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The Education Data That Matter Most to Parents and School Stakeholders

By Jamil Modaffari and Laura Jimenez   May 5, 2021

Today's school accountability systems are the primary tool education leaders use to understand the health of the education system and how well it provides all children an opportunity to learn the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the 21st century. They accomplish this by measuring and transparently reporting students' yearly outcomes in academics and other areas. When schools do not meet benchmarks, states require that they take action to improve. However, this system of accountability fails to include meaningful metrics that take into account the context in which students learn, their communities, and the resources made available to them. Most existing school accountability systems do not give leaders—especially those at the local level—a recipe to follow that leads to better outcomes for students. That is, accountability systems are too often designed without critical information about the component parts and the most effective step-by-step process for education stakeholders to follow in order to reach the desired outcome: a quality education for all students.

And yet, local school communities, parents, and caregivers are hungry for this information. They want data that can guide their daily actions to support student learning, both in the classroom and beyond school walls. In 2019, the Center for American Progress embarked on a series of community conversations with caregivers, educators, school administrators, and other school stakeholders to learn what information they value and want to know about schools and student learning. This issue brief highlights what CAP gleaned from one round of community conversations. It includes powerful thoughts from participants that illuminate the need for schools to provide timely and useful data to caregivers, educators, and school leaders to improve the quality of education each child receives.

CAP community conversation overview

CAP initiated a series of education-focused conversations centering the voices of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color across the country. Many of these communities have been systemically deprived of resources, resulting in

their students receiving less of an opportunity to learn at high levels. Their schools receive less funding, are taught by less experienced teachers, and have less access to rigorous and high-quality instructional materials and practices.[1]

This issue brief focuses on a series of conversations with caregivers, educators, and other school stakeholders centered on school accountability and what types of data are made available to community members to ensure that schools are preparing all students for college, career, and civic life. By hosting video calls with school communities in three parts of the country, CAP learned how they use data from accountability systems and what information they want to better support student learning and improve student outcomes. More details about the community conversations can be found in the appendix.

Brief overview of ESSA's K-12 accountability requirements

Each year, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to report how all students and different subgroups of students performed on standardized assessments and a series of additional metrics. The data that states report are necessary and useful for policymakers to target supports and additional investments to schools that need them. However, this design is insufficient to make real- or near-time decisions for students, does not offer any context for the conditions in which students are learning, and restricts determinations about school quality to these limited factors.

ESSA requires states to report how all students and subgroups of students performed in the following areas:

- Percentage of students scoring at proficient or higher on statewide reading and math assessments given annually from third grade through eighth grade and once in high school

- Four-year high school graduation rate

- Individual student growth on statewide reading and math assessments, or other academic data for elementary and middle schools

- Percentage of English language learners achieving English language mastery or proficiency

- At least one additional measure of student success or school quality, such as school attendance

States must use these data to calculate and report how all schools are doing on these metrics, as well as identify a subset of their lowest-performing schools according to state-set goals for the indicators listed above.[2] Schools identified as low performing must create and implement plans to improve until they meet minimum scores on some or all of the above data.

In addition, states must collect and report on a broader range of information, including access to advanced classes, college enrollment rates, student discipline rates, chronic absenteeism, per-pupil spending, and the professional qualifications of educators.[3] While ESSA broadened the scope of what information is used in school accountability systems to include additional measures beyond standardized assessments, local leaders need benchmark data that provide insight into the outcomes observed.

Through community conversations with caregivers, educators, school leaders, and other school stakeholders CAP learned what data these key constituencies want access to and find most useful in making decisions for students in responsive and meaningful ways.

The information school communities say they want about students

CAP virtually convened parents and other caregivers, educators, district and school leaders, and policymakers to discuss what they want to know about student well-being, academic performance, and outcomes.

Parents and caregivers

Adults caring for school-aged children know the kind of education they want kids to experience, and they want to know that schools are providing it. Caregivers want data on students' opportunity to learn; specifically, information about school climate and the supports and services available to students, especially students with disabilities.

Opportunity to learn, or OTL, refers to the academic and nonacademic programs, resources, and supports within a school needed for students to meet their learning goals and graduate prepared for success after high school.[4] OTL includes student access to high-quality curriculum, instruction, and programs; supportive school and classroom environments; highly effective educators; student supports; class sizes; and access to technology.[5] Letisha Vinson, a mother with two school-aged children, shared what opportunities to learn she looks for in her children's education:

> I am really going to look at the curriculum with, like, Google eyes. I want to break down what resources do they have? Are they going to have a science lab? Are they going to learn languages? [Are] there any specials like music and other means of learning outside of the core curriculum?

School climate refers to the character and quality of life in schools, and it is based on how students, teachers, and caregivers experience the goals, norms, values, teaching and learning practices, and interpersonal relationships occurring in

schools.[6] This could include valuing diversity, social-emotional learning, and students' sense of safety.[7] Jonida Spahija, a parent in Washington, D.C., conveyed the classroom culture she wants her daughter to experience:

> I want [my daughter] to be supported socially. I want her to be supported academically. I want her to be supported emotionally. And I want to know that there is cultural competency or cultural humility in the staff, that there is an awareness that they know the demographics that they're dealing with.

Student supports refer to the academic and nonacademic instructional techniques, services, and resources provided in schools to promote students' well-being and academic success.[8] Examples of student supports include mental and physical health services, counseling, college and career prep, tutoring, student-specific academic interventions, and services for students with disabilities.[9] One parent wondered:

> What community-based organizations have already been contracted to provide these services for our children? How will we ensure that all special [education] coordinators are equipped, trained, and ready to update IEPs (individualized education programs), to facilitate relationships with parents to ensure that services are happening, and to facilitate relationships with our kids?

Caregivers also want to see school data on report cards broken down by student demographic groups, laid out visually, and explained in plain language. Kerry Savage, an advocate for parent voices in education, recalled:

> When we did our canvassing work … supporting OSSE (Office of the State Superintendent of Education in the District of Columbia) with the development of the statewide report card … the number one thing that came up [with parents] was disaggregated data.

A national survey of parents from the Data Quality Campaign, an organization that advocates for changing the role of data in education so that "every student is not only counted, but counts," confirms this desire.[10] In the organization's 2019 national poll, 81 percent of parents reported interest in having access to information about how schools serve children like theirs—for example, students of the same race, gender, or special education status.[11]

When families are engaged in their child's learning and have access to actionable, meaningful data, they can support learning at home and make the best educational decisions for their children. Caregiver involvement in education is vital. Students who have families engaged in their learning are more likely to attend school regularly, have improved social skills and behavior, and achieve high levels of academic performance.[12] Vinson recalled asking her children's schools to engage and support caregivers more:

> We've been asking [the schools] to do more videos and parent support so that parents can be more engaged and involved in their children's learning and their progress, so [educators] are not waiting till the end of a semester or half a semester to say your child is behind or your child needs to do X, Y, and Z.

It is not only important for families to receive information from schools, but also for families to serve as a valuable source of information. Caregiver feedback can help schools reflect on how they are serving students, how they can better engage families, and how to create schools that provide all children with the education they deserve.[13] Another parent expressed the need for schools to collect feedback from caregivers in the hopes of preventing school closures due to low performance on state tests and accountability decisions:

> If [schools] talk to the parents about what's happening [and] what's not happening before we get to the closing part, then we won't have to go through so many grand openings of schools and reopenings. And our kids [won't] go through trauma, after trauma, after trauma of schools just not working.

Forty-seven states and the District of Columbia offer some form of open enrollment or allow students to attend the school of their choice. For families to make the best school choice, they need to be informed about the quality of education their children might receive in each school.[14] Russchelle Moore, a parent in Washington, D.C., shared how her son picked his high school because he knew about the science, technology, education, and math (STEM) programs offered there:

> The fact that it's a STEM school, that's a big thing for him because he likes small classroom settings, and he wants to be a part of a lot of programs, clubs, and things that a lot of schools don't have, that [his school] does have.

Making information on opportunities to learn available to families allows them to fully understand what schools have to offer and helps ensure that students receive the education that is best for them.

District and school staff

Performance data gathered and used in state accountability systems, collected through end-of-year tests, measure student achievement on grade-level standards or learning expectations by the end of the year. Caregivers and school staff receive reports on whether students and the school met these grade-level learning standards. Still, the data provide little detail on where individual students are in their knowledge and skills above and below grade level.

School leaders found state performance data useful to inform school boards, compare school performance, and identify trends over time. However, they and many other participants did not see much use for the data when it came to guiding their daily actions to support student learning. District and school staff expressed wanting timely information that includes individual student responses on state assessments, student readiness data, and nonacademic data on students to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

States do not return end-of-year test data until after the school year ends, and most do not provide teachers with individual student responses.[15] When educators have access to individual student responses, they are better able to support student learning and make informed instructional decisions.[16] Brian Fitzgerald, a fifth grade teacher in Massachusetts, described the gap in information when it comes to the end-of-year state test:

> *Without being able to see the answers that my students give, I can't really identify how they're coming up with the marks or the evaluations. I can't match what they think a good answer is unless I see the answer itself.*

District and school staff want to better understand what student readiness looks like and how to measure student readiness in real time, both academically and nonacademically. Understanding student readiness helps teachers differentiate instruction, goals, and expectations for each student.[17] Zachary Morford, a school leader in Washington, D.C., explained:

> *If we could clearly define what readiness looks like, student readiness at each grade level—academic, social-emotional, all those things—and then have ways to in real-time understand student mastery of those things… that for me would be my little magical universe.*

District and school staff understand the importance of nonacademic information about their students. This information includes attendance, students' critical thinking, mindset, social-emotional well-being, and interests, to name a few.[18] School systems should integrate more nonacademic data into the teaching and learning process,[19] especially because research demonstrates that tending to

students' nonacademic abilities and wellness is foundational to ensuring that they are prepared for success in the classroom and beyond.[20] Peter Anderson, head of Washington Latin Public Charter School, outlined the types of nonacademic information he values:

> *But there are things like student wellness and time management and teamwork and grit and emotional intelligence and citizenship and analytical thinking and aesthetic awareness. All those things are… interesting to me and things that I'd like to be able to measure.*

Data like those outlined above are closely tied to student learning. This information helps teachers and school leaders make timely decisions to improve all students' educational experiences. Other sought-after information includes classroom best practices, how well schools support teachers' professional growth, community engagement, students' ability to persevere, and students' ability to ask for help. When educators, school, and district leaders are provided with more timely and useful information, they can improve the quality of teaching and learning happening in the classroom. Curriculum, effective classroom practices, teacher training, and development are just some of the systems that make up teaching and learning in schools that district administrators, school leaders, and teachers can improve with better student data.

For example, when teachers identify gaps in student learning, they can adjust the curriculum to meet students' needs. This approach can be used schoolwide to modify the current curriculum or select a new one. Adjusting curricula is one example where increased access to timely and useful information can help educators and school leaders improve their students' quality of education. A scenario could involve a significant portion of students entering fifth grade unable to multiply two-digit numbers proficiently, year after year. After teachers and school leaders identify the recurring gaps in learning, they can adjust the fourth-grade curriculum to help close learning gaps and help ensure that students arrive in fifth grade able to multiply two-digit numbers.

Community-centered policy development

Too often, policies are made without the input of the individuals they directly affect. Policies need community input because community members are most likely to know how they will unfold in practice. For example, students must know how to read and calculate math, measured by state summative exams. However, emphasizing test data as the most important measure of school quality has led to counterproductive strategies and incentives, such as teaching students to pass a test and reducing the amount of time spent teaching subjects other than math and reading.

This is not to say that state-level accountability systems do not play an important role in K-12 education. They are a vital tool to gauge the health of schools and determine whether they are providing all students with the opportunity to learn and preparing them for college, career, and civic life. However, school systems also need to collect and distribute data that are useful to the purpose of daily teaching and learning guided by families, educators, and school leaders. In order to identify what information local communities value, policymakers must create space to have conversations about what data they want and how it will serve them.

Conclusion

The data provided from state accountability systems are the primary tools policy-makers use to determine the education system's health and measure educational equity. However, state accountability systems do not provide all the necessary information that caregivers, educators, and other school stakeholders need to guide their daily actions to support student learning. Each group of stakeholders has its own set of informational needs and ways it uses data to support students. Caregivers, educators, and school leaders are hungry for timely information closely tied to student learning to inform their decision-making and improve the quality of education children receive. CAP will continue to explore the issues raised in this issue brief with a future report on K-12 accountability.

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Acknowledgments

Appendix

CAP believes in creating policies with communities as opposed to imposing policies on them. The authors' approach therefore relied on a series of community conversations centering the voices of Black, Indigenous, and other non-Black people of color from communities across the country.

Conversations focused on what communities want to know about student learning, how they interact with school accountability systems, and how accountability systems can be more useful to the families, schools, and students they serve. CAP partnered with three organizations working to improve local accountability in order to connect with and learn from their diverse networks of caregivers, educators, and school and district leaders:

1. **Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE)**,[21] based in Washington, D.C., is a parent-centric organization "dedicated to creating an environment where the vision for education in DC is created with children and families, not for them." PAVE helps families understand the education system, build relationships with policymakers, and provides opportunities for parents to become parent leaders in education who lead and organize other families. CAP held five community conversations with PAVE: three with parents, one with school leaders, and one with PAVE leadership.

2. **The Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA)**[22] is a partnership of public school districts and their local teachers' unions working to create a fair and effective school accountability system in Massachusetts. MCIEA believes that communities should have a voice in deciding what is most important to know about school quality, teachers should lead the design of performance assessments and scoring of student work, and students should demonstrate their knowledge and skills through real-world application. CAP held two community conversations with MCIEA: one with educators, district, and union leaders and one with MCIEA leadership.

3. **The Colorado Education Initiative (CEI)**[23] cultivates systems improvement and educational equity across the state. CEI's work centers on four focus areas: school accountability, high school redesign, competency-based personalized learning, and educator development. While CEI does not advocate for any single accountability model, it believes these systems should be tools of continuous improvement—adapted to the students and communities they serve—and that communities should be key partners in creating accountability systems. CAP held one conversation with CEI leadership.

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