



A Guide for School Districts: Exploring Alternative Measures of Student Learning and Wellness

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Introduction

Beyond federal requirements in the Every Student Succeeds Act and state-level accountability systems, school districts across the country have an essential role in school-level accountability, especially assessing student learning and wellness. Today — with unfamiliar school configurations and unknown impacts on student outcomes — districts can **adapt how they measure school quality** to better understand how schools are operating and how students are learning.

Numerous school districts have developed [School Performance Frameworks \(SPFs\)](#) with shared metrics for quality among their schools. With a missing year of data on state assessments, widespread adoption of distance learning, and a renewed emphasis on student health and safety, these districts must **adjust their SPFs to account for missing data and shifting priorities**.

For those districts that have yet to establish SPFs, the urgent need to understand what schools are doing and how it affects student outcomes can serve as a call to action. SPFs are an essential tool that can help districts **set priorities for their schools and support them as they continue to adapt and improve**. Moreover, unlike federal- and state-level officials, school district leaders are well-positioned to establish metrics that are responsive to local circumstances.

Bellwether has published [numerous resources](#) in recent weeks and months about the role of metrics and accountability during the pandemic; this deck is a **tool for district leaders** as they develop and adapt their approaches.

Districts need to rethink their approaches to measuring student learning and wellness

The **COVID-19 pandemic, school closures, advent of distance learning, and suspension of state testing** have **disrupted how districts assess and manage their systems of schools**. Districts must **adapt** their approaches accordingly.

Districts must shift how they **assess school quality, support continuous improvement, and hold schools accountable**.

It is essential for districts to **understand how well schools are meeting the needs of students**, including not only academic growth but also student wellness.

Districts managing systems in which **foundational decisions** affecting student learning sit with **building leaders** need to continue strong oversight and support **decision-making at the school and system** level.

Districts have a **responsibility to protect student interests** while being mindful of the burdens they place on school leaders and educators.

Measures of school quality are essential for **understanding equity** and ensuring that the system of schools is collectively meeting the **needs of all students**.

The **data gaps** created by lack of testing **fundamentally disrupted** the ways in which districts have assessed schools' academic performance.

The need to rethink these measures has occurred within a broader discussion of accountability

Current circumstances present challenges for districts in managing school quality, as well as a **window to refresh** their approach. Districts with SPFs must **quickly and nimbly** adjust them, as well as how they are used for **accountability and continuous improvement**.

At the same time, all districts — regardless of whether they have SPFs — can start now to build a foundation for **how schools and systems recover**, how we assess **what we value** about school performance, and how to better **support students to thrive** moving forward.

Some have argued that we should **forgo accountability** for the last year and beyond, while others believe we should **return to past accountability practices as soon as possible**.

Neither response is adequate. Rather, districts must develop **new and better approaches** to assess student learning, school performance, and quality.

Districts need not start from scratch; many can **evolve their existing SPFs** to assess and communicate school quality.

Adaptations **shouldn't narrowly focus** on addressing current gaps in testing data.

In developing and evolving their SPFs, districts have an **opportunity to innovate** in ways that are responsive to the **needs of their local communities**.

To evolve SPFs or define new locally developed measures and goals, districts must answer several key questions

- 1 What are the **key concepts or indicators** that make up the district's current/past approach to assessing school quality? Are there other concepts or indicators related to school performance that become newly or more important for districts to assess in a COVID-19 world?
- 2 **How** has the district measured school performance within these indicators?
- 3 **Why** does the district focus on these measures? What questions is the district trying to answer?
- 4 What **kinds of decisions** does this data inform? What are the stakes of these decisions for students, schools, communities, and districts?
- 5 What **problems or complications** may prevent the district from using these measures now? Are there other limitations of those measures that the district is concerned about or aware of?
- 6 What are **other ways** the district could get at the questions that these measures are intended to help us answer? What information is the district currently collecting from schools? Is there additional information that schools are collecting that might help? Are there other information sources that would be useful that districts and schools don't currently have but potentially could?
- 7 What steps must the district take to **implement** these other ways of assessing quality or use them well? Are there any statutory or regulatory constraints? How will the district engage stakeholders and build buy-in for the changes?

This toolkit walks through these questions to support adjustments to measuring student learning and wellness

To **adapt existing school performance frameworks** during the pandemic, districts must audit the measures they have previously used, assess limitations of those measures in the current context, identify other measures that are newly relevant, and develop an approach to answering key questions about student learning and well-being.

Crucially, a **variety of stakeholders** use school performance frameworks to make decisions for their families, schools, and communities. Districts must prioritize providing information that is most useful to those stakeholders.

School performance frameworks typically include measures that align to six domains (slide 1 of 2)

1. Student Growth/Progress

- State standardized assessments:
Criterion-referenced growth, median growth percentile, student growth percentile, value-added measures
- Subgroup growth

2. Student Achievement (Proficiency)

- State standardized assessments: percent of students proficient, proficiency rates relative to other schools or state average
- Subgroup proficiency

3. Postsecondary Readiness

- Graduation rate/Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR)
- Credit units: 9th- or 10th-grade students on-track to graduate
- ACT/SAT: participation rates; percent scoring above a certain threshold; average score compared to national averages
- Completion of AP/IB or postsec credits while in high school
- Completion of industry-recognized credentials
- Postsecondary enrollment: College acceptance rate; percent of graduates enrolled in postsecondary; remediation rate for graduates attending postsecondary
- Post-graduation employment: Percent of graduates employed in the fall following graduation

This toolkit will walk through [key questions for districts](#) one by one for the first domain, followed by a summary of each of the other five domains.

The measures included here are examples and do not reflect all possible measures for each domain

School performance frameworks typically include measures that align to six domains (slide 2 of 2)

4. Model-Specific Goals	5. Student & Family Engagement & Well-Being	6. Opportunity Gaps
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Extent to which school implements/students complete practices aligned with specific school model (e.g., internships or capstones; volunteering hours)● Valid and reliable measures of student learning in subjects other than ELA and math (e.g., additional languages for bilingual schools; science)● Portfolios or other tools to demonstrate student learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Instructional minutes● Average daily attendance● Chronic absenteeism rates● Truancy rates● Reenrollment rates● School climate measures● Parent surveys● Student surveys● Supports for emotional, behavioral, mental, and physical health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Exclusionary discipline rates● Exclusionary discipline rates for student subgroups● Student mobility● Special education delivery● Racial and economic segregation● Teacher demographic data● Teacher-student match data● Availability & enrollment in advanced, rigorous coursework; gifted and talented programs; courses in arts, social sciences, sciences, and technology; formalized systems of tutoring and other academic supports● Enrollment in above by subgroup

This toolkit will walk through [key questions for districts](#) one by one for the first domain, followed by a summary of each of the other five domains.

Domain Example: Student Growth/Progress

Districts can use this process to adapt existing SPFs or define new school measures and goals

The following slides sequentially walk through the **questions districts must answer** to adapt their school performance framework or define new locally developed school measures and goals ([see here for the complete list of questions](#)).

Each slide focuses on one of these key questions, provides **instructions for examining practices and priorities** to answer that question, and identifies **key considerations**.

This set of slides illustrates how a district might go through this process, using the **student growth/progress domain** and the **state standardized assessments** measure as an example. A district should complete this same process for all measures it is considering adapting or creating.

A workbook [available here](#) was developed to answer similar questions for charter school authorizers, and may also be useful for districts.

1 What domains make up the district's current/past approach to assessing student growth/progress?

The district must **identify the domains** that make up its vision for school quality

- Review the **domains** in the district's **school performance framework**
- Identify the **domains** that the district focuses on in measuring school performance
- Identify which of these domains are **common across schools** and which are **differentiated for certain types of schools** (e.g., by grade level) or for individual schools

What domains make up the district's current/past approach to assessing school quality?	Student growth/progress
<i>How have we measured school performance in these domains?</i>	
<i>Why do we focus on these measures?</i>	
<i>What questions are we trying to answer?</i>	
<i>What kinds of decisions do these data inform?</i>	
<i>What complications may prevent us from using those measures now?</i>	
<i>What are other ways we could get at the questions that these measures are intended to help us address?</i>	
<i>What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or use them well?</i>	

2 How has the district measured school performance in student growth/progress?

The district must **identify how it measures** these domains of school quality.

- For **each of the domains** identified, the district must **list out the measures** that it previously used, or could use, to assess school performance for that domain
- This list may get **long**; there will likely be **multiple measures** for each domain
- **The district should not pare down** the list of measures at this point, but consider this a brainstorm
- This list of measures is the district's initial list of **student growth/progress measures**

What domains make up the district's current/past approach to assessing school quality?	Student growth/progress
How has the district measured school performance in these domains?	State standardized assessments (e.g., criterion-referenced growth, median growth percentile, student growth percentile, value-added measures)
<i>Why do we focus on these measures?</i>	
<i>What questions are we trying to answer?</i>	
<i>What kinds of decisions do these data inform?</i>	
<i>What complications may prevent us from using those measures now?</i>	
<i>What are other ways we could get at the questions that these measures are intended to help us address?</i>	
<i>What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or use them well?</i>	

3

Why does the district focus on these measures? What questions is the district trying to answer?

The district must be clear about the **rationale** for including these measures in its school performance frameworks

- For **each of the student growth/progress measures**, the district must think through **why** the measure is important
- Given that rationale, the district must clarify the **question** it is trying to answer with that measure

Consider: Are any questions answered by **multiple measures**? Are each of the measures **worth collecting** or **necessary** to answer the question?

What domains make up the district's current/past approach to assessing school quality?	Student growth/progress
How has the district measured school performance in these domains?	State standardized assessments: (e.g., criterion-referenced growth, median growth percentile, student growth percentile, value-added measures)
Why does the district focus on these measures?	Student growth or learning gains reflect how well a school is supporting children's learning; growth or gains provide a more accurate picture of a school's contribution to children's learning than achievement data alone
What questions is the district trying to answer?	Are students learning what we expect them to learn over the course of the year? Are students progressing at least one grade level over the course of the year? Are students on track to reach grade-level expectations?
<i>What kinds of decisions do these data inform?</i>	
<i>What complications may prevent us from using those measures now?</i>	
<i>What are other ways we could get at the questions that these measures are intended to help us address?</i>	
<i>What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or use them well?</i>	

4 What kinds of **decisions** do these data inform?

Student learning and wellness measures are ultimately used to make **decisions** about schools.

- The district must identify the **types of decisions** that these data have historically informed
- There will likely be **substantial overlap** in the types of decisions

Consider: How do teachers and school leaders use this information to **inform** their **instructional approaches** and **priorities**? How do families and the community use this information to **understand** school quality and **make decisions** for students?

What domains make up the district's current/past approach to assessing school quality?	Student growth/progress
How has the district measured school performance in these domains?	State standardized assessments: (e.g., criterion-referenced growth, median growth percentile, student growth percentile, value-added measures)
Why does the district focus on these measures?	Student growth or learning gains reflect how well a school is supporting children's learning; growth or gains provide a more accurate picture of a school's contribution to children's learning than achievement data alone
What questions is the district trying to answer?	Are students learning what we expect them to learn over the course of the year? Are students progressing at least one grade level over the course of the year? Are students on track to reach grade-level expectations?
What kinds of decisions do these data inform?	Ratings shared with parents and public; school improvement planning; decisions about driving systemic improvement
<i>What complications may prevent us from using those measures now?</i>	
<i>What are other ways we could get at the questions that these measures are intended to help us address?</i>	
<i>What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or use them well?</i>	

5

What **problems** or **complications** may prevent the district from using those measures now?

The district must anticipate **complications** with relying on these measures to inform decisions.

- For each of the student learning and wellness measures, the district must identify **potential challenges**
- **Key questions** may help elucidate challenges: What is the short- and long-term availability of the data? Does the district question or mistrust the validity of the data for this measure?

Consider: Are there any **actions** the district could take to solve these problems? Do any measures have **insurmountable** challenges? If so, is it crucial to **continue using** those measures, at least at this point in time?

What domains make up the district's current/past approach to assessing school quality?	Student growth/progress
How has the district measured school performance in these domains?	State standardized assessments: Criterion-referenced growth, median growth percentile, student growth percentile, value-added measures
Why does the district focus on these measures?	Student growth or learning gains reflect how well a school is supporting children's learning; growth or gains provide a more accurate picture of a school's contribution to children's learning than achievement data alone
What questions is the district trying to answer?	Are students learning what we expect them to learn over the course of the year? Are students progressing at least one grade level over the course of the year? Are students on track to reach grade-level expectations?
What kinds of decisions do these data inform?	Ratings shared with parents and public; school improvement planning; decisions about driving systemic improvement
What complications may prevent the district from using those measures now?	States did not administer state standardized assessments in spring 2020, so growth data are not available for this year or next year, and potentially further into the future
<i>What are other ways we could get at the questions that these measures are intended to help us address?</i>	
<i>What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or use them well?</i>	

6 What **other ways** could the district get at the questions these measures are intended to help us answer? (1 of 2)

There may be **viable alternatives** to the data historically used for this measure.

- For each of the measures with prohibitive challenges, the district must brainstorm **data sources** or **measures** that could answer the same question
- The districts must prioritize data that fill a gap created by **COVID-19** and focus on data that the district and schools **already collect** or could be **collected with limited burden**

Consider: Are there **steps the district should take** to collect a new source of data in the future?
 Are there **partners** the district can reach out to or **permissions** the district must secure in order to have access to these data in the long term?

What domains make up the district's current/past approach to assessing school quality?	Student growth/progress
How has the district measured school performance in these domains?	State standardized assessments: Criterion-referenced growth, median growth percentile, student growth percentile, value-added measures
Why does the district focus on these measures?	Student growth or learning gains reflect how well a school is supporting children's learning; growth or gains provide a more accurate picture of a school's contribution to children's learning than achievement data alone
What questions is the district trying to answer?	Are students learning what we expect them to learn over the course of the year? Are students progressing at least one grade level over the course of the year? Are students on track to reach grade-level expectations?
What kinds of decisions do these data inform?	Ratings shared with parents and public; school improvement planning; decisions about driving systemic improvement
What complications may prevent the district from using those measures now?	States did not administer state standardized assessments in spring 2020, so growth data are not available for this year or next year, and potentially further into the future
What are other ways the district could get at the questions that these measures are intended to help it address?	*See next slide
<i>What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or use them well?</i>	

6 What **other ways** could the district get at the questions these measures are intended to help us answer? (2 of 2)

There may be **viable alternatives** to the data historically used for this measure.

- For each of the measures with prohibitive challenges, the district must brainstorm **data sources** or **measures** that could answer the same question
- The districts must prioritize data that fill a gap created by **COVID-19** and focus on data that the district and schools **already collect** or could be **collected with limited burden**

Consider: Are there **steps the district should take** to collect a new source of data in the future?

Are there **partners** the district can reach out to or **permissions** the district must secure in order to have access to these data in the long term?

<p>What domains make up the district's current/past approach to assessing school quality?</p>	<p>Student growth/progress</p>
<p>Questions 2 - 5</p>	<p><i>*See previous slide</i></p>
<p>What are other ways the district could get at the questions that these measures are intended to help it address?</p>	<p>Benchmark or interim measures commonly used by schools (e.g., NWEA adapted to produce a summative score, ANet benchmarks)</p> <p>Student progress data generated by online/tech-based learning programs (e.g., DreamBox, Waterford)</p> <p>Curriculum-based assessments used by schools</p> <p>Formative assessments used by schools</p> <p>Students' progress through independently defined levels of performance (e.g., Lexile or grade-level progress in reading, executive functioning levels for adult learning)</p>
<p><i>What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or use them well?</i></p>	

7 What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or using them well?

The district must plan carefully when revising its approach

- The district must identify **statutes** or **regulations** that affect how it can adapt school performance frameworks (e.g., school board policies)
- The district must identify **stakeholders** who need to have **input** and **buy-in** for changes to school performance frameworks (e.g., board members, school leaders, families)

Consider: Given the number of changes schools and communities are navigating, **careful planning** and **strong communication** are of utmost importance

What domains make up the district's current/past approach to assessing school quality?	Student growth/progress
Questions 2 - 6	<i>*See previous slide</i>
<p>What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or use them well?</p>	<p>Assess constraints in statutes, regulations, or local policies in consultation with local school board and state education agency, as needed</p> <p>Engage school leaders to understand what assessments they use, and how they use them (and other sources of data) to identify and address areas of continuous improvement</p> <p>Engage parent-teacher associations or other parent groups to understand how data on student growth/progress informs public understanding and family decision-making</p> <p>Communicate with school board members and other public officials about the ways in which the district plans to change the domains, to solicit input and build buy-in</p> <p>Determine ambitious but achievable expectations for students and schools</p>

Domain Summaries:

- *Student Growth/Progress (see previous slides)*
- Student Achievement/Proficiency
- Postsecondary Readiness
- Model-Specific Goals
- Student & Family Engagement & Well-Being
- Opportunity Gaps

Student Achievement/Proficiency: Summary of Key Questions (1 of 2)

What domains make up our current/past approach to assessing student achievement/proficiency?	
1 How has the district measured school performance in these domains?	Subgroup proficiency on state assessments
2 Why does the district focus on these measures?	Students need to master grade-level content in order to be prepared for success in the next level; holding schools accountable for whether students are meeting common grade-level standards is important as a matter of equity to ensure high expectations for all students
3 What questions is the district trying to answer?	Are there differences in performance between student subgroups? Is this school improving outcomes for underserved subgroups?
4 What kinds of decisions do these data inform?	Ratings shared with parents and public; school improvement planning; decisions about driving systemic improvement
5 What complications may prevent the district from using those measures now?	States did not administer state standardized assessments in spring 2020, so these data are not available
6 What are other ways the district could get at the questions that these measures are intended to help it address?	<p>Benchmark or interim measures commonly used by schools (e.g., NWEA adapted to produce a summative score, ANet benchmarks)</p> <p>Student progress data generated by online/tech-based learning programs (e.g., DreamBox, Waterford)</p> <p>Curriculum-based assessments used by schools</p> <p>Formative assessments used by schools</p> <p>Students' progress through independently defined levels of performance (e.g., Lexile or grade-level progress in reading, executive functioning levels for adult learning)</p>

Student Achievement/Proficiency: Summary of Key Questions (2 of 2)

What domains make up our current/past approach to assessing school quality?

7 What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or use them well?

Assess constraints in statutes or regulations, in consultation with local school board and state education agency, as needed

Audit the validity and reliability of existing assessments and determine for what types of accountability decisions it is appropriate to use them

Engage school leaders to understand what assessments they use, and how they use them (and other sources of data) to identify and address areas of continuous improvement

Engage parent-teacher associations or other parent groups to understand how data on student growth/progress informs public understanding and family decision-making

Communicate with school board members and other public officials about the ways in which the district plans to change the domains, to solicit input and build buy-in

Determine ambitious but achievable expectations for students and schools

Postsecondary Readiness: Summary of Key Questions

What domains make up our current/past approach to assessing postsecondary readiness?

1	How has the district measured school performance in these domains?	Graduation rate/Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR)
2	Why does the district focus on these measures?	High school graduation is an important outcome that predicts a host of later economic and life outcomes
3	What questions is the district trying to answer?	Are students in this school persisting to graduation and graduating at acceptable rates?
4	What kinds of decisions do these data inform?	Ratings shared with parents and public; school improvement planning; decisions about driving systemic improvement
5	What complications may prevent the district from using those measures now?	Students whose education was disrupted due to COVID-19 may have lower on-time graduation rates for several years into the future
6	What are other ways the district could get at the questions that these measures are intended to help it address?	Calculate additional graduation rates over extended timelines (e.g., 5-year, 6-year) to account for COVID-related disruptions
7	What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or use them well?	<p>Analyze and take steps to mitigate potential unintended consequences (e.g., whether adjusted graduation rates will be perceived as lowering standards)</p> <p>Engage parent groups, business leaders, and postsecondary institutions to understand how graduation data inform their decisions</p> <p>Solicit input and build buy-in with school board members and other public officials</p> <p>Determine ambitious but achievable expectations for students and schools</p>

Model-specific goals: Summary of Key Questions

What domains make up our current/past approach to assessing model-specific goals?

1	How has the district measured school performance in these domains?	Extent to which school implements/students complete practices aligned with the school model (e.g., internships or capstones; volunteering hours)
2	Why does the district focus on these measures?	Districts can create flexibility for schools to create specialized educational programs that advance specific models or goals (e.g., bilingualism, arts, social justice). Districts that oversee these systems have a responsibility to assess whether such schools are implementing the models with fidelity
3	What questions is the district trying to answer?	Is this school implementing its model as intended?
4	What kinds of decisions do these data inform?	Ratings shared with parents and public; school improvement planning; decisions about driving systemic improvement
5	What complications may prevent the district from using those measures now?	Safe reopening or extended distance learning may require some changes in schools' models or how they implement associated activities
6	What are other ways the district could get at the questions that these measures are intended to help it address?	Are there measures that some schools collect as part of their model that are more important now and should be a higher priority to collect for all schools/students (e.g., measures of student well-being or health)?
7	What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or use them well?	<p>Engage school leaders to identify existing and potential measures that capture the specific value and outcomes of their school model</p> <p>Engage parents to understand what measures would be useful in understanding a school's implementation of a specific model</p> <p>Solicit input and build buy-in with school board members and other public officials about the importance of different school models and tailored measures of quality</p> <p>Determine ambitious but achievable expectations for students and schools</p>

Student and family engagement and well-being: Summary of Key Questions

What domains make up our current/past approach to assessing student and family engagement and well-being?

1	How has the district measured school performance in these domains?	Average daily attendance
2	Why does the district focus on these measures?	Students need to be participating in the learning environment in order to grow and advance
3	What questions is the district trying to answer?	Are students attending school regularly?
4	What kinds of decisions do these data inform?	Ratings shared with parents and public; school improvement planning; decisions about driving systemic improvement
5	What complications may prevent the district from using those measures now?	Unclear how to meaningfully define or measure attendance in a distance learning context; short-term closures and illness are likely to elevate absenteeism rates
6	What are other ways the district could get at the questions that these measures are intended to help it address?	Measures of engagement with online learning platforms (e.g., logins, presence during synchronous instructional time, software-based engagement tracking, completion of daily objectives or activities)
7	What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or use them well?	<p>Analyze and take steps to mitigate potential unintended consequences (e.g., how attendance data informs how districts allocate and schools receive resources)</p> <p>Engage parent groups to understand how they can or need to be engaged with attendance during distance learning</p> <p>Solicit input and buy-in from school board members and other public officials</p> <p>Determine ambitious but achievable expectations for students and schools</p>

Opportunity gaps: Summary of Key Questions

What domains make up our current/past approach to assessing equity?

1	How has the district measured school performance in these domains?	Exclusionary discipline rates for student subgroups
2	Why does the district focus on these measures?	Higher rates of exclusionary discipline for some students may reflect educator biases and/or exacerbate disparities in other outcomes
3	What questions is the district trying to answer?	Are there disparities in the rate at which different student subgroups experience exclusionary discipline?
4	What kinds of decisions do these data inform?	Ratings shared with parents and public; school improvement planning; decisions about driving systemic improvement
5	What complications may prevent the district from using those measures now?	Unclear how to meaningfully define or measure exclusionary discipline rates in a distance learning context
6	What are other ways the district could get at the questions that these measures are intended to help it address?	Unclear until schools develop norms around discipline policies and practices in virtual environments
7	What steps must the district take to implement these other ways of assessing quality or use them well?	<p>Engage parent groups to understand what data could replace discipline rate data and be useful for decision-making</p> <p>Solicit input and buy-in from school board members and other public officials, as well as those affected by the decisions (e.g., school leaders, counselors, families)</p> <p>Determine ambitious but achievable expectations for students and schools</p>

Appendix

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