NATIONAL PARENTS UNION | CENTER FOR POLICY & ACTION

MEASURING MEANINGFUL RESULTS FOR KIDS

A National Parents Union Special Report

FOREWARD

KERI RODRIGUES

Co-Founder & Founding President, The National Parents Union

Community,

The National Parents Union is proud to announce that this month our Parent Leader Council of Assessment and Accountability will convene in Washington D.C. to meet with key decision makers about the need to continue to improve public education. Consistently, over multiple national parent polls and focus groups, parents express desire for continuous improvement in our schools. From the federal enforcement of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to a school board's role in ensuring schools are not failing children, we know that we must strive for better- which we can only do if we have our eyes open to inequity and low achievement in our schools.

At the National Parents Union, we believe that parents are essential advocates for their children's education and well-being. Our newly formed Parent Council on Assessment and Accountability is committed to advancing a vision where parents are empowered with the knowledge and tools necessary to ensure that every child has access to an excellent and equitable education.

In our public education system, there are two critical components that serve as checks on whether every child is getting an education where they are progressing on grade level.

Those two items are:

- **Assessment: (How we measure)**

  We give students assessments to see if they are on grade level. In schools and districts where students are not on grade level, we can identify them for more support.

  Ideally, that data should lead to ***action***.

- **Accountability: (How we support based on what we learn)**
  It is important that struggling schools and districts receive the support and resources that they need to improve.

  Assessment data serves as a critical tool of empowerment for families. When parents can access and understand this data, they are equipped to advocate for the supports and resources their children need to thrive and systems can provide needed support to help students who are behind with extra resources.

These insights enable parents to ask the right questions, make informed decisions, and hold education systems accountable to delivering on their promise of success for every child, regardless of background or circumstance. Through this work, we are building a movement to elevate the voices of parents in the fight for educational equity and excellence.

Onward,

Keri Rodrigues

Keri Rodrigues
NPU Co-Founder & Founding President

HISTORICAL LEGISLATIVE EFFORTS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND REFORM

Decades of research has shown that receiving a high-quality education considerably lowers the likelihood of inequalities later in life. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson highlighted these truths in a message to Congress, emphasizing that continued neglect of the country's schools would lead to higher unemployment rates, lack of employable skills as the world continues to modernize, and increased spending on adult and youth incarceration and family welfare programs.[2,5]

President Johnson posited that the future security of the nation rested on education the children, stating:

> *"Nothing matters more to the future of our country: not our military preparedness-for armed might is worthless if we lack the brain power to build a world of peace; not our productive economy--for we cannot sustain growth without trained manpower; not our democratic system of government--for freedom is fragile if citizens are ignorant."*[3]

The president believed every child should be encouraged to obtain as much education as he has the ability to take, and proposed "a national goal of Full Educational Opportunity," with a focus on four major tasks:

1. Improving education to millions of disadvantaged youths;
2. Providing all students with the best educational equipment, innovations and ideas;
3. Improving teacher training and modernizing teaching technology;
4. Providing incentives to anyone wanting to continue their education.[4]

Congress responded with The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), requiring all children in the United States be provided the opportunity to receive a fair, equitable and high-quality education.[5] The intent of the law was to raise educational standards and make education more equitable by including testing and accountability requirements.[6]

 In 1983, President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education released A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, which echoed President Johnson's earlier concerns about America's future. A Nation at Risk called for comprehensive public education reform and higher student expectations, and subsequent administrations attempted to answer the challenge.[7] President George H.W. Bush introduced America 2000, intended to achieve the world's best math and science test scores by the turn of the century, but the legislation stalled. President Bill Clinton had two plans pass Congress in 1994, but the testing system they introduced was voluntary, and few states complied.[8]

 In 2002, Congress passed No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which reauthorized ESEA and mandated annual testing in all 50 states. With this law, the federal government took a more prominent role in holding schools responsible for the academic progress of all students. Specifically, NCLB focused on ensuring that states and schools boosted the performance of English language learners, special education students, minority students, and students from families experiencing economic hardship. Schools were required to show progress each year, or they faced sanctions and the risk of state takeover.[9]

HISTORICAL LEGISLATIVE EFFORTS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND REFORM

No Child Left Behind requirements became difficult for schools and educators to successfully implement, and children were, in fact, still being left behind. In 2015, President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), replacing NCLB with a law that focused on a clear goal of fully preparing all students for success in college and careers. ESSA was intended to advance equity by upholding protections for disadvantaged and high-need students, ensure that vital assessment information was provided to the communities, and help support and grow local intervention innovations.[10]

Despite these mandates, there continue to be disparities in the access to and quality of educational programs across income, race, and region. If the outcome of a person's life depends so heavily on the education they receive beginning in early childhood, then educational inequalities have to be corrected in order for equal opportunities to exist.

Educational inequity is a public policy issue with social justice implications.[11] Failing educational systems and punitive disciplinary practices push students out of school, and may unintentionally funnel minority students toward a path that leaves them vulnerable to becoming enmeshed in the juvenile justice system.[12] It is students from historically and/or currently marginalized groups — that is, students who are and have been the furthest from the center of education policy discussions – that are having to deal with the repercussions.[13]

THE PARENT PERSPECTIVE ON ASSESSMENTS TO DRIVE STUDENT SUCCESS & CLOSE WIDENING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

Every child deserves and has a right to a supportive educational environment, and parents, educators and policymakers want to see students finish school ready to thrive in an ever-evolving global market.[14] Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 13-year-old students have seen their math and reading scores decline on the math and reading scores of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments, with lower-performing students recording greater declines than higher-performing students.[15]

Assessments serve multiple purposes in education and play a pivotal role in improving student outcomes. When done well, effective assessment practices use a multi-faceted approach to guide instruction, inform interventions, and hold educational systems accountable for student learning. Assessment data allows educational institutions to continuously enhance their teaching methods and strategies.[16] From diagnosing student learning needs to evaluating the effectiveness of instructional strategies, assessment data is integral to fostering academic success and closing achievement gaps.[17]

As the 2023-24 academic year came to a close, the National Parents Union (NPU) surveyed parents to determine how they truly feel about their child's school experience and preparedness for the next school year. The results of the poll revealed that parents continue to be concerned about the academic readiness and future economic mobility for their children.

Overall, less than half of surveyed parents (48%) believe their child is "definitely" academically prepared for the next school year. Among parents of sixth- to eighth-graders, that number drops to 43 percent.
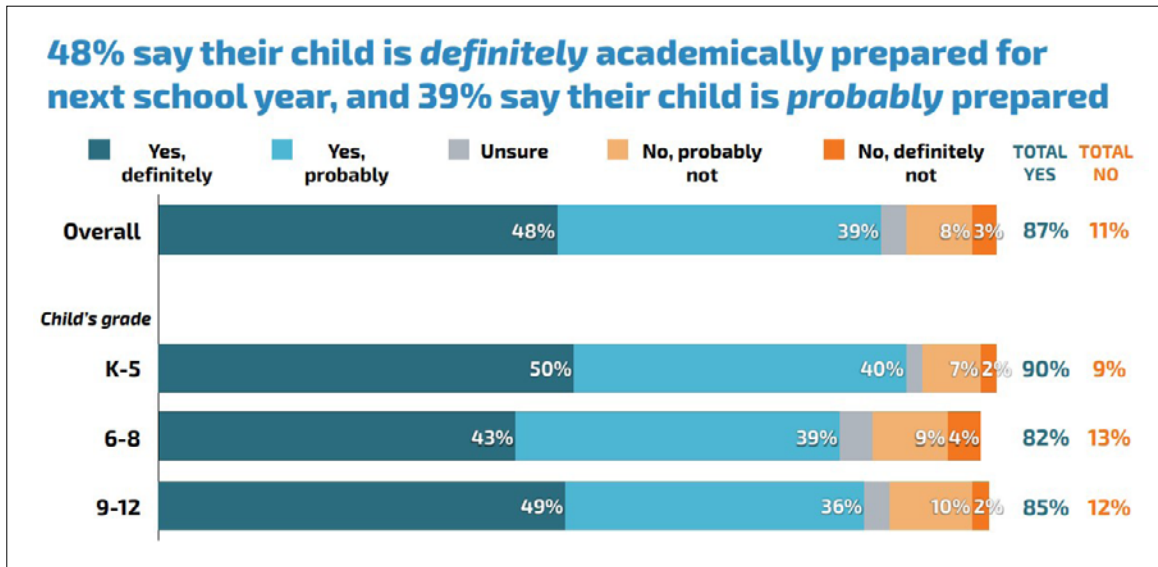
The National Parents Union

Measuring Meaningful Results for Kids

THE PARENT PERSPECTIVE ON ASSESSMENTS TO DRIVE STUDENT SUCCESS & CLOSE WIDENING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

48% say their child is *definitely* academically prepared for next school year, and 39% say their child is *probably* prepared

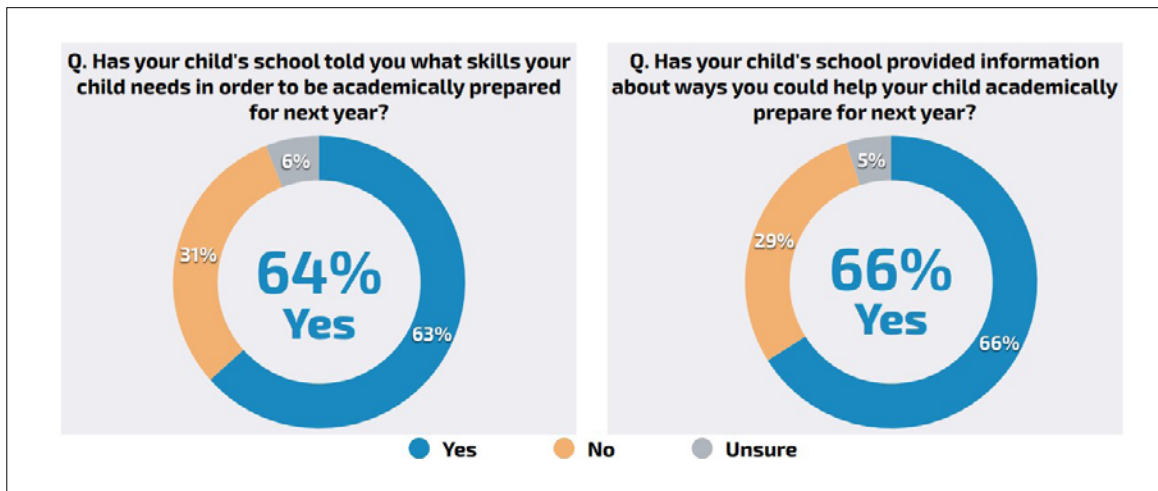|	Yes, definitely	Yes, probably	Unsure	No, probably not	No, definitely not	TOTAL YES	TOTAL NO
Overall	48%	39%		8%	3%	87%	11%
Child's grade							
K-5	50%	40%		7%	2%	90%	9%
6-8	43%	39%		9%	4%	82%	13%
9-12	49%	36%		10%	2%	85%	12%

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Thirty-one percent of parents reported that their child's school did not tell them what skills their child needed to be equipped for next year, and 29% said that schools did not provide information about how parents can help prepare them.

Q. Has your child's school told you what skills your child needs in order to be academically prepared for next year?

64% Yes

63% Yes · 31% No · 6% Unsure

Q. Has your child's school provided information about ways you could help your child academically prepare for next year?

66% Yes

66% Yes · 29% No · 5% Unsure

● Yes ● No ● Unsure

When asked about statewide assessments, 77% of surveyed parents viewed the tests as a valuable way to measure their child's performance. Of those parents, 44% believe statewide assessments showed a child's progress and identified areas for growth. While overall, parents had mixed feelings about statewide tests, a large majority wanted to see the test data used to benefit districts:

- 84% of parents said that district leaders **Definitely should** or **Probably should** use state testing data to send additional resources to schools and students that demonstrated the most need.
- 80% of parents said that districts **Definitely should** or **Probably should** use state testing data to determine how resources are allocated.
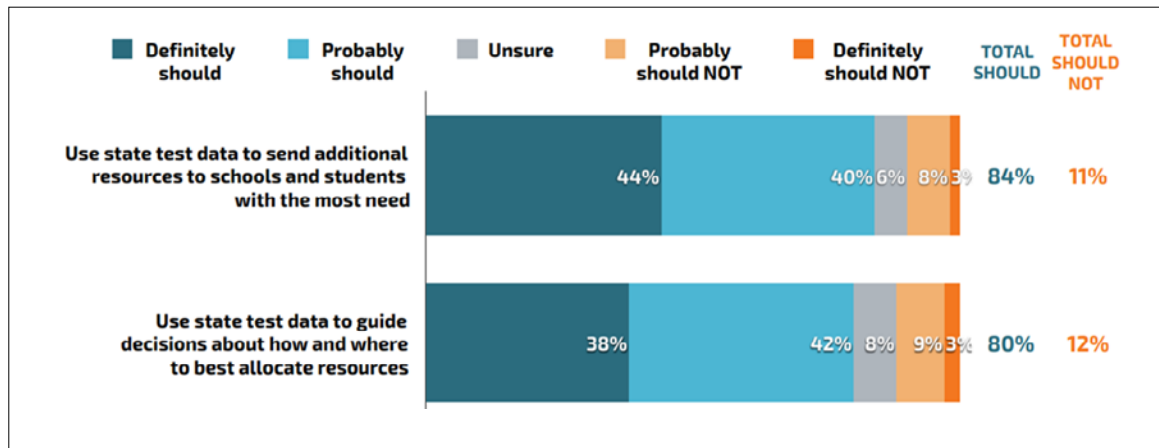
THE PARENT PERSPECTIVE ON ASSESSMENTS TO DRIVE STUDENT SUCCESS & CLOSE WIDENING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

More than half of surveyed parents replied that they would view state test data as more valuable if district leaders used it as a tool to improve both student outcomes and resource disbursement.

- 57% of parents said statewide test data is more valuable if the data is used to ensure that schools receive resources necessary to provide academic support programs for all struggling students.

- 54% said state test data would be more valuable if used to identify the best ways to improve student outcomes.

- 51% said statewide assessments would be a more valuable tool if district leaders used it to determine how resources are allocated
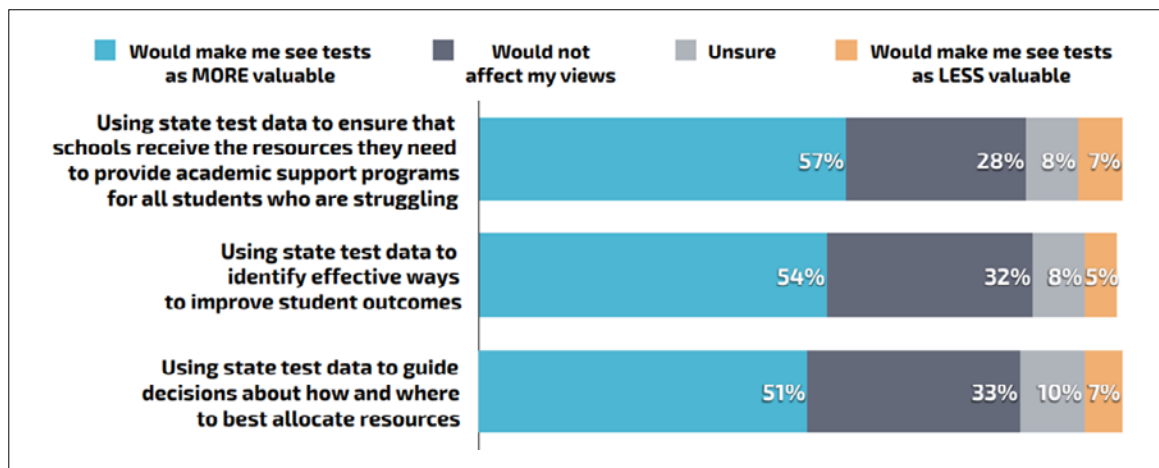
A broad majority of surveyed parents saw value in using state testing data to make decisions on:
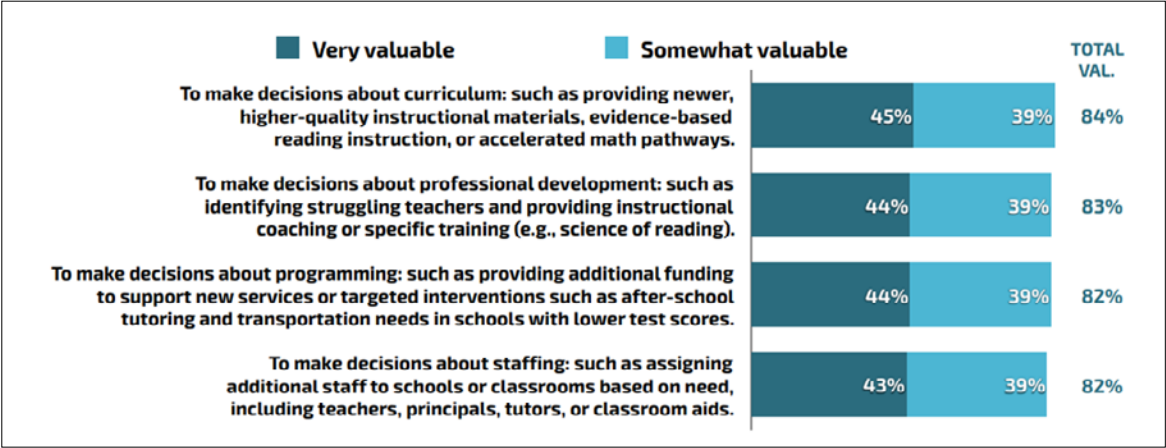
- Curriculum (84%)
- Professional Development (83%)
- Programming (82%)
- Staffing (82%)

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Measuring Meaningful Results for Kids

THE PARENT PERSPECTIVE ON ASSESSMENTS TO DRIVE STUDENT SUCCESS & CLOSE WIDENING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

	Very valuable	Somewhat valuable	TOTAL VAL.
To make decisions about curriculum: such as providing newer, higher-quality instructional materials, evidence-based reading instruction, or accelerated math pathways.	45%	39%	84%
To make decisions about professional development: such as identifying struggling teachers and providing instructional coaching or specific training (e.g., science of reading).	44%	39%	83%
To make decisions about programming: such as providing additional funding to support new services or targeted interventions such as after-school tutoring and transportation needs in schools with lower test scores.	44%	39%	82%
To make decisions about staffing: such as assigning additional staff to schools or classrooms based on need, including teachers, principals, tutors, or classroom aids.	43%	39%	82%

Parents also overwhelmingly saw value in using assessment data for a variety of uses, particularly supporting professional development for teachers and additional student programming.

	Very valuable	Somewhat valuable	TOTAL VAL.
To make decisions about curriculum: such as providing newer, higher-quality instructional materials, evidence-based reading instruction, or accelerated math pathways.	45%	39%	84%
To make decisions about professional development: such as identifying struggling teachers and providing instructional coaching or specific training (e.g., science of reading).	44%	39%	83%
To make decisions about programming: such as providing additional funding to support new services or targeted interventions such as after-school tutoring and transportation needs in schools with lower test scores.	44%	39%	82%
To make decisions about staffing: such as assigning additional staff to schools or classrooms based on need, including teachers, principals, tutors, or classroom aids.	43%	39%	82%

WITH ASSESSMENT MUST COME ACCOUNTABILITY

Intending to close the achievement gaps, Title I of the ESEA requires that all children be provided the opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education.[19] The law leaves school improvement primarily at the discretion of states and school districts, rather than the federal government, with one exception: **states are required to identify the lowest-performing five percent of schools and high schools with high dropout rates. These schools are placed on comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) plans, which are developed by school districts and approved by the state**. While states are responsible for ensuring the CSI implementation, the Department of Education (DOE) monitors the states' oversight of school improvement and other Title I requirements.[20]

Senate Report 115-289, which accompanied the 2019 Appropriations Bill, authorized the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to review school improvement activities. In January 2024, the GAO released their report, Education Could Enhance Oversight of School Improvement Activities, in which they analyzed a sample of state-approved CSI plans to determine their compliance with three basic ESSA requirements for which the Department of Education has issued strict guidance. According to ESSA, CSI plans must (1) be based on a school-level needs assessment; (2) identify resource inequities; and (3) include evidence-based interventions.[21]

WITH ASSESSMENT MUST COME ACCOUNTABILITY

In the explanatory statement offered in the 2024 Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Education and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, Congress emphasized the need for additional monitoring and oversight of school improvement efforts. Specifically, the statement highlights the need for careful tracking of the implementation of these initiatives, particularly in low-performing schools receiving federal support. The bill calls for increased accountability measures to ensure that allocated funds are used effectively in an effort to enhance student outcomes. The DOE was directed to provide the Committees with regular reporting on the progress of schools on CSI plans, as well as an evaluation of the impact of various interventions and strategies funded through these appropriations. The bill also encouraged collaboration between federal, state, and local education agencies to ensure the implementation of evidence-based strategies tailored to the specific needs of the schools and students being served.[22]

In a June 2024 letter to U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, the National Parents Union inquired about the progress being made by the DOE to address the concerns in the GAO report. Specifically, NPU requested information regarding the plans and procedures being developed or implemented to improve oversight, support, and assistance for schools identified under CSI (see Exhibit A).

In their response to NPU, the DOE outlined the steps the Department currently takes to monitor CSI schools, and reiterated their intent to continue thorough oversight of ESEA school improvement requirements. In addition, the DOE confirmed their commitment to addressing the concerns raised by the GAO and Congress, and stated their intent to address the concerns raised by the GAO and Congress (see Exhibit B).

When done well, **school-level needs assessments** help districts and schools understand their strengths and weaknesses while providing the foundation for strategies to address the challenges. A review of **resource inequities** helps to determine whether resources are distributed equally, and helps districts and schools develop a plan to correct inequities. Finally, using **evidence-based interventions** increases the likelihood that student outcomes will improve. However, in their report, the GAO found that the majority of plans that were reviewed were not meeting these requirements.[23]

Less than half (42%) addressed all three elements; almost a third (30%) contained two elements; and more than a quarter (28%) included only one element, or none at all. In some cases, plans still missed the mark even when they addressed all required elements.[24] Additionally, despite ESSA requiring evidence-based programs, nearly one-in-five plans listed interventions the Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse declared ineffective. Other plans named interventions that weren't appropriate for the students they targeted.[25] In part because of the shortcomings of the CSI plans, ESSA requirements have been identified as critical areas in need of improvement.[26]
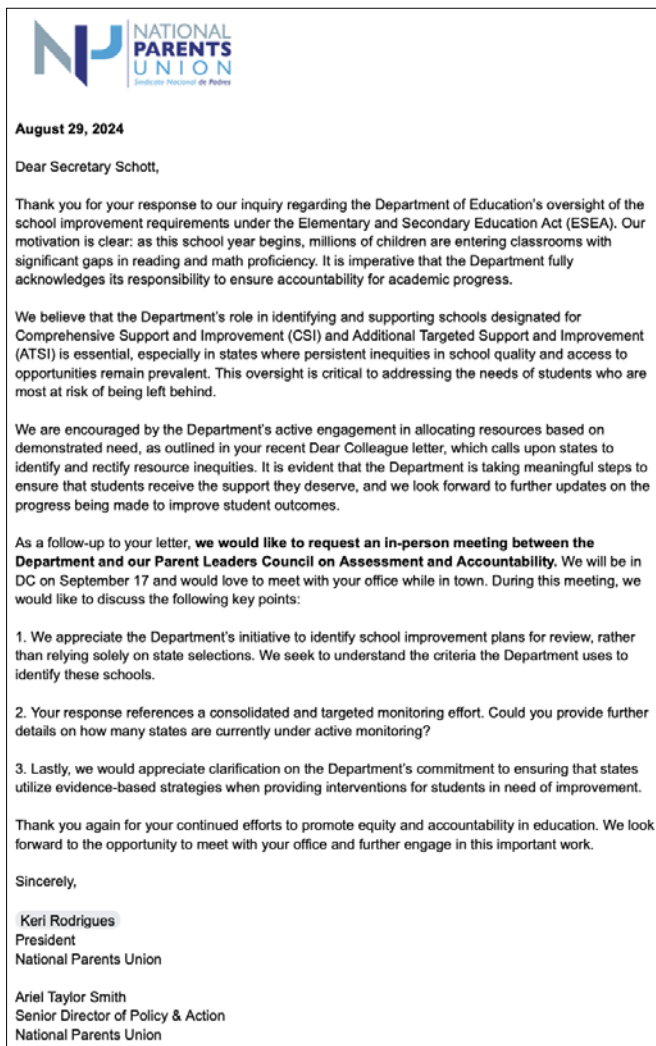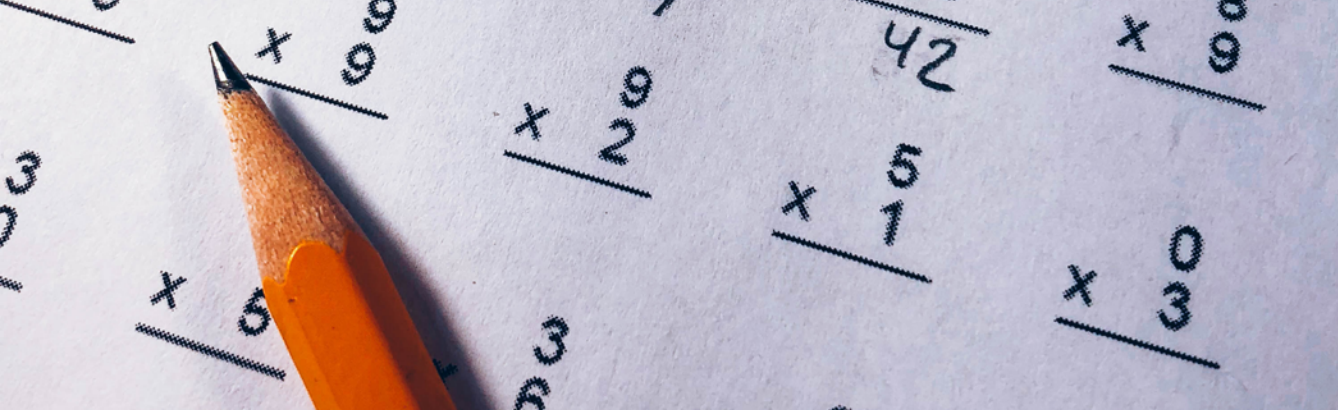
UNDERSTANDING THE CRITICAL ROLE OF ASSESSMENTS IN K-12 EDUCATION

Assessments play an integral role in improving educational experiences and student outcomes, serving as fundamental tools for understanding learning needs, guiding instructional strategies, and motivating students. As part of a systematic process to gather, analyze, and interpret information, assessments allow educators and districts to evaluate students' learning progress and abilities.[28]

Feedback received from assessments help students understand their strengths, provide clear learning expectations, and offer guidance on areas that may require additional resources.[29] Assessments allow families and educators to focus on areas that require additional attention, and are an essential part of diagnosing learning differences. Moreover, they are a vital part of holding schools accountable for student performance.[30]

There are four primary types of assessments – formative, summative, diagnostic and standardized – but they are all used for much the same purpose: to analyze student performance, evaluate the strength and weaknesses of a class, and guide decision-making for better student outcomes.[31]

- **Formative assessments** are conducted during the learning process and used to provide real-time feedback to students and teachers. Formative tests help identify students' strengths and weaknesses, and allow teachers to adjust their instruction to provide immediate interventions as needed.

- **Summative assessments** are administered at the end of a learning period to evaluate overall student performance. Used for grading and accountability purposes, summative tests are a comprehensive overview of what students have learned and help educators determine whether or not learning objectives have been met.

- **Diagnostic assessments are** designed to identify specific learning needs and challenges faced by students. These tests help educators identify learning disabilities and develop targeted interventions to address individual student needs.

- **Standardized assessments** are administered to all students and are used to compare performance across different groups and/or institutions. These tests provide data on student achievement on a wider scale, allowing for comparison and benchmarking.[32]

Assessments are a cornerstone of education, and effective assessment practices offer several benefits to improving student outcomes. From measuring student progress to evaluating teacher effectiveness, assessments provide educators and districts with vital data that informs instructional practices and guides decision-making. In an increasingly data-driven world, the role of assessments in shaping educational practices cannot be overstated.

ASSESSMENTS AS A TOOL FOR TRANSFORMATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Meaningful assessment data allows teachers to adjust their instruction to address the diverse needs of students within a classroom. Assessments provide teachers with critical information about student learning – what they know, what they should know, and what they don't know yet – which allows them to tailor instructional strategies to provide targeted support.[33] Teachers and school districts utilize assessment data to proactively identify students at risk of falling behind. This early intervention is crucial for preventing learning gaps from widening, ensures that all students have the opportunity to succeed, and significantly improves student outcomes for struggling learners. Assessment data helps hold educational systems accountable for student outcomes. By tracking student progress, policymakers and educators can evaluate educational programs, and make adjustments as needed. These accountability measures help ensure that schools and districts are meeting educational standards and providing all students with a high-quality education.[34]

Finally, assessments help identify achievement gaps among different student groups, such as those based on socioeconomic status, race, or disability. The data can highlight disparities, allowing for the development of targeted interventions to address the specific needs of marginalized students, and helping to reduce educational inequity.[35]

As previously discussed, assessment tools and techniques are indispensable in educational settings, offering a variety of methods to measure and support student learning. By using a balanced approach that incorporates multiple assessment tools and techniques, educators can ensure that they are meeting the diverse needs of their students and promoting meaningful learning outcomes. From standardized tests to performance-based assessments, each tool serves a unique purpose and provides valuable data that informs instructional practices.

Standardized tests are one of the most widely recognized assessment tools in education. Designed to measure student performance against a uniform set of standards, these tests provide objective data that can be used for accountability purposes. Typically used for large-scale assessments – such as college entrance exams – standardized tests allow for comparisons across different groups of students, and are an important part of evaluating teacher and school effectiveness.[36] **Formative assessments** are used to monitor student learning during the instructional process. They are ongoing, include quizzes and classroom discussions, and provide immediate feedback to both teachers and students. These tools allow educators to adjust their lesson plans as needed, and tailor their methods to meet the needs of their students.

Summative assessments evaluate student learning at the conclusion of an instructional period. Typically, they are more formal and comprehensive, and designed to evaluate if a student has met objectives, such as final exams. As a tool, summative assessment tools are often used for grading or promotion to the next grade level.[37] Other techniques used include **performance-based assessments** (such as science experiments and presentations), **rubrics** (guidelines for essays and projects), **portfolios** (i.e. writing or artwork), and **self- and peer-assessment** (such as peer review or self-assessment checklists).[38]

A balanced approach that incorporates a variety of assessment tools and techniques is essential for providing a comprehensive view of student learning. When used effectively, assessment tools can help create a dynamic and responsive learning environment, which supports academic achievement and fosters a culture of continuous improvement within schools.[39]

EVOLVING ASSESSMENTS TO MEASURE A WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION FOR EVERY CHILD

WHEN IT COMES TO ASSESSING DIVERSE STUDENT POPULATIONS, INCLUDING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELLS), A THOUGHTFUL AND INCLUSIVE APPROACH IS REQUIRED.

With employers increasingly seeking individuals who can adapt to changing environments and solve complex problems, fostering and developing these skills is crucial for success in the twenty-first century workforce.[42] There is a broader significance to student outcomes, however, that a well-educated populace is essential for economic growth and competitiveness. Education contributes to social cohesion, reduces inequalities and promotes civic engagement.[43]

The world is rapidly changing, and employers are seeking individuals who are able to analyze information, evaluate evidence, and solve problems. Schools are beginning to incorporate teaching critical thinking skills, assessing them using open-ended questions, project-based learning, and case studies that require critical thinking and problem-solving. Creativity is also becoming more valued, and employers are seeking to hire workers with the skills to be innovative, generate new ideas, and think outside the box. Encouraging creativity fosters curiosity and a willingness to take risks, which are important for personal and professional growth.[47]

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is another crucial part of both education and personal development, as this is how we all acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal goals. Research done by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) shows that SEL programs improve academic performance, reduce behavioral problems, and enhance students' attitudes toward themselves and others.[45]

As the world progressively becomes more digital, more and more jobs require some level of technological proficiency. The ability to effectively use technology to access, evaluate, create and communicate information is essential for academic success and participating in society. As such, schools are beginning to incorporate digital literacy in their curricula. Students are assessed by demonstrating their proficiency with digital tools via research, digital communication and cybersecurity awareness.[48] Understanding how the government works, being informed about social and political issues, and the ability to participate in civil discourse are all skills needed to participate in a democratic society. By incorporating civic engagement in curricula, educators aim to prepare students to be engaged and informed members of their communities and society. Educators assess these skills via service projects, debates and participation in community events.[49] There are so many skills we can measure and assess to ensure students are receiving a well-rounded education that prepares them to live successful, choice-filled lives and be active citizens.

When it comes to assessing diverse student populations, including students with disabilities and English language learners (ELLs), a thoughtful and inclusive approach is required. In order to ensure that assessments are both equitable and effective, it is essential to recognize and address the unique needs of these students.

EVOLVING ASSESSMENTS TO MEASURE A WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION FOR EVERY CHILD

Students with disabilities may require accommodations such as extended time, alternative formats, or assistive technology to allow them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills effectively. These accommodations are mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees that students with disabilities have access to a free and appropriate public education. As part of IDEA, assessments must be designed or modified to accommodate these needs without compromising the validity or reliability of the results.[50]

English language learners face challenges that can impact their performance on assessments, as language proficiency can affect a student's ability to comprehend test instructions and process information. Failure to account for language proficiency can lead to inaccurate measurements of ELL's academic abilities. As such, assessments should take the student's level of English proficiency into consideration, and students should be provided with appropriate supports such as bilingual dictionaries or additional time.[51]

As classrooms become progressively more culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse, it is necessary to implement assessment practices that recognize and accommodate the varied backgrounds and experiences of all students. Cultural bias in assessment places students from historically marginalized groups at a disadvantage, leading to results that inaccurately reflect their knowledge and abilities. Equitable and inclusive assessments are crucial to addressing the diverse needs of all students, ensuring every child is equipped to thrive in our interconnected and complex world.

USING ASSESSMENTS TO IDENTIFY STUDENT SUPPORT AND INTERVENTIONS

Effective assessment practices offer educators an opportunity to identify students who are at risk of falling behind, allowing for crucial intervention to prevent learning gaps from widening. For struggling learners, early intervention significantly improves student outcomes, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed.[53] These targeted, evidence-based strategies are designed to address specific learning needs and challenges to close achievement gaps and enhance student engagement.[54]

In order for educators to better address the diverse needs of students, they need to have a clear understanding of the different types of interventions. Broadly categorized into three types – academic, behavioral, and social and emotional – interventions are crucial for ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed and assessments help us identify the right kind of intervention that a student may need.

Academic Interventions are designed to help students who struggle with specific subjects or skills to ensure they achieve grade-level proficiency. Examples may include targeted instruction, one-on-one tutoring, and differentiated instruction. One of the most commonly used frameworks for targeted instruction is the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, which is a multi-tiered approach that provides support based on students' needs. For example, Tier 1 involves high-quality classroom instruction, Tier 2 includes small group interventions for students who need additional support, and Tier 3 offers focused, individualized lessons for those who continue to struggle. Research has shown that RTI is effective in early identification of learning disabilities.[55]

Differentiated Instruction is an intervention method where teachers tailor their teaching strategies, materials, and assessments to meet the diverse learning needs of students. Differentiation can take many forms, including adjusting lesson complexity, offering additional information to complete tasks, and offering choices on how students are assessed. For those with disabilities and English language learners, this approach has been shown to improve academic outcomes.[56] One-on-one or small group tutoring has been found to significantly boost academic achievement, especially in reading and mathematics.[57]

USING ASSESSMENTS TO IDENTIFY STUDENT SUPPORT AND INTERVENTIONS

Behavioral Interventions focus on improving student behavior, reducing disruptive actions, and creating a positive learning environment. These interventions may include behavior modification plans, positive reinforcement strategies, and social skills training. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a widely used approach that promotes positive behavior through reinforcement rather than punishment. Shown to reduce disciplinary incidents, PBIS involves setting clear behavioral expectations, teaching the expectations to students, and consistently rewarding students when expectations are met.[58] Other interventions that may be used are Behavioral Contracts that outline specific goals, rewards and consequences,[59] and Social Skills Training to teach students communication, cooperation and conflict resolution. These programs have been shown to be beneficial for students with ADHD and on the autism spectrum.[60]

Social-Emotional Interventions are aimed at helping students develop the skills they need to manage their emotions, build healthy relationships, and navigate social challenges. These interventions may include social-emotional learning programs, counseling services, and mentorship programs. The goal is to enhance students' social-emotional skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and relationship building skills. Often, the results are improved academic performance, better social relationships, and reduced emotional distress.[61]

Implementation of effective interventions requires a thoughtful approach that includes careful planning, ongoing assessment, and collaboration among educators, families, and schools. According to ESSA, schools are encouraged to use interventions that are backed by "strong" or "moderate" evidence.[62] In education, evidence-based practices are instructional methods and interventions that have been proven to be successful through painstaking research and evaluation. To be considered evidence-based, an intervention must be supported by evidence from well-conducted research studies, randomized controlled trials, or other methodologies that demonstrate a clear cause-and-effect relationship between the intervention and positive student outcomes.[63]

One of the cornerstones of implementing effective interventions is the use of **Data-Driven Decision Making**. Using formative, summative, and standardized assessments, data is collected and analyzed to identify students' needs, monitor their progress and adjust interventions as needed. This data is used to inform instructional decisions and tailor interventions to meet the specific needs of each student. For example, Response to Intervention (RTI) is an evidence-based framework that relies heavily on data to guide the implementation of academic and behavioral interventions.[64]

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is an evidence-based framework that integrates academic and behavior interventions into a cohesive system. Using a tiered system, MTSS provides varying levels of support based on student needs:

1. **Tier 1** uses universal interventions that are provided to all students in the general education setting, and includes high-quality instruction and positive behavioral supports.

2. **Tier 2** is used in small-group settings, and is a more targeted intervention for students who require additional support with a specific skill or behavior beyond Tier 1.

3. **Tier 3** is intensive and individualized, used for students with significant needs, and often involves specialized instruction or services.[65]

USING ASSESSMENTS TO IDENTIFY STUDENT SUPPORT AND INTERVENTIONS

Collaborative Problem-Solving is an approach that brings together educators, families and students to identify challenges, develop intervention plans, and monitor progress. This strategy ensures that interventions are comprehensive, and research supports the effectiveness in collaboration in improving student outcomes. Further, involving students in the process has been found to help them develop self-regulation skills and take ownership of their learning and behavior.[66]

Equal education is not giving every student the same, but making sure that all students get what they need. **Differentiated Instruction** meets children where they are. This method acknowledges that students have varying levels of readiness, interests, and learning profiles, and requires ongoing assessment, flexible grouping and varied instructional approaches. Using this strategy, educators provide multiple ways for students to engage with material and demonstrate their understanding. Differentiated instruction can lead to significant gains in student achievement, particularly for those who struggle in traditional classroom settings.[67]

Finally, effective implementation requires educators to be well-trained and continually updated on the latest research and strategies. **Ongoing Professional Development** can include workshops, coaching, and collaborative learning communities where educators share best practices and problem-solve together. Professional development that is sustained, collaborative, data-driven and focused on evidence-based practices is more likely to lead to improved instructional quality and student outcomes.[68]

Collaboration in intervention planning and implementation in educational settings is essential for creating effective and sustainable solutions for student achievement. Recognizing that the best outcomes for students are achieved when educators, administrators, parents, and community stakeholders work together, ESSA mandates a collaborative approach to planning. With an emphasis on the importance of evidence-based programs, ESSA requires interventions be tailored to the specific needs of the school and its students, with consideration given to local context and available community resources. This ensures that, not only are plans evidence-based, but also sustainable within the local environment.[69] Collaboration ensures that interventions take diverse perspectives and expertise into consideration. When educators, administrators, parents and other stakeholders are part of the planning and implementation, the process is enriched with different viewpoints and resources.[70]

DATA-DRIVEN APPROACHES, CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS, AND CONTINUES EVALUATION FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

As educators and school districts seek to improve student outcomes and provide equitable learning opportunities, it has become increasingly more essential to utilize data to inform decision-making. Data from standardized tests, formative assessments, and classroom observations provide insight into areas where students struggle or excel, allowing for educators to tailor their instruction to meet student needs. Educators are able to identify patterns in student performance, which is crucial for developing targeted interventions that address the root causes of academic challenges.

Furthermore, by utilizing data on attendance and behavior in conjunction with academic performance, it is possible for educators to identify at-risk students early and implement timely interventions. Simply putting interventions into place doesn't mean that student outcomes will improve. Educators use data to continuously monitor student progress so that interventions can be adjusted as needed so that they remain responsive to student needs. This maximizes an intervention's impact, and allows educators to adjust their instruction, which results in improved academic outcomes.[74]

DATA-DRIVEN APPROACHES, CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS, AND CONTINUES EVALUATION FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

When it comes to allocating resources, schools and districts use data to ensure that educational resources are directed toward the areas with the greatest need. By identifying trends and gaps in student performance, administrators can make informed decisions about where to invest in professional development, instructional materials, and support services.[75] Finally, schools use data to identify disparities in outcomes across different demographic groups. This enables educators to address systemic inequities and implement strategies that target underserved populations, reducing achievement gaps and fostering a more inclusive learning environment.[76]

Aligning assessments and interventions with educational goals and standards is a fundamental aspect of effective teaching and learning. This ensures that instruction is focused and equitable, and provides all students with the opportunity to succeed. Alignment of curriculum helps educators and policymakers gauge whether students are meeting established educational standards, aiding in data-driven decision making.[77] When assessments and educational standards are aligned, they provide a common framework from which student performance is evaluated, promoting consistency across different grade levels and subjects. This promotes educational equity by ensuring that all students have equal opportunity to learn and demonstrate their knowledge. Within this framework, educators are better able to identify areas that need additional support or intervention, which leads to more targeted and effective teaching strategies.[78]

When interventions are aligned with educational goals and standards, they are more likely to be effective in addressing specific learning objectives and ensuring that they are relevant to the students' needs. Maintaining ongoing alignment between assessment, instruction, and intervention fosters a more supportive learning environment while encouraging student progress toward meeting educational standards.[79]

INCORPORATING MULTICULTURAL CONTENT INTO ASSESSMENTS ENSURES THAT THEY REFLECT THE DIVERSE EXPERIENCES AND KNOWLEDGE OF ALL STUDENTS, AND HELPS TO AVOID CULTURAL BIAS WHICH CAN DISADVANTAGE STUDENTS FROM MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES.

When it comes to the racial, cultural and personal identities of students, classrooms in the United States are becoming increasingly more diverse. **Culturally responsive teaching** involves acknowledging and valuing students' cultural backgrounds as assets in the learning process, while culturally responsive practices ensure that all students receive support tailored to their unique cultural perspectives. Educators have the opportunity to create instruction that is rich in context, but they also face challenges in making sure that assessments provide fair and unbiased opportunities for students to show their abilities. As such, assessments should be designed to reflect this in order to be relevant and meaningful to all students.[80]

Students bring diverse cultural perspectives, languages, and values to the classroom, which can affect how they interpret and respond to assessments. Accordingly, a fundamental aspect of culturally responsive assessment is recognizing the cultural contexts that influence students' learning experiences. Incorporating multicultural content into assessments ensures that they reflect the diverse experiences and knowledge of all students, and helps to avoid cultural bias which can disadvantage students from marginalized communities.[81] Cultural bias can manifest in various ways, such as through the language used in test items, the scenarios presented, or the assumptions made about students' prior knowledge. Language barriers and cultural differences can lead to misinterpretations of test items, leading to inaccurate measurements of students' abilities.[82]

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DATA-DRIVEN APPROACHES, CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS, AND CONTINUES EVALUATION FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Just as assessments should be culturally responsive, so too should the interventions designed to support students' learning. These interventions should recognize and address unique challenges faced by students from different cultural backgrounds, and should be adapted to align with students' cultural practices and communication styles. By leveraging students' linguistic diversity, English language learners can more effectively access curriculum and educators can create more inclusive and effective interventions.[83]

Essential to evaluating the effectiveness of assessments and interventions is monitoring the practices to confirm that they are achieving the desired results and having a positive outcome on student outcomes. One of the most effective strategies for monitoring is continuous data collection and analysis. Regular data collection on student performance allows educators to make informed decisions about interventions and instructional strategies. In addition, regular data analysis helps identify which interventions are working and which may need adjustment. In addition, data collection should be both formative for immediate feedback, and summative to provide a comprehensive view of student achievement and the overall effectiveness of an intervention.[84]

INCORPORATING MULTICULTURAL CONTENT INTO ASSESSMENTS ENSURES THAT THEY REFLECT THE DIVERSE EXPERIENCES AND KNOWLEDGE OF ALL STUDENTS, AND HELPS TO AVOID CULTURAL BIAS WHICH CAN DISADVANTAGE STUDENTS FROM MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES.

Using only one assessment tool can limit the accuracy and comprehensiveness of evaluations. Utilizing multiple measures provides a more complete view of student learning, the effectiveness of interventions, and allows for triangulation where different data sources are compared to ensure validity. Furthermore, the use of multiple measures reduces the likelihood of bias, as they consider a variety of student performance factors, rather than relying on a single metric.[85]

Ongoing professional development is another key strategy for ensuring the effectiveness of assessment and intervention practices. Educators need frequent training and support to successfully implement and evaluate strategies. Through professional development and collaboration with others, educators can stay informed about best practices and continuously improve their approaches to monitoring and evaluation.[86]

Finally, effective monitoring and evaluation require a commitment to continuous improvement. Creating feedback loops – where educators regularly review assessment data, reflect on their practices, and make necessary adjustments – are critical for maintaining the effectiveness of interventions. By fostering a culture of continuous improvement, educators can ensure that assessment and intervention practices are consistently effective.[87]

STRENGTHENING COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENTS AND INTERVENTIONS THROUGH POLICY AND PRACTICE

Education is the foundation of any society, shaping the minds of future generations and determining the growth and course of a nation's economic and social progress. Schools and districts have the responsibility of ensuring that all students achieve their full potential, regardless of background or ability. Central to this obligation is the implementation of comprehensive assessment and intervention systems, which are crucial for identifying student needs, guiding instructional practices, and providing support.

These systems provide a complete view of a student's academic performance, social-emotional development, and overall well-being. While traditional assessments focus solely on academic achievement, comprehensive systems consider multiple aspects, and include a variety of assessments that help identify specific areas in need of support. Intervention systems encompass a range of tools and strategies, and target the issues identified during the assessment phase.[88]

Disproportionately represented among those who fall behind academically are students from low-income families and historically marginalized groups. Because these students are more likely to attend schools with fewer resources, comprehensive assessments and intervention systems are often lacking, if they exist at all. As a result, students may not receive the targeted support they need, leading to an ever-widening achievement gap. Comprehensive systems enhance educational equity by helping to identify students who are struggling academically and socially, and providing targeted interventions that can prevent long-term educational deficits. **Policy support** helps level the playing field by ensuring that all schools have the resources and guidance they need to implement effective systems.[89]

Research shows that access to detailed, real-time data about student performance can be used by teachers, school districts, and parents to make informed decisions that improve educational outcomes. Policy support ensures that the infrastructure for data collection, analysis, and dissemination is accessible to all educators. Without this support, however, schools may struggle to implement data-driven practices, which can lead to suboptimal outcomes.[90] Perhaps the most important argument for strong policy support is that it leads directly to the early identification of learning difficulties. Research has been clear that students who receive early support are more likely to catch up to their peers and succeed academically. As such, early intervention is crucial for addressing issues before they become entrenched.[91]

ESSA emphasizes the use of data to improve outcomes and reduce disparities, and policies that align with ESSA ensure that assessment and intervention systems are used to promote equity. Additionally, policy support provides funding and guidance to implement programs effectively, ensuring that systems are not only executed but are also sustainable and effective. Policies that mandate regular assessments and interventions help ensure that no student falls through the cracks. However, without clear and consistent plans that are implemented with fidelity, even the most well-designed system can falter, leaving vulnerable students without the help they require.[92]

STRENGTHENING COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENTS AND INTERVENTIONS THROUGH POLICY AND PRACTICE

Over the years, policies and initiatives have been implemented at the federal, state, and local levels to enhance the effectiveness of assessment and intervention systems. Designed to provide frameworks that guide education practices and promote equity, these policies shape how assessments are conducted, how data is used, and how interventions are implemented to meet diverse student needs. Comprehensive assessment and intervention systems are critical tools aimed at identifying learning gaps, providing target support, and ensuring that all students have access to high-quality education.

As mentioned before, one of the most significant federal policies in the U.S. education system is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA aims to provide states with greater flexibility in designing accountability systems while maintaining a strong focus on improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged students. ESSA mandates state implementation of annual assessments in reading and math for students in grades three through eight, and once in high school. The goal is to identify students who need additional support and provide early intervention to improve their outcomes. ESSA emphasizes the importance of data-driven decision making, and states are provided with the autonomy to develop comprehensive intervention systems that meet the diverse needs of students.[93]

The School Improvement Grants (SIG) program, which was initially established by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and continued under ESSA, provides funds to support interventions in the lowest-performing schools. These funds are used to implement evidence-based strategies, and schools receiving SIG funds are required to demonstrate improvement in student achievement over time.[94]

Another crucial provision of ESSA is **Title I Funding**, which provides financial assistance to schools with high percentages of students from low-income families. Title I funds are intended to help these schools meet the needs of their students by improving academic achievement, using assessments to monitor progress, interventions and support programs. Title I funds are also used to support professional development for teachers, ensuring they are trained to effectively use assessment data and implement interventions.[95]

Title VI, Part A – Indian Education is another vital provision of ESSA that addresses the unique educational and cultural needs of Native American and Alaska Native students. It provides federal funding to support programs that promote academic achievement, cultural preservation, and college or career readiness for these students. The provision ensures that Native students have access to resources and opportunities that are culturally relevant, while also focusing on closing the achievement gaps they often face.

The **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** is a federal law enacted by Congress in 1975 to ensure that children with disabilities receive free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, and ensures those children receive special education and related services. IDEA directs states and public agencies to provide early intervention, special education, and related services to eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. Also mandated by this law is the use of individualized education programs (IEPs) and the requirement that schools conduct comprehensive assessments to identify students with disabilities. The data gathered from assessments is then used to develop tailored interventions to meet each student's unique needs.[96]

STRENGTHENING COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENTS AND INTERVENTIONS THROUGH POLICY AND PRACTICE

Originally developed as part of IDEA, Response to Intervention (RTI) is a widely adopted framework aimed at providing early intervention for struggling students. Beginning with high-quality classroom instruction and followed by increasingly intensive interventions, the strength of the initiative lies in its proactive approach to identifying students at risk for academic failure before they fall too far behind.[97] Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is an extension of RTI that expands the framework to include not only academic interventions but also behavioral and social-emotional supports. Integrating data-based decision making across multiple areas of learning and behavior, MTSS allows for a more comprehensive approach to student support. By recognizing that academic difficulties often intersect with behavioral and emotional challenges, MTSS is particularly valuable for addressing the needs of the whole child.[98]

Finally, programs such as Head Start – funded by the federal government – provide early education, health, nutrition, and parental involvement services to low-income children and their families. The primary goal of Head Start is to promote school readiness by addressing the comprehensive needs of young children. Head Start programs include regular assessment of child development and learning, allowing educators to intervene early when developmental delays and learning challenges are identified.[99]

INCREASING FUNDING FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSESSMENT PROGRAMS CAN HELP ENSURE ALL CHILDREN, ESPECIALLY THOSE IN UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES, ARE SCREENED FOR DEVELOPMENTAL DELAYS AND LEARNING CHALLENGES BEFORE THEY ENTER KINDERGARTEN.

While existing policies such as IDEA and ESSA have laid strong foundations, there are areas where reforms and new policies could significantly enhance the effectiveness of these systems. Drawing on insights from existing research, initiatives, and policies, it is possible to form recommendations for policy changes and reforms to improve assessment and intervention practices.

It is well established that early childhood education is crucial for laying the groundwork for future academic success, particularly for students from low-income families. While programs like Head Start have made strides in this area, there is a need to expand and strengthen these initiatives. Increasing funding for early childhood assessment programs can help ensure all children, especially those in underserved communities, are screened for developmental delays and learning challenges before they enter kindergarten. **Amendments to the ESEA to increase Title I funding to early childhood education initiatives** could provide more opportunities for children to attend early childhood education programs, and enhance the comprehensiveness of assessments.[100]

Many states have adopted MTSS frameworks, but there is a wide variation in how these systems are implemented. **A national MTSS framework** could ensure consistency and equity in how students receive academic, behavioral, and social-emotional support. Establishing federal guidelines and resources would assist states with implementing and maintaining high-quality MTSS practices, and provide a standardized approach to identifying students' needs and delivering targeted interventions. This could be facilitated with reauthorization of ESSA to include specific provisions for implementation and monitoring of a National MTSS framework, along with providing grants to incentivize states to adopt and adapt the framework to their needs.[101]

STRENGTHENING COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENTS AND INTERVENTIONS THROUGH POLICY AND PRACTICE

Teachers are central to the successful implementation of assessment and intervention practices, yet many lack sufficient training in using that data to inform their instruction. As such, **ongoing professional development** is essential for equipping educators with the skills needed to interpret assessment data and apply it effectively. There is a demonstrated need for policymakers to fund professional development programs that focus on data literacy and evidence-based interventions. Additionally, states should mandate that teacher preparation programs include comprehensive training in these areas, ensuring that new teachers enter the profession with the necessary skills.[102]

Inequities in school funding leads to disparities in the quality of assessment and intervention practices. While Title I funding aims to address these disparities, the allocation of resources varies significantly between states and districts. Policymakers should **revise funding formulas to ensure that resources are distributed based on student need**, rather than equal distribution across districts. Prioritizing schools with the highest levels of need ensures that they have the resources necessary to implement comprehensive assessment and intervention systems.[103]

Academic success cannot be completely achieved without addressing behavioral and emotional struggles as well. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is increasingly recognized as vital for student success, yet it is often excluded from discussions of academic assessment and intervention. Policymakers can **require the integration of SEL into intervention frameworks** helps to address the whole child, which leads to better outcomes both academically and emotionally. Providing funding for the development and implementation of SEL assessments and interventions ensures that they are aligned with academic goals and are culturally responsive.[104]

THE NATIONAL PARENT UNION'S COMMITMENT

In conclusion, assessment and accountability are indispensable pillars of our public education system, ensuring that every child has equitable access to high-quality learning opportunities. These tools provide the transparency and data needed to identify gaps, address disparities, and drive improvement. Without a clear understanding of student progress and the performance of our schools, we cannot advocate for the necessary changes that will support all children in achieving academic success.

THE NATIONAL PARENTS UNION, THROUGH **THE PARENT LEADER COUNCIL ON ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY**, IS COMMITTED TO ADVANCING POLICIES THAT HOLD SYSTEMS ACCOUNTABLE, EMPOWER PARENTS WITH KNOWLEDGE, AND ULTIMATELY CREATE A FUTURE WHERE EVERY CHILD IS PREPARED TO THRIVE.

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FOOTNOTES

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