

U.S. Chamber of Commerce
Foundation

Connecting Data to Achievement

Assessment and Accountability Brief Series

October 2026



The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

harnesses the power of business to create solutions for the good of America and the world. We anticipate, develop, and deploy solutions to challenges facing communities—today and tomorrow.

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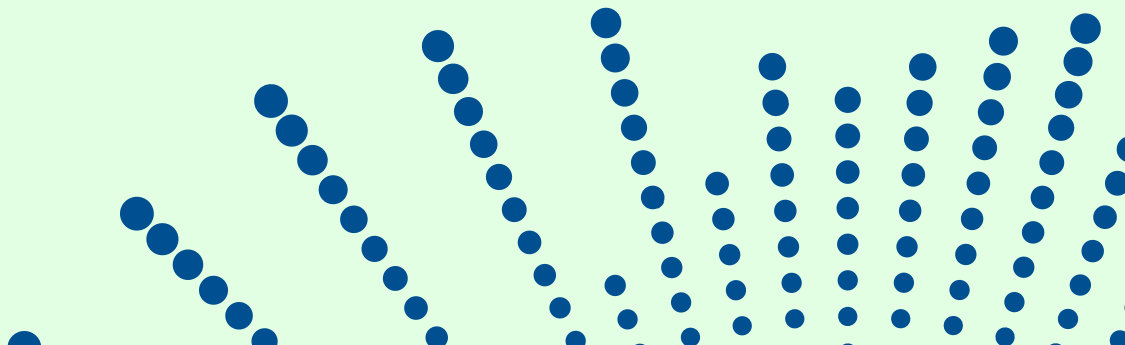
Business leaders use data to understand how your organization is performing and where it needs to improve. A dashboard might show declining sales, rising costs, or a division that is falling short of its goals. However, an organization does not improve simply because results appear on a screen. Leaders must interpret the information, identify the underlying problem, direct resources, and leverage data to adjust their strategy.

The same principle applies in education. The first brief in this series examined how states set different expectations for academic proficiency, making it difficult to interpret and compare student performance across state lines. The second explored the availability of data and trends that could weaken the transparency and comparability of student outcomes.

This third and final brief asks a more fundamental question: What is all this information for? The education sector has become reasonably good at measuring student performance and identifying schools that need support; the harder and more important challenge is using that information to improve outcomes.

Data collection and reporting are essential, but they are not the end goal. Transparency helps families, policymakers, and the public understand how schools are performing, but transparency alone does not improve outcomes for students. Actionable data, though, is a valuable tool when education leaders use data to identify students and schools that need support, direct additional resources, select appropriate interventions, and determine whether those efforts are working.

Federal and state accountability systems devote significant attention to transparency and the identification of low-performing schools, but more attention is needed on doing the difficult work of school improvement. A [2024 report](#) from the U.S. Government Accountability Office revealed that less than half of school improvement plans addressed all three required elements, including a needs assessment, identifying resource inequities, and selecting evidence-based interventions. Data, when not used to inform school improvement strategies, cannot lead to meaningful improvements for kids – which may in turn fuel opposition to statewide assessments and confusion around testing's purpose.



Education First's *Rethinking the Test Pile* report further illustrates this distinction. This study examined assessment systems across states and districts, including the assessments students take, the assessments' purpose, and how leaders decide which assessments to administer. Importantly, the study found no statistically significant relationship between the volume of assessments administered by districts and student proficiency or growth. The finding does not suggest that measurement lacks value – it underscores that collecting more data does not, by itself, produce better results. Data must be connected to decisions about instruction, support, resources, and improvement.

Connecting data to school improvement is also a question of focus and capacity. Leaders in other sectors routinely evaluate whether the information they collect is helping make better strategic decisions for their organization. If a data point on a dashboard is not being used, an organization is unlikely to continue investing time and resources in collecting and reporting it indefinitely. The same should be true in education. When data are not useful for identifying needs, guiding action, or evaluating progress, leaders should ask whether collecting and reporting them is worthwhile. The objective is not to collect data for data's sake, but to collect the right information and use it to drive improvement.

For this brief, we focus primarily on student achievement in academic subjects, primarily collected through standardized assessments. Statewide standardized tests remain the principal measure to collect objective, comparable information about academic achievement at scale.

They are not perfect measures and cannot answer every question about a student or a school, but as our current best measure of comparable student achievement data at scale, these tests should remain a central component of how community leaders and policymakers evaluate school quality and plan for school improvement.

The value of those results ultimately depends on how strongly they are connected to school improvement decisions. The education system has become reasonably good at measuring performance and identifying schools and students who need additional support; the harder and more important challenge is using that information to improve outcomes for kids. This brief examines how states and districts can use student achievement data for decisions about resources, support, and, ultimately, the improvement of academic outcomes. Through examples of data in action, this brief considers how leaders can move from measuring performance to changing it, especially for the students and schools that need support most. We conclude with recommendations for how business leaders can support a stronger connection between data and school improvement in their communities.

Data in Action: The Mississippi Marathon

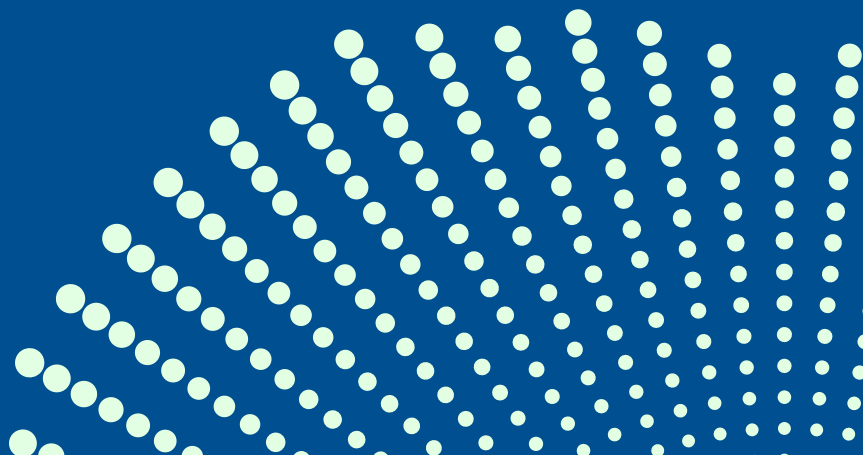
One of the most cited education success stories of the past two decades comes from Mississippi and provides an example of data used in school improvement strategies. Ranked near the bottom of states on the National Assessment of Educational Progress from its inception in 1990 until the mid-2000s, the state has since made dramatic gains in student achievement, particularly in early literacy. The Progressive Policy Institute's paper *[Inside the Mississippi Marathon](#)* details Mississippi's sustained effort to set high expectations, measure progress, and use achievement data to guide improvement and implementation over time.

Mississippi's literacy reform strategies demonstrate how data can drive action. State-approved screening tests are used to identify children below reading proficiency before third grade, students who are not proficient in reading are retained in third grade, parents receive notice when children fall below benchmarks, and schools with high concentrations of struggling readers receive required training and coaching designed to improve the quality of reading instruction.

At all points, data impacts action, like by editing professional development provided in districts. Additionally, these structures were built for continuous improvement, periodically identifying new schools for interventions and providing evidence-based supports on a rolling basis.

Over time, this data-driven approach has led to real gains for students; Mississippi fourth-graders have posted the most growth of any state on the National Assessment of Educational Progress from 2013 to 2024, and the state now ranks seventh in the nation in reading.

Mississippi's experience underscores an important lesson: identifying a problem is only the first step. The state's success came not from collecting more data through screeners, but from using data to direct resources, improve classroom practice, and continuously evaluate whether those efforts were producing better results.



Data in Action: Houston Independent School District

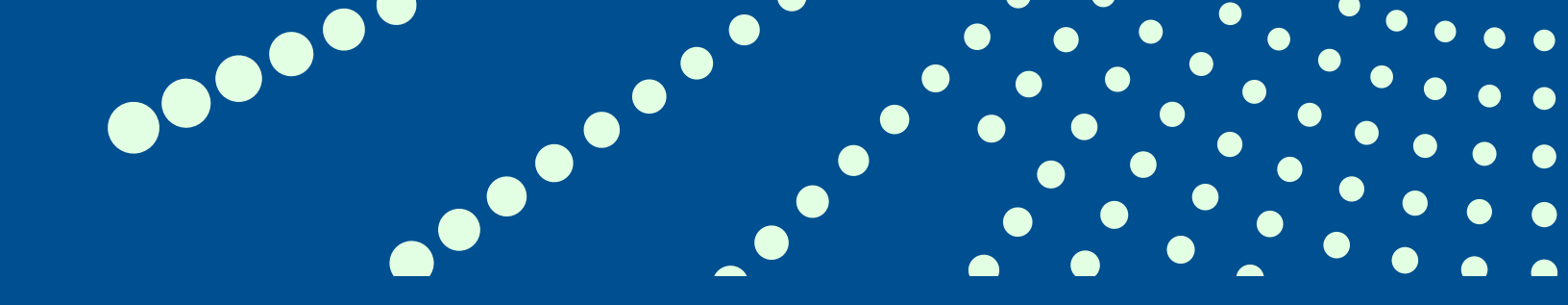
When the Texas Education Agency assumed control of Houston Independent School District (HISD) in 2023, leadership inherited a district where student achievement consistently lagged behind state averages and more than 50 campuses earned failing accountability ratings. In its [Three Years of Transformation](#) report, HISD says it leveraged achievement and accountability data to continuously identify schools in greatest need of support and to guide the district's reform strategy.

Under Superintendent Mike Miles, HISD's New Education System focused interventions on historically low-performing campuses. Schools received instructional coaching aligned to curricula, extended learning time, and increased classroom support. Student performance data was then used to monitor whether those changes were improving outcomes, and to determine which additional supports were needed.

District leaders emphasized what Miles calls "[instructional coherence](#)", aligning curriculum, instruction, teacher evaluation, and academic standards around a common definition of effective teaching. Emphasizing the value of classroom instruction, HISD a variety of data in its Pay-for-Performance program, including academic outcomes and classroom observations, to identify excellent teachers and reward them with higher salaries.

Early results suggest that coupling data with clear action and instructional coherence can accelerate improvement. According to [HISD](#), the number of A- and B-rated schools more than doubled between 2023 and 2026, and the number of D- and F-rated schools declined sharply. Student performance on state assessments improved across multiple subjects, with some of the largest gains in campuses that previously struggled the most.

Houston's experience illustrates that data alone do not improve schools. Achievement data helped district leaders identify where support was needed, target interventions, monitor implementation, and evaluate results. In that sense, data functioned not simply as an accountability measure, but as a management tool for continuous improvement.



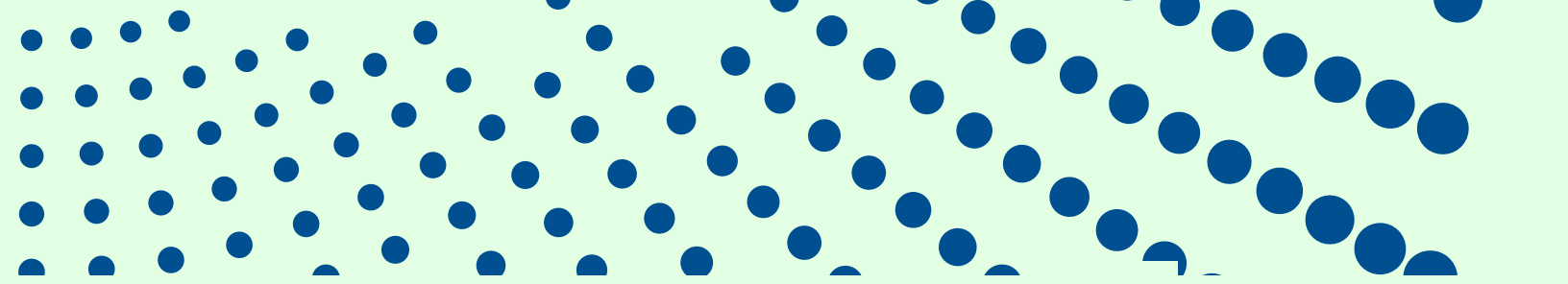
Data in Action: Improving Career Pathways

Data can also be a tool of improvement in career pathways contexts, helping employers and educators identify gaps and build programs that align with industry need. In [Lenawee County, Michigan](#), chemical manufacturers faced persistent difficulty filling entry-level production positions, inspiring the launch of a local employer collaborative. Working with Lenawee Now, the Lenawee Intermediate School District, and Michigan Works Southeast, employers used the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Talent Pipeline Management® approach to identify the shared talent challenge and better understand the barriers contributing to it.

That process helped employers move from identifying a workforce shortage to developing specific responses. After determining that perceptions of chemical manufacturing careers were one barrier to recruitment, the collaborative worked with local schools and partners to increase students' exposure to the industry through career-awareness videos, chemistry-based classroom materials, guest lectures, and a middle-school chemistry competition. Employers also reviewed potential training options for entry-level chemical operators and industrial maintenance technicians.

The results illustrate how data, whether sourced from workforce statistics, employer projections, or academic assessment, can help build a system that prepares students with the skills they need to be successful after high school. The case study reports that employers initially described 50 to 100 collective production-operator openings; by a later collaborative meeting, most companies reported only one or two openings.

The [case study](#) appropriately cautions that this change cannot be attributed solely to the collaborative's work. Still, Lenawee County demonstrates how data can be leveraged to build stronger and more aligned education-employer partnerships, ultimately improving outcomes for students.



What Can the Business Community Do?

One important first step is to emphasize the importance of education data as an indicator of the health of the future workforce. If stakeholders do not highlight the importance of these data, statewide, comparable assessment and transparent reporting will be deprioritized at best.

Of course, as discussed in this brief, collecting academic outcomes data for the purpose of public reporting is not the goal. Ask questions of leaders in your state and/or districts about how data is used to drive school improvement decisions. Find your State Report Card website [here](#) to view what data is used for accountability in your state.

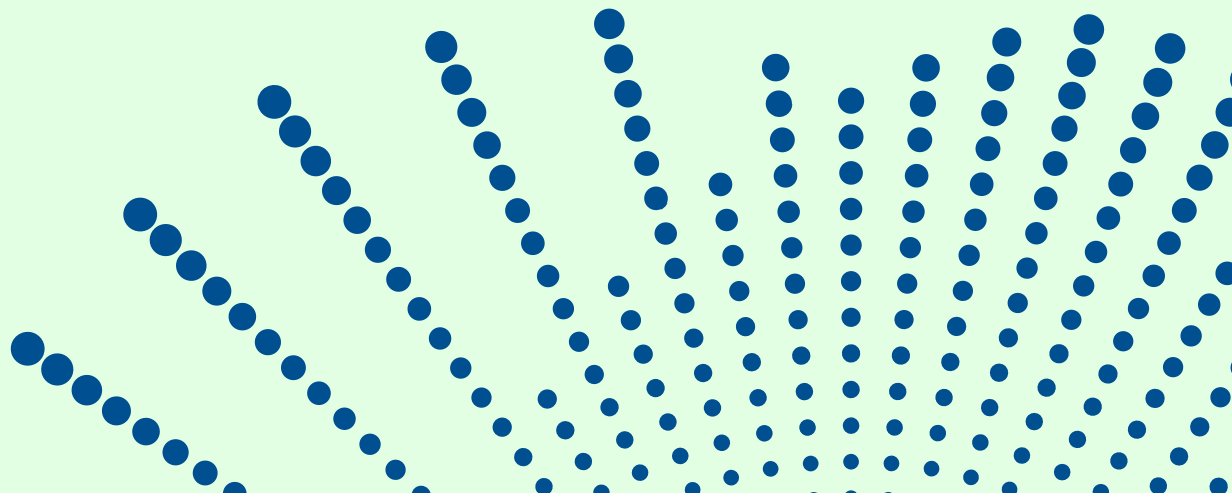
Finally, when assessment data are perceived as tools for transparency and school identification rather than improvement, stakeholders may question the value of collecting them in the first place. Education, business, and community leaders can safeguard against this by communicating assessments' purpose and how they are used, including by celebrating tangible examples of how data drives improvement.

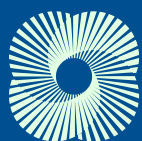
As a business leader, approach district and state leaders as a trusted, supportive partner. One of your most powerful actions is to ask smart questions, such as:

- What data is used to identify students and schools in need of support?
- How are strategies selected to improve student outcomes in your community? What is the process for vetting these choices, and what evidence supports the efficacy of those interventions?
- What is the capacity of our state education agency to support school improvement efforts?
- How do districts create their school improvement plans? How are these plans evaluated and supported by the state education agency?
- How do we measure progress in our schools?
- What challenges or pain points could data help identify, and how could those insights inform an appropriate intervention?
- How is data used to evaluate the effectiveness of school improvement efforts?
- How can the business community and chambers of commerce partner to align school improvement goals with regional workforce needs?
- What additional support do you need in school improvement efforts?

Other actions to consider include:

- Celebrate progress. School improvement is difficult work, and voicing support of leaders making hard decisions goes a long way in maintaining energy and effort.
- Call attention to what's working. Education leaders who have already identified schools in need of support need examples and research-backed best practices.
- Encourage district and state leaders to be intentional about school improvement efforts and consider policies that increase the capacity of state education agencies to support school improvement. The Education Trust recently [published a report](#) interviewing state education agency administrators with recommendations for how states can shift focus from compliance to building capacity and technical assistance.
- Make the case that academic success matters for the future workforce. This provides air cover for education leaders to make difficult decisions and stay the course on promising practices. For example, the Florida Chamber Foundation's [State of 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency](#) report frames reading skills as critical for the workforce and details strategies that business leaders can support, such as using data and supporting evidence-based literacy instruction.





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