



Surveyed students report being at sea on postsecondary options and the progress they are making toward their goals.

Jennifer Bell-Ellwanger

Access to Data Is Key to Navigating High School and Beyond

Students want information to help navigate their academic experience and chart their paths after high school. But according to a national poll of high school students that my organization, the Data Quality Campaign (DQC), and the Kentucky Student Voice Team developed

in 2022, they are not getting the information they need. State policymakers can help remove this source of students' uncertainty about their futures.

The many uncertainties that students in particular experienced over the last three years are reflected in the large numbers

of students who are chronically absent, missing from schools, or are otherwise disengaged.¹ The decline in FAFSA applications also hints at how students' outlook on the available paths after high school has changed.²

Better access to data will help students understand their college and career options, the steps they should be taking during the K-12 years to attain their goals, and their academic progress to date. This data access is essential for paving the way to recovery. State, district, and local education leaders must take actions to help students, their communities, and schools get the data they need.

Listening to Students

To field a national poll of public high school students' perceptions of their postsecondary readiness and academic progress, DQC teamed up with the Kentucky Student Voice Team, a youth advocacy, research, and policy nonprofit organization.³ The students on the team identified important topics to investigate and potential questions, and they helped assess the results.

More than half of the students surveyed in the 2022 poll said the pandemic changed how they think about what they might do after school. Students also revealed that they are in the dark about their current learning and want more information to inform their postsecondary and workforce plans.

While 81 percent of students agreed that data about their learning and academic progress are important to staying on track after the pandemic, fewer than half reported getting information from their school about whether they are meeting grade-level expectations, are on track to graduate from high school, or about how much academic progress they had made during their current academic year. Worse, one in 10 students said they did not receive any information about their academic progress over the 2021–22 academic year.

High school students are particularly focused on what they need to do today to prepare for tomorrow. Just 35 percent of students reported that their school informed them of what postsecondary or career pathways are available to them, and the same low percentage of students reported that their school told them whether the

courses they are taking are preparing them for higher education.

Understanding milestones and academic progress is especially important during transition points, whether it is a switch to remote instruction or from one school to another. Esha Bajwa, who helped develop our student poll as a member of the Kentucky Student Voice Team, reflected on her experience moving to a new state right before her senior year of high school:

I was brand new to Kentucky, and it was not always clearly communicated what the graduation requirements were because they're different even from high school to high school. And I just remember, it was a couple weeks into my senior year, and they pulled me out of class to take a civics exam and I wasn't told really anything. I was like, what test am I taking? And when I got there, they said, "You need to take this to graduate." And I was just sitting there panicking because I was not told.⁴

Another member of the Kentucky Student Voice Team involved with the poll, Raima Dutt, reflected on the dearth of helpful information:

In terms of my own personal data on progress I've made, I've found that I barely have any. I mean, I have my report cards and my progress checks, which just have my grades every six or eight weeks. But that's up to me and my family to interpret. No one's really saying these are good grades, or hey, maybe you need to get this grade up so you can pass.... So I've never really received that data, and the only data that I feel like I've received that's individualized is state testing. We get that data, but I feel like that's not a very accurate representation because it's one test, and it's also the end of the year.⁵

Like their surveyed peers, Dutt and Bajwa also expressed a need for more information on their options after high school. While 73 percent of surveyed students felt that they were on track for success (e.g., ready for postsecondary education or a career), just 61 percent of students felt confident they knew all their options. A vast majority reported they would feel more confident about their future if they had better access to information.

Dutt confirmed that postsecondary options were uppermost on her mind as she reflected on the information she would love teachers or guidance counselors to provide:

Because we kind of have to figure out our career path on our own. And I wish there

Just 35 percent of students reported that their school informed them of what postsecondary or career pathways are available to them.

was data or just information like, hey, I think you should check this out. I also wish I had more individualized data. Because on grades it's like, say I have a 4.0 GPA or I have a 3.8. It's hard to create a picture of what that really means. . . . I know there are just so many different colleges, but there are also other postsecondary options. I really hope that our school could provide local scholarship opportunities because even as a junior I've been looking at some of those, just to get a general idea, because the whole college planning process is so long and tedious.

Likewise, Esha reported that she wanted more

“information about student loans and how long it takes to pay them off. . . . I feel like nobody talks about that because it depends what degree you get and things like that. There's really no conversation about how this is a long-term investment and there are cons to it in terms of money, and there's an assumption that everyone's going to college without fully informing the students, like hey, this is what the investment is.”

To make access to usable data a reality, statewide longitudinal data systems must be reoriented.

Access for Other Stakeholders

The poll made clear that students want more information on their academic progress and postsecondary options. And 84 percent of the students we surveyed believed it is their state's responsibility to share clear information with them and their families about whether or not schools are effectively teaching and supporting all students.⁶

But students are not the only people who want better information. DQC's 2021 and 2022 national polling of superintendents, principals, and parents—all conducted by The Harris Poll—shows that everyone wants information to help them make or support education and workforce decisions.

■ **Superintendents:** 98 percent report they would be more confident in their abilities to make decisions for their district with better data access, and 61 percent use data to make decisions about course offerings and curriculum aligned to postsecondary and workforce opportunities.⁷

■ **Principals:** 94 percent said they would feel more confident in their leadership decisions with better access to their students' postsecondary and workforce outcomes.⁸

■ **Parents:** 93 percent said that easier access to information would help them feel more confident about their ability to support their child's post-high school decision making.⁹

To make access to usable data a reality, statewide longitudinal data systems must be reoriented to address three questions: Who needs access to data, when, and how? While states have been building cross-agency, longitudinal data systems for decades and have made notable progress, today's state data systems are largely designed and used for system-level compliance and monitoring.¹⁰ The very design of these systems and the policies that govern them are not oriented toward getting individuals, the public, and policymakers timely answers to pressing questions that will inform decision making.

Reorienting statewide data systems toward access means that everyone—not just students—will have robust access to the information they need to answer their most pressing education and workforce questions and make decisions that support students. If states orient their data systems in this way, people will be able to accomplish the following:

■ Individuals will be able to make informed decisions about their courses in high school, the postsecondary and workforce preparation they need, and the debt they may incur when they take on different pathways.

■ The broader community will benefit from increased access, improved outcomes, and leaders focused on the best way to improve education and workforce pathways.

■ Leaders will be able to make informed policy decisions and be held accountable for improving schools and postsecondary options.

While no state has a data system that enables different types of access that are specific to users' needs, California completed a multiyear effort to design its Cradle-to-Career Data System, which will securely bring together data from across the early childhood, K-12, postsecondary, and workforce sectors to empower policymakers, advocates, and communities with actionable data to support students' success. In many ways, California is still at the beginning of its efforts to build an effective, useful data system, but the state's design process can provide an invaluable roadmap for leaders in other states.¹¹

Tasks for State Boards of Education

Leaders must attend to the ways they share and seek information. Listening to and speaking with their communities is the best way to understand what information constituents need and how it can be made most useful to them. By sharing information about context, proximity, and framing of data, state and school leaders can build trust and ensure that communities will be able to understand and use the data.¹²

Context. Context helps students and others make sense of the numbers and how to act upon them. State officials ought to share as much contextual information as possible and make sure it is clearly presented and translated into the most commonly spoken languages in the state.

Proximity. People inherently trust and value data they collect themselves. Consumers' trust in data diminishes as they move farther away from its source. Continuously providing avenues for stakeholder engagement and showing evidence of listening go a long way to building trust in data.

Framing. People want data framed in a way that maximizes their ability to be successful (e.g., focusing on their assets) and does not magnify the challenges (e.g., focusing on any deficits). State leaders should build an understanding of how communities perceive data about their students and be sensitive to how members of a community will receive information about them. They can open a dialogue to understand how data should be framed in the future.

State boards are the people's voice in education. To best represent the people and ensure that their priorities are being addressed, people must be involved in decision making. But the student voice is often overlooked. Ensuring that leaders are focusing on incorporating the voices of students and other community members, it is important for state leaders to ask the following:

- How are you creating space to listen to student voices? Are you inviting them to speak at state board meetings or creating other avenues to hear students speak?
- What are students telling you about their experiences? How are you addressing their comments?

- What are you doing to address their concerns? And how are you sharing that information with students and other community members?

Students need not feel disconnected from the information that will help them succeed in high school and beyond. Listening to what data students want and need will help state boards ensure that everyone—especially students—has what they need to be successful in and out of school. ■

¹Kalyn Belsha, "Why Are Students Missing So Much School? The Answer May Lie in the Chronic Absenteeism 'Black Box,'" *Chalkbeat*, October 13, 2022; Bianca Vásquez and Sharon Lurye, "Thousands of Kids Are Missing from School. Where Did They Go?" *Associated Press*, February 9, 2023; Holly Kurtz et al., "Student Engagement during the Pandemic" (Bethesda, MD: EdWeek Research Center, 2021).

²Bill DeBaun, "FAFSA Renewals Down 12%, Nearly 900,000 Students through March 31," *National College Attainment Network*, April 27, 2022.

³More than 1,000 students were polled by The Harris Poll. Data Quality Campaign and Kentucky Student Voice Team, "Students Want Access and Support to Use Their Own Data to Navigate Their Futures," September 20, 2022, https://dataqualitycampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/DQC_KSVT-Student-Polling-2022.pdf.

⁴Evan Omerso, "Listening to Students: A Conversation about the Data They Need to Make Post-High School Decisions," Data Quality Campaign blog, March 21, 2023.

⁵Ibid.

⁶DQC and KSVT, "Students Want Access and Support."

⁷Data Quality Campaign and AASA, "Better Access to Data Helps Superintendents Make Decisions. They Want More Of It," The Harris Poll, September 20, 2022, https://dataqualitycampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/DQC_AASA-Superintendent-Polling-2022.pdf.

⁸Data Quality Campaign, "Disconnects in Perceptions of Data Use Threaten Recovery. State Leaders Must Act Now.," August 18, 2021, The Harris Poll, 4, <https://dataqualitycampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/DQC-Poll-2021.pdf>.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Data Quality Campaign, "What Now? States Must Act to Meet People's Data Access Needs" (Washington, DC: Data Quality Campaign, 2022), <https://dataqualitycampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/DQC-Access-Policy-Brief.pdf>.

¹¹Data Quality Campaign, "Investing in California's Data Future: How California's P-20W Cradle-to-Career Data System Could Take the State from Last to First" (Washington, DC: Data Quality Campaign, 2022), <https://dataqualitycampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CA-P-20W-case-study.pdf>.

¹²Data Quality Campaign, "The Consumer's Guide to Data" (Washington, DC: Data Quality Campaign, 2021), <https://dataqualitycampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/DQC-Consumers-Guide-to-Data.pdf>.

By sharing information about context, proximity, and framing of data, state and school leaders can build trust.