

U.S. Chamber of Commerce
Foundation

The Business Leader's Guide to K-12 Educational Data, Assessment, and Accountability

October 2026



Why Should the Business Community Engage in K-12 Educational Data, Assessment, and Accountability?

Education is the backbone of a thriving local economy. According to the U.S. Census, nearly eight in 10 adults live within 100 miles of where they grew up, meaning the vast majority of a community's workforce of tomorrow is in its classrooms today. But how do we know that all students are receiving the high-quality education needed to be successful in work and life?

Assessment and accountability structures ensure that the decisions made in and regarding our public schools are focused on student achievement and school quality. Many dismiss the technical details of testing and accountability as academic exercises rather than workforce necessities. Even business leaders who recognize the importance of strong schools often find the complexities of federal and state reporting difficult to navigate.

Yet, assessment and accountability structures have significant influence over the quality and rigor of education in our communities. They set performance goals that drive school improvement and provide the objective data needed to identify and support underperforming schools. Effective accountability models ensure that resources are aligned with student needs and that performance results are reported clearly and promptly to the public. From identifying foundational learning gaps in elementary school to measuring access to high school career pathways, these systems maintain the high expectation required for a competitive talent pipeline.

The business community has a critical role to play in championing these rigorous systems. Business leaders understand that you cannot manage what you do not measure, and their expertise in data-driven decision-making can reinforce the need for transparency in our public schools. If employers want to ensure a stable supply of prepared workers, they must signal that academic proficiency and clear performance signals are non-negotiable.

“There is a clear reason for the business community to have a seat at the table when it comes to K-12 education: today's classroom is tomorrow's workforce, and our economy needs a workforce equipped with the academic skills required for jobs of the future.”

— Andrea Helart, President and CEO, Lake Havasu Area Chamber of Commerce

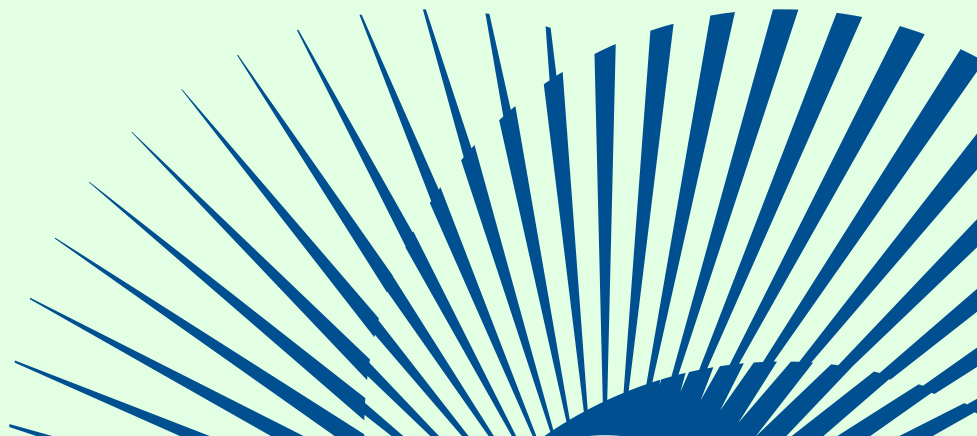
KEY QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO CONSIDER

- How do academic skills like reading, math, and science impact readiness for careers and your community's future workforce?
- When and how does your state assess student learning in reading, math, science, and social studies?
- What assessments are required, why, and what other assessments might districts use?
- How is the public informed of how schools are doing?
- Are schools in your state graded or assigned a rating?
- How do leaders in your state use education data?
- How does your state support low performing schools or districts to improve?

Takeaway: Why Business Has a Stake

- 1 Workforce quality starts with K-12 outcomes
- 2 Employers need transparent information about talent pipelines
- 3 Accountability helps identify gaps before they become workforce shortages
- 4 Business leaders have historically played a role in supporting transparency, standards, and continuous improvement

Those unfamiliar with K-12 policy are often surprised to learn how frequently state-level actions can either strengthen or weaken the quality of education data. This guide provides an overview of how assessment and accountability systems work and why business leaders must actively engage with policymakers and school districts to protect the integrity of student achievement data.



A Brief History of Assessment and Accountability

The federal role in education has evolved from providing funding for access—focusing on system inputs—to enforcing strict outcomes-based mandates, before eventually designing a system that gives significant authority to the states while setting backstops on the federal level.

This journey began with the [Elementary and Secondary Education Act \(ESEA\)](#) in 1965, which attempted to address the cycle of intergenerational poverty as part of President Johnson’s “War on Poverty.” The legislation focused primarily on expanding equal opportunity and access in public schools by funding categorical programs for certain student groups, like students living in poverty. However, the new policy left decisions regarding what was taught and how performance was measured almost entirely to local districts.

This meant that states varied in whether and how they measured academic outcomes for students. In 2000, only a quarter of states consecutively assessed students in the same subjects from the early elementary grades through middle school. This made tracking education progress—whether at the student or district level—nearly impossible to do with fidelity. Most states did report snapshot state assessment results, but many did not report disaggregated results, making it impossible to analyze outcomes for specific student groups.

In 2002, the [No Child Left Behind Act \(NCLB\)](#) ramped up the federal role in accountability and shifted the focus from system inputs to outputs. NCLB required states to administer annual math and reading tests in grades 3-8 and once in high school and disaggregate that data by student groups. States were also required to help all students reach “proficiency” on state tests by the 2013-2014 school year. One aspect of the NCLB system is that each state decided what “proficiency” would mean and which tests they would use to assess it. So, for businesses looking to base a regional office, there was no reliable measure of student performance comparable across state lines. As for accountability in NCLB, the law also required states to identify schools that failed to make adequate progress toward proficiency, which were subject to various sanctions.

After over a decade of NCLB implementation, some parts of the system showed strain. Common calls for reform were based on backlash against perceived federal intrusion, the concern that classroom curriculum was narrowing to focus on tested subjects, and the increasing evaluations placed on teachers.

In 2015, Congress passed the [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#), which significantly shifted power from the federal government to the states. Under ESSA, states must set their own goals regarding proficiency, English-language proficiency, and graduation rates. States are required to create accountability systems that report on these indicators (and a few others), but they can choose how much weight to give to each indicator. There are also requirements for states to identify and support the lowest-performing schools, but states have the ability to choose how they will support those schools.

The role of bipartisanship cannot be understated in the evolution of federal K-12 education legislation. Both NCLB and ESSA received significant bipartisan support as both sides of the aisle came together to call for high-quality education for all. However, as education has become increasingly politicized, major education reform seems out of reach. Although ESEA was due for reauthorization after the 2021-2022 school year, Congress has not considered a new major piece of K-12 legislation, meaning that states must continue adhering to ESSA.

The PIE Network's [Federal Timeline of Standards, Assessment, and Accountability](#) offers additional background on the development of federal assessment and accountability policy.

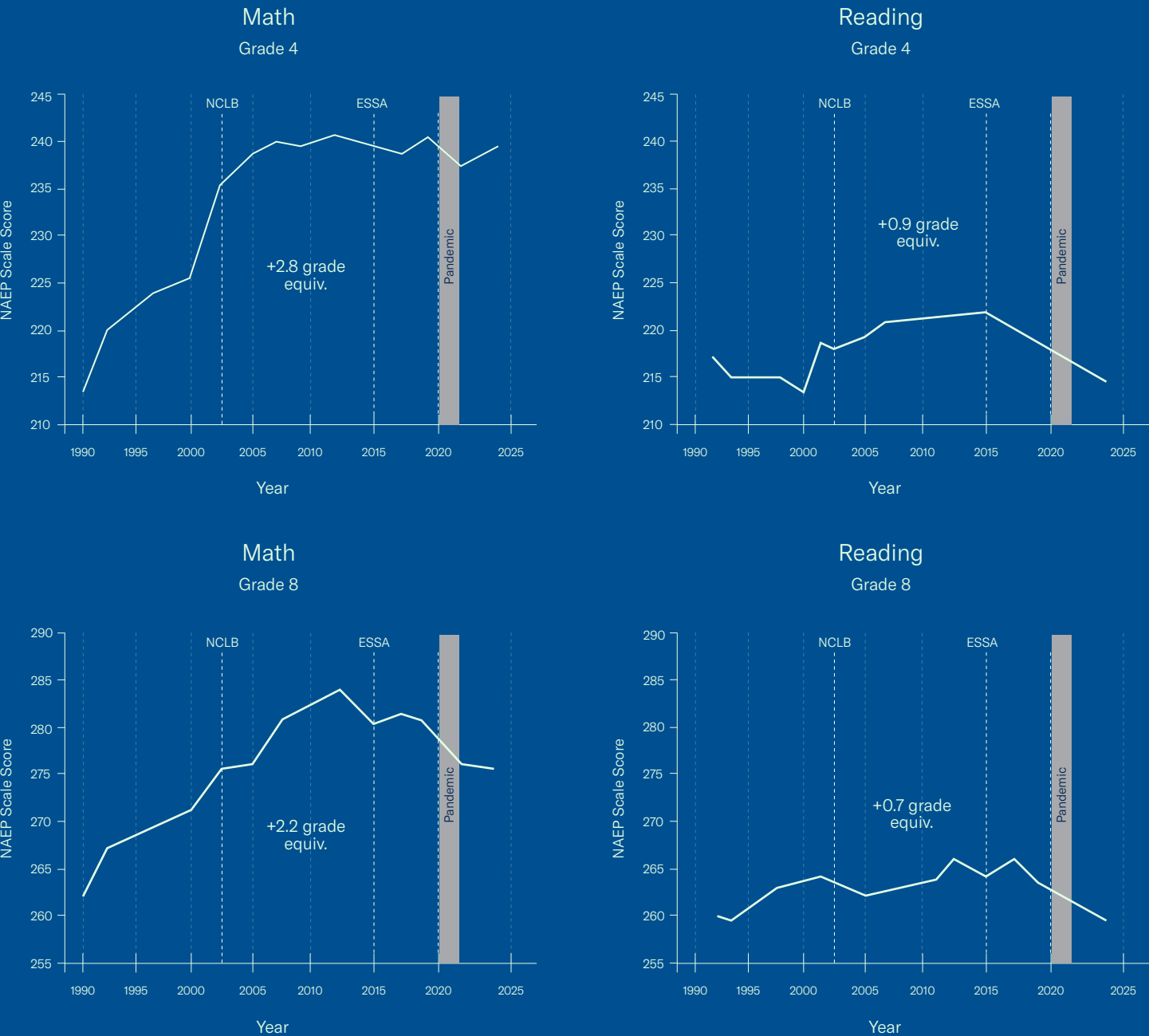
Impact

How do we measure the impact of these policies on student achievement at scale? Because states can set their own grade-level standards and assessments, state assessment scores are not comparable nationwide. The only nationally representative assessment of K-12 student achievement is the [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#), also known as the Nation's Report Card.

NAEP scores show that from the 1990s to the mid-2010s, student achievement grew. In math, student achievement for both fourth and eighth grades peaked in 2013 compared to the 1990 baseline (42% proficiency for fourth grade and 35% for eighth grade). As of the 2024 administration of the assessment, proficiency fell to 39% for fourth grade and 28% for eighth grade. In reading, student achievement has remained nearly unchanged since the 1990s, experiencing only slight gains over time and throughout policy changes. Reading proficiency rose slightly from 1990 until 2013, when 35% of fourth graders and 36% of eighth graders achieved proficiency in 2013. In 2024, scores had returned to levels last seen in 2003, with 31% of fourth graders and 30% of eighth graders proficient.

The [Education Scorecard](#), a collaboration from researchers at Harvard and Stanford, provides another interpretation of the NAEP data. "From the pre-[NCLB] minimum to the post-NCLB peak, mean math achievement in 4th and 8th grade improved by the equivalent of 2.8 grade equivalents and 2.2 grade equivalents, respectively," the researchers write. Reading achievement almost improved by almost a full grade equivalent in 4th and 8th grades during this period.

Figure 1: National NAEP Trends, 1990 to 2024



Note: Estimates are from National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). NAEP Data Explorer. U.S. Department of Education Sciences. We convert the difference in pre-NCLB minimum to post-NCLB maximum using a grade equivalent to 10.25 for math and 10.625 for reading.

Source: June 2024 ERS

Reflections from our previous [Looking Back to Look Forward](#) report highlight a nuanced picture of what specific interventions drove increased student achievement. Drs. Dan Goldhaber and Mike DeArmond found that high-stakes accountability clearly improved student achievement in math, particularly for elementary students and historically marginalized groups. Universal transparency ensured that states could no longer hide the

underperformance of specific subgroups behind a school-wide average. Conversely, other policies and promises did not succeed at scale. Teacher evaluation reforms and school turnaround initiatives failed to show consistent national impact on student outcomes. Additionally, the promise that new assessments would provide parents with clearer, timelier information remains largely unfulfilled.

Current Requirements

Although ESSA presents a lighter federal touch than its predecessor, it remains a sweeping piece of legislation that defines the parameters of education quality and transparency.

The organization [All4Ed](#) provides digestible fact sheets and videos explaining specific aspects of the law. Below, we outline some of the most critical federal requirements for assessment and accountability:

Assessments

States are required to administer annual standardized assessments in reading and math for all students in grades 3–8 and at least once during high school. Science assessments are also required once in each of three grade spans: elementary, middle, and high school. While states have the flexibility to adopt their own academic standards and choose their own tests, these assessments must be aligned with college- and career-ready expectations, set by states, to ensure students are prepared for the modern workforce.

Reporting and Disaggregation

States must report performance data not just as a school-wide average, but broken down by specific student groups, including major racial and ethnic groups, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, and students with disabilities. This requirement seeks to prevent the underperformance of vulnerable populations from being hidden behind potentially higher-achieving majorities.

Transparency

States must publish annual “report cards” that are accessible and understandable to the public. Beyond test scores, these report cards include graduation rates and at least one non-academic indicator, such as chronic absenteeism or access to advanced coursework. Additionally, since the 2019-2020 school year, ESSA has required transparency into fiscal management by mandating the reporting of actual per-pupil expenditures at the school level.

School Quality or Student Success Indicator

Under ESSA, states must include at least one measure of “school quality or student success” in their accountability systems, often referred to as the fifth indicator. This indicator must be valid, reliable, comparable statewide, able to meaningfully differentiate school performance, and reported for all students and student subgroups. Many states use this flexibility to include measures related to college and career readiness, such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate participation or success, dual enrollment or postsecondary credit attainment, SAT/ACT performance, graduation pathway completion, career and technical education concentrator status, industry-recognized credential attainment, or participation in work-based learning. For business leaders, these indicators can provide useful signals about whether students are leaving high school with experiences and credentials connected to the workforce.

However, these metrics also require careful interpretation. Industry-recognized credentials can be meaningful when they are aligned to high-demand, high-wage fields and validated by collaboratives of employers, but they can become weaker signals if states count credentials of uneven quality or limited labor market value. Similarly, work-based learning can help students build career awareness and workplace skills, but participation alone may not demonstrate readiness unless the experience is structured, supervised, and connected to clear learning outcomes. The strongest accountability systems balance measures of opportunity, participation, and demonstrated attainment so that college and career readiness indicators reflect both access to career-connected learning and evidence that students are prepared for success after high school.

Timeliness

ESSA emphasizes that data must be reported to families and policymakers in a timely manner to be actionable. Although many states still struggle with delays, the federal expectation is that results are shared promptly enough to allow families to make informed decisions about their child’s education before the start of a new academic year.

School Improvement

States are required to use their accountability data to identify and intervene in the bottom 5% of all schools, known as Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools. Additionally, states must identify schools where specific student groups are consistently underperforming [called Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) schools]. While the federal government provides the funding for these interventions, states and local districts are responsible for designing and implementing the specific improvement strategies.

Types of Assessment and Metrics

Types of Assessments

Understanding and using education data requires distinguishing between different types of assessments, each of which serves a specific purpose. The annual, statewide tests discussed above are called summative assessments and act as a point-in-time evaluation of student learning at the end of the school year. These assessments are critical to accountability because they provide a birds-eye view of student proficiency across schools, districts, and states. They are also important to families in providing a check on whether their child is meeting grade-level expectations.

In contrast, interim and formative assessments occur throughout the year. Formative assessments are daily tools used by educators to adjust instruction in real-time, while interim assessments provide periodic check-ups to track growth. While these are invaluable tools for instruction, they are not designed to replace the summative assessment's role in holding schools accountable for final outcomes.

EducationFirst provides many resources about assessment, including their recent report exploring the assessment system from the student perspective, [Rethinking the Test Pile: A National Study of K-8 Assessments](#).

Participation vs. Performance

Not all metrics are the same: some measure participation in an opportunity, while others measure performance or outcomes of the student or program overall. For example, some metrics included in school reports are enrollment in AP courses, career and technical education programs, or work-based learning. These examples are participation statistics that do not necessarily convey student performance, preparation, or mastery of specific skills. However, other metrics are performance-based, such as credential attainment, postsecondary credits earned, industry-recognized credentials achieved, and whether graduates are employed a certain number of years after graduation. When metrics are not aligned with desired outcomes, accountability systems can unintentionally encourage school systems to optimize what is counted rather than what matters most for students.

Data Use and Communication

How Stakeholders Can Use Assessment Data

Data is not just for compliance; it can be a powerful tool for strategic decision-making. Leaders at various levels can use assessment and accountability data in different ways, including to uphold high expectations, identify and scale effective practices, and support school improvement. Leaders can use education data in the following ways:

State Leaders	District Leaders	Community Members
– Celebrate districts showing growth and identify those in need of intervention. – Allocate resources to the communities and student groups that need them most. – Make informed decisions about policy changes, such as adopting evidence-based reading reforms when proficiency stalls. – Learn more about the impact of existing state investments, policies, and programs on student outcomes. Move funds away from programs that do not show results. – Combine and analyze cross-agency data to inform policy decisions. – Implement results-based contracts for educational services.	– Make informed decisions about instruction and teacher support. – Identify specific learning gaps and implement targeted interventions like high-dosage tutoring or professional development. – Monitor the implementation of district programs and policies. – Encourage teachers, staff, students, and families to participate fully in the culture and educational progress of the school. – Develop and revise district and school plans, targets, and goals. – Communicate to community members effectively on the progress your school demonstrated in the yearly assessment – and potential ways they could be supportive.	– Act as the ultimate keepers of high expectations. – Ensure the future workforce remains a priority in discussions about student outcomes. – Look into and ask questions about student achievement and growth for students overall and for specific student groups. – Provide feedback on how data is shared with the public. Push for timely, digestible, and actionable information. – Consider ways to invest and support your local district(s). – Celebrate academic achievement throughout the school year and when state assessment results are posted.

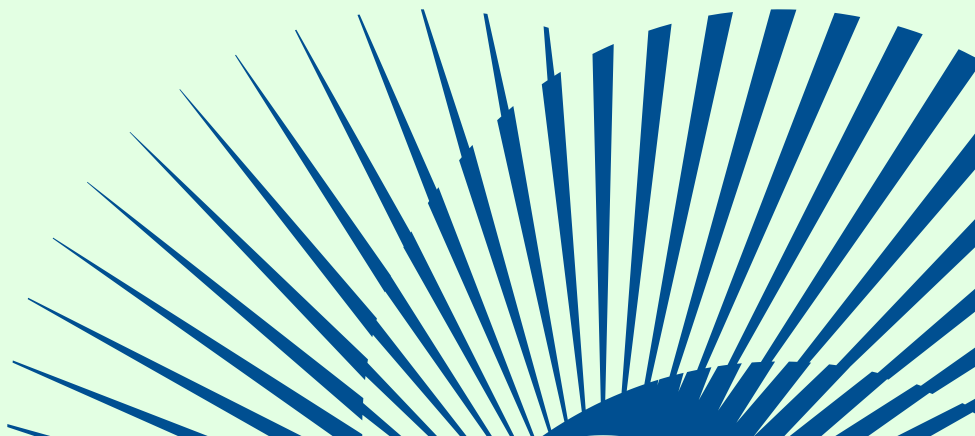
Speaking the Same Language

Effective partnerships between the business community and K-12 leaders begin with a shared understanding. Business leaders often discuss return on investment, productivity, talent pipeline, reskilling projections, and other industry terms. Educators use terms like proficiency, component skill, student achievement, formative assessment, and other education terms. While the vocabulary may differ, the underlying goal is the same: ensuring students develop the knowledge and skills needed for success after high school.

By understanding how school leaders use data to measure progress, business leaders can more effectively engage in productive conversations, ask informed questions, and establish themselves as constructive partners rather than outside critics. When discussions focus on shared outcomes and progress, education and business leaders are better equipped to work together and strengthen student and future workforce success.

“Our organization can better partner with our school districts on shared initiatives when we speak the same language to raise issues from an economic development perspective.”

— Amanda Wike, Executive Director, Dixon Chamber of Commerce & Main Street



What Business Leaders Can Do

When used well, K-12 education data can help business leaders understand long term workforce needs, engage constructively with education partners, and contribute to efforts that prepare students for future opportunities.

Business leaders can support the creation and usage of education data in many ways:

- Investigate conversations at the state level about changing grade-level standards or definitions of proficiency. Ask questions about how these changes will impact students' readiness for college and careers.
- Encourage the timely release of state assessment scores. Families, educators, and community members should be able to use these scores to inform decisions about summer learning and additional academic supports before the next school year begins.
- Ask your state leaders to adopt performance metrics and reporting processes that are accessible, meaningful to families and the public, and aligned with desired outcomes, such as [A-F letter school grading systems](#) or indicators that measure completion of [work-based learning experiences](#).
- Encourage district leaders to use student data to inform decisions about curriculum, assessments, and teacher supports.
- Help community members translate complex academic data into actionable information. [Research from Learning Heroes](#) shows that when parents have a clear, honest understanding of their child's progress, they are more likely to seek out the academic supports necessary for success.
- Host public forums where education data is discussed in the context of local economic and workforce development plans.
- Publicly recognize schools that have significantly improved student outcomes. Highlighting “bright spots” proves that progress is possible even in challenging contexts.

Questions to Consider as You Evaluate a State's System

What Makes a Good Accountability Indicator?

- Is the outcome meaningful to students?
- Is it valid and reliable?
- Does it relate to achievement?
- Does it differentiate among schools?
- Does it create unintended incentives?
- Is it under the school's control?

Accountability System Scorecard

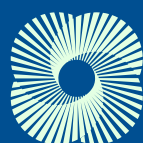
- Is proficiency reported clearly?
- Is growth included and easy to understand?
- Are career readiness indicators included?
- Are student groups reported separately?
- Can I find the student groups' data easily and find proficiency and growth indicators?
- Are results released before the next school year?
- Is the overall school performance data communicated clearly?
- Can I tell which components make up the school's overall grade?

Questions Business Leaders Can Ask State Leaders

- What percentage of students are proficient and how has that changed over five years?
- How much weight does academic achievement receive in the accountability model?
- Are career readiness indicators included? Do these indicators align to industry needs?
- How quickly are assessment results reported?

Questions Business Leaders Can Ask District Leaders

- How are assessment data used when selecting curriculum?
- Which student groups are furthest from proficiency?
- What interventions are producing measurable gains?
- How is career pathway participation connected to student achievement?
- What can the business community do to support the district's goals and needs in the next 1-3 years?



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