (EORM) Yalú	Sacatepequez Sumpango
	Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta (EORM) Xenacoj Mat	Sacatepequez Santo Domingo
	Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta (EORM) Xenacoj Vesp	Sacatepequez Santo Domingo
	Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta (EORM) Caserío Xepatuj	Sololá, Nahuala
	Escuela Oficial de Panchún	Joyabaj
	Escuela Oficial de Panajxit II	Santa Cruz del Quiché
El Salvador (14)	Centro Educativo Copapayo	Sonsonate
	La Esperanza	San Vicente
	Las Colinas (EDUCO)	Sonsonate
	Las Ilusiones (EDUCO)	Juayúa

Country and number of action	School	State
	Las Tres Ceibas	Sonsonate
	Monte Sinaí (EDUCO)	San Vicente
	San Diego	San Vicente
	San Diego Uno (EDUCO)	San Vicente
	San Francisco Angulo	San Vicente
	Santa Gertrudis (EDUCO)	San Vicente
	Jiboa	San Vicente
	Santa Teresa (EDUCO)	Sonsonate
	Palacios	Suchitoto, Cuscatlán
	Tehuacán	Tecoluca, San Vicente
Honduras (4)	Dr. Marco Aurelio Soto, San Juancito	Francisco Morazán
	Miguel Morazán, Aldea Las Tapias	Francisco Morazán
	Juan Lindo, Zarabanda	Francisco Morazán
	Rómulo Durón, Aldea Mateo	Francisco Morazán
Dominican Republic (3)	El Corozo	Moca
	Las Charcas	Santiago, Distrito No.8
	Los Hornos	La Vega
Nicaragua (6)	Jean Paúl Genie	Departamento Managua
	Ruben Darío No.2	Departamento Managua
	San José de la Cañada	Departamento Managua
	San Isidro	Chinandega
	Amigos de Holanda	El Viejo, Chinandega
	Hermanos de Salzburgo	León

**Annex 2:**

# Guide for Information Collection

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This guide serves as the basis for collecting information. The indicators are tested in the field to determine their value in clearly assessing the situation and motivating the educational community. The information ultimately presented to the community is modified, based on the application.

## **CONTEXT**

### **Identification**

- Name of school
- Date
- School/community code number
- Address, municipality, department, country
- Type of school (mark all that apply): rural, urban, multigrade, indigenous, etc.
- Grades offered
- Number of students (male and female)
- Number of teachers
- Employment status of teachers
- Number of shifts
- Grades attended from preschool to sixth grade
- Person(s) responsible for collecting school-level information

### **Access to Services**

Does the school have the following services?

- Potable water
- Sanitation—number of functional latrines, if any
- Electricity
- Adequate natural light in classrooms
- Functional recreation area
- Access to a telephone
- Adequate security
- Recycling processes

## INPUT

### Access to Resources

How many children have access to the following school resources?

Desks

Notebooks and pencils

Crayons, poster boards, and similar materials

Recycled materials

A textbook of their own to use during class

A textbook to use outside of class

Computers, science labs, or another form of technology used for learning

A usable library

### Access to Social Services

Which of the following social services are available in the school for students?

Daily school meals

Vouchers

Scholarships

Health programs

Other (specify)

What needed services are not available at the school center?

Does the school receive some type of nongovernmental assistance? Who contributes, and with what kind of help?

## PROCESSES

### Attendance

In total, how many students do not regularly attend school?

In total, how many students do not arrive at school on time?

On how many school days last month were classes not held? For what reasons, in each case?

What is the average number of students per section?

### Implementation of the school plan

Does the school rely on an improvement plan for administrative management and instructional practices?

Why should it have a plan?

To what extent is the school plan known and shared with the teachers?

To what extent is the school plan known and shared with parents?

To what extent have previously established goals of the school plan been achieved?

**Parent participation**

- Is there someone at home who reads to children?
- Do parents support or check homework?
- Are there appropriate conditions at home for children to do homework?
- Do teachers and parents work together on projects to improve the school?

**RESULTS****Coverage**

- How many school-age boys (7–15) are out of school?
- How many school-age girls (7–15) are out of school?
- If preschool is offered, how many preschool-age boys and girls are out of school?

**Efficiency**

- How many students are repeating first, second, and third grade this year? Why?
- How many students are in first grade and how many are in sixth grade? If these numbers vary greatly, why do they?
- How many students does each teacher have?

**Quality**

- Do students ask questions and express ideas during class?
- Are students working in small groups?
- Do students read children's books and other materials that are not textbooks?
- Are specific times devoted to reading during school hours?
- Do students write about topics they care about?
- Are there student's exhibitions on the walls?
- Are many students writing productions (e.g., poems, letters, research, and stories)?
- Are student's math exhibitions on the walls? Do these include problem-solving exercises?
- Do students receive formative feedback to correct their mistakes and recognize their learning successes?
- Do students receive recognition for their academic progress?
- Is there discipline at the classroom?
- Are classroom norms hung on the wall of each classroom?

**Civic competencies**

- Does the school have an active student government?
- Is student government representation diverse?
- Is student's group work displayed?
- Is there formative self-assessment of teachers as well as student participation in team-building activities?

### Annex 3:

## Frequently Asked Questions

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### **What is the CERCA School Report Card?**

The CERCA school report card (SRC) has been developed in Central America as an approach that informs local school communities about conditions of teaching and learning in their schools. The analysis of simple indicators uses self-assessment to enable communities to better understand educational processes and results. Local communities develop action plans and monitor implementation to improve school quality.

### **Why is the CERCA SRC unique?**

The SRC is unique because it involves teachers, parents, and students working jointly to collect and analyze information and act upon what they find. The SRC is a strategy of empowerment and capacity building in action research, analysis, and planning for local education communities. It is not a top-down approach; rather, it is designed to build quality education through local community consensus and decisionmaking. Thus, this approach can be considered a non-confrontational accountability process that supports ongoing decentralization efforts.

### **What are the key features of CERCA SRC?**

The key features of the SRC are:

1. A strong focus on educational quality and democratic behavior in the classroom as keys for improving the delivery of local education.
2. A democratically elected analysis group (AG) of 10–15 members, with equal representation of students, teachers, and parents. An AG also includes the school principal and perhaps a community leader, and all members work together over a three-month period, on average.
3. A community facilitator, who, for a limited period of time (2 to 3 hours a day for about 12 days) helps communities to collect and analyze data. The facilitator also helps the AG to prepare and deliver the SRC on school conditions to the broader community and assists with other actions to improve the education experience of students.
4. An emphasis on assisting communities in monitoring the results of their action plans and making new decisions based on the monitoring findings.

### **What procedures make the CERCA SRC work?**

A series of procedures are generally carried out over the course of a school year.

**The first step is the selection of members of the analysis group.** The AG's student, teacher, and parent members are usually elected democratically by their peers, though communities can determine another selection process. The school principal is also a member of the AG.

**The second step involves defining data collection strategies and procedures.** AG members decide on approaches for collecting information on the status of the school. This is done through a number of simple indicators that are related to the general characteristics of the school, coverage, efficiency, and the quality of teaching and learning. Additional indicators include access to services and resources and processes such as attendance, planning, and parental participation. The AG studies findings and prioritizes the information by identifying weaknesses that the community can address and that have the most impact on learning.

**The third step is to present findings to the community.** This step involves the production of the actual SRC. The AG uses a variety of media, including graphics and socio-drama, to present findings at community dialogues. Community members provide input on priorities and action strategies.

**The final step is the implementation of action and monitoring plans.** The finalization of the action plan is based on community input. It consists of strategies for carrying out actions, identification of individuals responsible for the actions, a timeline, and a monitoring plan with objectives and measures for determining results. The AG often participates in the action planning, as do community members.

### **Why is an approach like the CERCA SRC important?**

Traditionally, parents in Central America have had few options for, and little knowledge about, the education of their children, especially in the absence of standardized tests and school reporting. Due to their scarce economic resources, most parents have very limited capacity to express complaints about their children's schooling and almost no power to influence it. Their powerlessness reflects the weak, top-down, bureaucratic systems that typify government services in the region.

National governments and ministries of education recognize the importance of improving education quality by stimulating local participation. However, the focus thus far has been on local administration of funds. While this process may improve transparency and accountability, it has done little to affect education quality.

Ministries in Central America are looking for ways to involve parents meaningfully in educational aspects of schooling.

### **Is this the first time that a school report card has been implemented?**

No, school report cards have been implemented in more than 10 developing countries and exist in a number of forms in developed countries. The four most successful programs in the developing world have been implemented in Namibia, Brazil, Ghana, and by UNICEF in several countries. However, The CERCA SRC is a new model that was developed using the input of existing school report card methodology. The CERCA SRC took this bottom-up effort further by helping communities develop their own objectives and procedures for collecting and analyzing data, taking actions, and monitoring results. In addition, the SRC makes students a vital part of the entire process and shares information with the whole community.

### **What has been the impact of the CERCA SRC in Central America?**

The SRC process generated a great deal of interest in school communities. An average of 306 individuals participated in assemblies — or community dialogues — that were held to discuss SRC findings in all participating schools. In the largest of these schools, over 1,000 people participated in the community dialogue.

The SRC successfully addressed issues of education quality and efficiency:

- ninety-seven percent of the schools with action plans initiated activities to improve education quality during the 2005 school year.
- actions to improve education quality made up 85 percent of all actions taken in SRC schools, compared to 18 percent of actions in schools without the SRC.
- an estimated 77 percent of community members participating in the SRC process could demonstrate an understanding education quality issues as a result of this participation.
- 79 percent of SRC schools initiated actions before the end of the school year, and all of them incorporated the SRC into their school management planning for the ensuing school year.

### **How long does it take to implement the CERCA SRC?**

The SRC process generates results in a relatively short time, generally between six weeks and three months.

### **What types of actions were carried out as a result of the CERCA SRC?**

Actions related to quality included parents establishing an adequate place for their children to do homework and reading with them; students developing norms of conduct for the classroom and serving as tutors for younger children; and teachers studying participatory methods, organizing classrooms into small groups, and training parents as tutors.

Actions related to efficiency included teachers and parents visiting the homes of habitually tardy or absent students, religious leaders discussing the importance of schooling during church meetings, school-age children being identified who were not enrolled in school, and community groups taking action on child labor affecting school attendance.

### **Is the CERCA SRC cost-effective?**

Yes, although comparative data are limited, the CERCA SRC per-beneficiary cost is less than one-half that of other programs in Central America. Per-community costs are one-third less than the costs of a similar program in Ghana.

### **Is the CERCA SRC sustainable?**

The potential for SRC sustainability is high. In the five countries, all participating SRC communities plan to continue implementing actions for school improvement in 2006 without CERCA support.

The CERCA SRC process has established a cadre of parents, teachers, and students who have learned to collect and analyze data, as well as develop strategies that use local resources to solve problems and monitor results. This is evident in the number of communities where AGs successfully carried out action plans, despite the fact that facilitators could not reach them for a period of time. That knowledge gained in planning and monitoring was transferred is shown in the demonstrated ability of school personnel to adapt SRC action plans to their 2006 school management plans.

### **How does the CERCA SRC link to school improvement plans and other current educational policies in participating countries?**

The SRC supports decentralization policies and strategies to encourage local participation in all Central American countries, and it promotes the efficient use of local resources to improve educational quality. The SRC also provides information for effective local school management, and it supports national strategies for partnership between local school leadership and ministry of education supervisory personnel to improve delivery of national and regional services to schools.

### **Can the CERCA SRC approach be taken to scale?**

Yes, the CERCA School Report Card has all of the key characteristics for a successful scaling up. It is low cost, it can be implemented by existing Ministry personnel, such as supervisors or school principals, it can be continued effectively by communities without external support, and it has a strong focus on results related to accountability for learning and outcomes. The SRC is a valuable tool for those countries involved in initiatives to improve educational quality and/or decentralize control of schools to local communities. Specifically, the SRC can contribute to programs with objectives such as: parent participation in student learning; teacher self-improvement efforts such as teacher circles; student participation through peer tutoring and after school programs; or school improvement planning using data-based management procedures.

Results suggest that scaling up can best be achieved by using a phased strategy that allows new implementing schools to learn from the experience of those who are using the SRC approach. The school outreach division of Ministries, such as supervision, should implement the SRC by training school directors to facilitate the School Report Card approach. Utilization of School Report Card findings by Ministries to plan outreach support to the schools will reinforce ongoing use of the SRC tool and encourage additional schools to implement the approach.



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