

Communicating Performance:
A Best Practice Resource for Encouraging
Use of State and School Report Cards

THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, Bureau of Indian Education, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Council seeks member consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public.

Communicating Performance: A Best Practice Resource for Encouraging Use of State and School Report Cards

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Pedro A. Rivera (Pennsylvania), President
Carissa Moffat Miller, Executive Director

Alissa Peltzman
Cory Curl

One Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20001-1431
Phone (202) 336-7000 • Fax (202) 408-8072 • www.ccsso.org



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State and school report cards provide a powerful avenue for states to reach families and the broader public as essential partners in improving student outcomes. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and many state legislatures require states to publish an array of education data including measures at the state, district, and school levels. The report cards also go deeper, illuminating how these measures vary for students by race and ethnicity, income, language, disability, and other characteristics. State and school report cards that effectively communicate these data to the public can inform educators and families, help them ask better questions, and ultimately, drive school improvement to support all students.

States have a range of possible public data reporting tools to support these purposes; part of each state's work is to integrate these tools to tell a coherent story using their education data.

To answer questions about student performance, state education agencies have increased their capacity to collect, manage, analyze, and make decisions based on data over the last 15 years. States have enhanced internal capacity to serve their own information needs, as well as the wider needs of policymakers, educators, and families. More people now have better access to more data about a broader array of indicators of educational performance.

While states have made substantial progress,¹ too few families, community leaders, and other stakeholders regularly review and act on states' education data.² Access remains inconsistent across stakeholders with different backgrounds and levels of understanding about state education systems. Data indicators may be more abundant but may not yet answer important questions.

The next frontier for state leadership is to advance beyond providing access to data to driving the use of data. Effective use of data is critical to more effectively support educators and students. Underlying many states' commitment to effective data usage is a commitment to equity. When educators have comprehensive information about student performance and can consider that information for all students and based on different student populations, they can start to take critical steps towards addressing achievement gaps. In 2017, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Aspen Institute published a report, [Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Education Chiefs](#), that details ten actions states can take to advance equity. This report includes several specific examples of how data can be used effectively to address equity issues:

- Initiating conversations about equity with diverse stakeholders
- Publicly examining data on current performance and trends
- Disaggregating data in meaningful ways to identify disparities in opportunity and outcomes
- Publicly sharing data on measures of students' progress after graduation and long-term success

1 In its 2014 [Paving the Path to Success: Data for Action](#) report, the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) documented significant progress across states.

2 In [Show Me the Data 2017](#), the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) points to some of the challenges with accessing report cards and identifies ways states can continue to improve report card development.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

With this resource, we highlight practices and questions to help state education agencies increase use of state and school report cards for decision-making and continuous school improvement. Understanding report card design and current use is a critical piece to a strategy designed to increase their use by stakeholders to improve student outcomes. We hope states will examine whether state and school report cards are empowering and equipping parents and families to advocate in partnership with community organizations and to be aware of, and part of, school improvement efforts. We also explore how state and school report cards can support a more coherent approach to effectively utilizing the available array of statewide data and public reporting tools, ensuring that each metric strengthens the picture of student, school, and district performance.

This resource recognizes current trends and context that reflect states' work to drive use of state and school report cards. In many states, for example, report cards prioritize information from the state's school and district accountability system. As accountability has grown more multi-faceted, it becomes essential for states to find ways to deliver crisp, clear, and concise messages about performance as the report card is a key communication tool for the accountability system.

In addition:

- The imperative has been raised to use data for improvement, to go "beyond the sandbox" of a wide array of data to figuring out the information that matters most and using it to improve results. For example, **Connecticut** provides a link from its school report card to resources for improvement.
- States continue to innovate with ways to use data in narratives to tell stories. For example, in **Ohio's** state-level report card, the state reinforced the importance of understanding the data with a graphic: A Tale of Two Districts.
- States provide opportunities to celebrate success and maintain an urgency to improve outcomes. For example, **Texas** highlights ways in which a school performs "exceptionally well" and **Idaho** is highlighting and tracking ESSA achievement goals and recognizing schools that meet interim goals.

This resource serves as a companion to CCSSO's [Communicating Performance: A Best Practice Resource for Developing State Report Cards](#), from October 2017.

The first report detailed best practices for states in positioning their report cards within a larger theory of action to improve student outcomes. It promoted promising practices for engagement and feedback. It also offered key questions for states on data and content, design and structure, and development and sustainability.

Exemplar: Ohio

A Tale of Two Districts

State report cards tell a story



Two districts with the same overall grade – that means they're the same, right?

Wrong.

The details matter. Take a deeper look and you'll see these report cards tell different stories. Each district has its own strengths and weaknesses, and the report cards help us have important discussions about them.

What are we doing well? Where do we need to improve? Knowing these things can drive improvement in our schools and benefit each of Ohio's 1.7 million schoolchildren.

Ohio | Department of Education

Exemplar: Texas (Celebrating Success)

WHERE IS THIS CAMPUS DOING EXCEPTIONALLY WELL?

[Tell Me More](#)

- ✗ Academic Achievement in Mathematics
- ✓ Academic Achievement in Science
- ✗ Academic Achievement in English Language Arts/Reading
- ✗ Top 25 Percent: Comparative Academic Growth
- ✓ Postsecondary Readiness
- ✓ Top 25 Percent: Comparative Closing the Gaps

In this resource we have included examples and key questions for states to ask to continuously improve their state and school report cards. The resource then discusses how the state and school report card integrates with other data and improvement tools within the state education agency (SEA). Finally, it illuminates examples of how states are promoting and encouraging use of their state and school report cards to inform actions by key stakeholders, especially families.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT OF STATE AND SCHOOL REPORT CARDS

Developing state and school report cards is not a linear process that ends with the release of the report card. Rather, the development process should be ongoing and support continuous improvement.

Useful state and school report cards follow these criteria:

- Reflect insights gleaned through stakeholder engagement
- Prioritize the most valuable information for primary users and provides critical context for the information

- Adopt simple, consistent language that primary users understand
- Build in clear visualizations that help primary users learn from patterns and trends
- Offer functionality that works for primary users
- Promote confidence in data quality

In this section, we offer key questions and examples to help states take the next steps on each criterion.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

States go through extensive stakeholder engagement as they are developing their report cards, but it doesn't end there. As users begin to interact with these tools, states should be consistently seeking feedback on how to make the report cards more meaningful. Central to this continuous improvement process is gathering feedback from the most important audiences.

State leaders should think through engagement and feedback in the context of how state and school report cards are being accessed and used. These insights can help shape decisions about refining or strengthening current design and content, making mid-course modifications, adding wrap-around supports or collateral communications materials, or informing a complete overhaul.

- **Nevada** invites users accessing the state and school report card online to complete a brief feedback survey.
- **Arkansas** promoted stakeholder feedback through a survey distributed through traditional distribution channels as well as leveraging social media, including purchasing Twitter and Facebook ads. Arkansas also hosted Facebook Live sessions and produced a series of use-case videos.
- **Louisiana** also sought to expand stakeholder engagement and feedback, directly reaching out to pediatricians and real estate agents.³
- The **Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) in DC** tapped into community partner organizations and champions for developing a new report card to reach more than 2,200 parents and families and community members, through in-person sessions, online engagement, and canvassers at Metro and bus stops. OSSE captured an overview of who responded and how the feedback was used to inform report card content, layout, and design.
- **Ohio** alerts stakeholders of which indicators and data are “coming soon” to raise awareness and start conversations prior to the release of the data.

Stakeholder engagement continues to be a critical and ongoing aspect of a state's continuous improvement process. See Figure 4 and Figure 5 in [Communicating Performance: A Best Practices Resource for Developing State Report Cards](#) for additional guidance on selecting a balance set of

³ In 2018, CCSSO released [A School Finder to Empower: Case Study of Louisiana's New School Report Card](#), to highlight examples of best practice strategies the state education agency implemented as they developed reporting tools that would meet the needs of their stakeholders as well as their lessons learned from the experience.

options for engagement. CCSSO has also released [Engaging Around State Report Cards: How to Use Stakeholder Input to Create Actionable Tools for Improvement](#) which identifies how states can use their report cards to help drive improvement by informing the actions of stakeholders.

PRIORITIZATION

States have been producing report cards for many years, but the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) expanded reporting requirements. At the same time, data systems have become increasingly sophisticated and enable states to collect, analyze, and report more data about student readiness and system performance. Furthermore, states have become more explicit in their intent to produce report cards specifically for parents and families. This level of prioritization enables states to respond to the needs of stakeholders and provide greater transparency and access to data that answers critical questions that stakeholders value.

Strong state and school report cards reflect strategic decisions states have made to prioritize important information to prevent users from suffering information overload. States have also taken steps to organize information to prioritize what is most important for users to learn, according to their own priorities that those of their stakeholders. States can use web analytics to inform their prioritization. Which pages or data points are clicked/viewed the most frequently by users?

States are working to make the information concrete, sequential, and accessible for stakeholder groups. Drill-down approaches or building multiple layers of access to the data enables users to access and use information to best meet their needs. For example, **North Carolina** has prioritized school grades and academic growth scores, placing them in the top left corner of its online school report cards—the place where users’ eyes go first.

Exemplar: North Carolina (prioritization)



Louisiana has included a variety of contextual information about schools that are important to parents and families, including music and art extra-curricular opportunities.

Exemplar: Louisiana (contextual information)



MUSIC/ART

- Dance
- Music
- Theatre
- Art
- Band

Questions for state leaders to ask colleagues within the state education agency

- Who are the primary audiences you want to use the school report card, and why?
- What stories do you want them to use the data to tell? What questions do you hope they will use report cards to answer?
- What data do you most need your key audiences to learn and understand?
- How can we build in opportunities for users to access more detailed data and explanations?
- What contextual information about schools (e.g. mission, extra-curricular activities) do you want them to learn?
- Which agency teams are using—or could be using—the school report card in their work with schools and districts? Is there a shared understanding of use cases across our agency, including, at a minimum, from your agency staff in the offices of communications, accountability, school improvement, data, and technology?
- How can you incorporate data and contextual information without clutter?
- How do districts and/or schools link to the state report cards?
- How do districts and/or schools inform parents and families about the release of new, additional information?

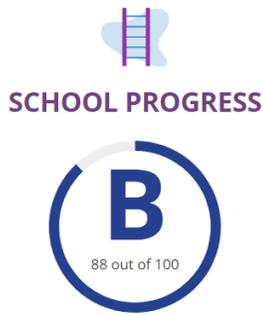
Questions for state leaders to ask through user engagement and feedback⁴

- Have you used the state and/or school report card? When? How? How do you see yourself using it in the future?
- What motivates you to use the state and/or school report card? What do you need to know first?
- What data do you most want to see and understand?
- What contextual information about schools (e.g. mission, extra-curricular activities) is most useful?
- Have you shared the report card with others? With whom, and why? Would you recommend it to others?
- What stories, if any, can you tell others based on what you've learned from the school report card?
- What questions are unanswered?

LANGUAGE

Education jargon has too often created barriers between state leaders and the people who want to learn from school report cards. Clear language welcomes all users, including those who do not know details of a state agency's organizational structure or a state's policy environment. Some states have posted their report cards to easy-to-remember web addresses, such as in **Illinois** (illinoisreportcard.com), **New Mexico** (nmschoolgrades.com), or **Texas** (txschools.org). Once there, users can find clear language, along with definitions of measures, discussion of demographics and gap closing and prompts to go further for more detailed information. Another component of language accessibility is providing translations for report cards, including the landing page context. Both **California** and **New York** translate their report cards into multiple languages.

⁴ In 2018, CCSSO released [Communicating Performance: A Best Practices Resource for Developing State Report Cards](#) to provide guidance throughout the development cycle of state and school report cards, offering considerations with respect to feedback and engagement strategies, data and content and development and sustainability. CCSSO also released "[Let's Get this Conversation Started](#)" and "[Let's Keep this Conversation Going](#)" to provide an array of engagement strategies and successful state examples of stakeholder engagement related to ESSA.



School Progress shows how students perform over time and how that growth compares to similar schools.

For example, on the **Texas** school report card, each school's overview page gives a score and a grade for *School Progress*, along with a simple definition:

How students perform over time and how that growth compares to similar schools.

If users click on a button for 'Additional Details', they find a slightly more detailed definition:

School Progress measures how much better students performed on the STAAR test this year versus last year. It also looks at how much better students are doing academically at the district compared to similar districts.

Users will also find an even more detailed explanation about how the *School Progress* score is calculated.

Questions for state leaders to ask colleagues within their state education agency

- What standards should we set for our school report card on text complexity?
- Do we use consistent terms, definitions, and visualizations across our state and school report cards, student report cards, and assessment score reports?
- Are there a few concepts or terms that we want all users to learn about, given their importance in our state's context such as the names of the achievement levels for your state's assessment system? How can we explain and define these terms in ways that promote understanding?
- What terms can we identify as unhelpful jargon—and find alternative ways of communicating?
- What steps should we take to enhance search optimization?
- What languages does the report card need to be translated into?

Questions for state leaders to ask through user engagement and feedback

- How do you find the school report card? What search terms do you use?
- What does this word or phrase mean to you? What images or phrases does it bring to mind?

- Is _____ the best way to define [this word]? What other definition would be useful?
- Are the definitions and language on the state and/or school report card, assessment score reports, or student report card, easy to understand and consistent?
- Are there any terms you find confusing on the report card?

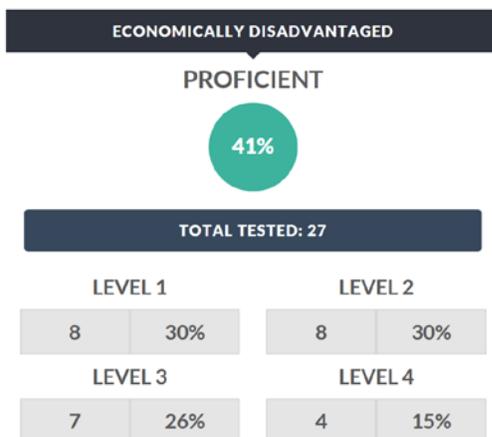
VISUALIZATION

Strong state and school report cards incorporate visuals to draw users' attention and support understanding of the data. Visuals combine color, shapes, numbers, and descriptive text without creating confusion or bias. They can illuminate patterns and trends by showing how data vary along different dimensions or by time. Through the development and continuous improvement process, states should ensure the colors used are ADA accessible and that the online components meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. Visuals can also be captured as images for social media to draw in new users. For this reason, several states report that they are intentional that the graphics help users interpret the data.

For example, **New York's** school report card presents data in an infographic style, designed to reach a wider audience by simplifying content in a visual manner and arranging it in an easy to view format. New York is also developing a parent dashboard as an additional reporting tool.

Mississippi has strong examples of data visualization within the newly developed [Mississippi Succeeds Report Card](#).

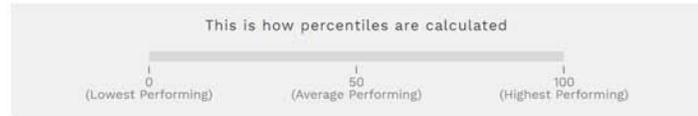
Exemplar: New York (infographics)



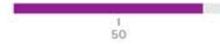
Louisiana illustrates how to combine text, numbers, and shapes to help users understand directionality (what is high vs. low performance).

Exemplar: Louisiana (directionality)

HOW IS THIS SCHOOL PERFORMING IN PREPARING STUDENTS OF COLOR?

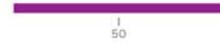


ASIAN



For this group, the school performed better than **90%** of all Louisiana schools.

AFRICAN AMERICAN



For this group, the school performed better than **99%** of all Louisiana schools.

Louisiana also shows how they can support understanding of comparisons (school vs. state performance) as well as trends over time.

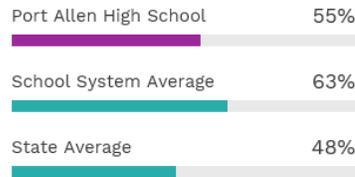
Exemplar: Louisiana (comparisons)

[Back to Student Performance >](#)

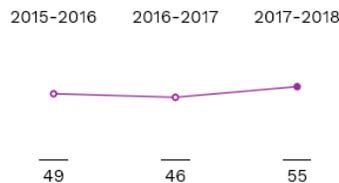
GRADUATES EARNING CREDENTIALS



HOW DID THIS SCHOOL PERFORM COMPARED TO THE SCHOOL SYSTEM & STATE?

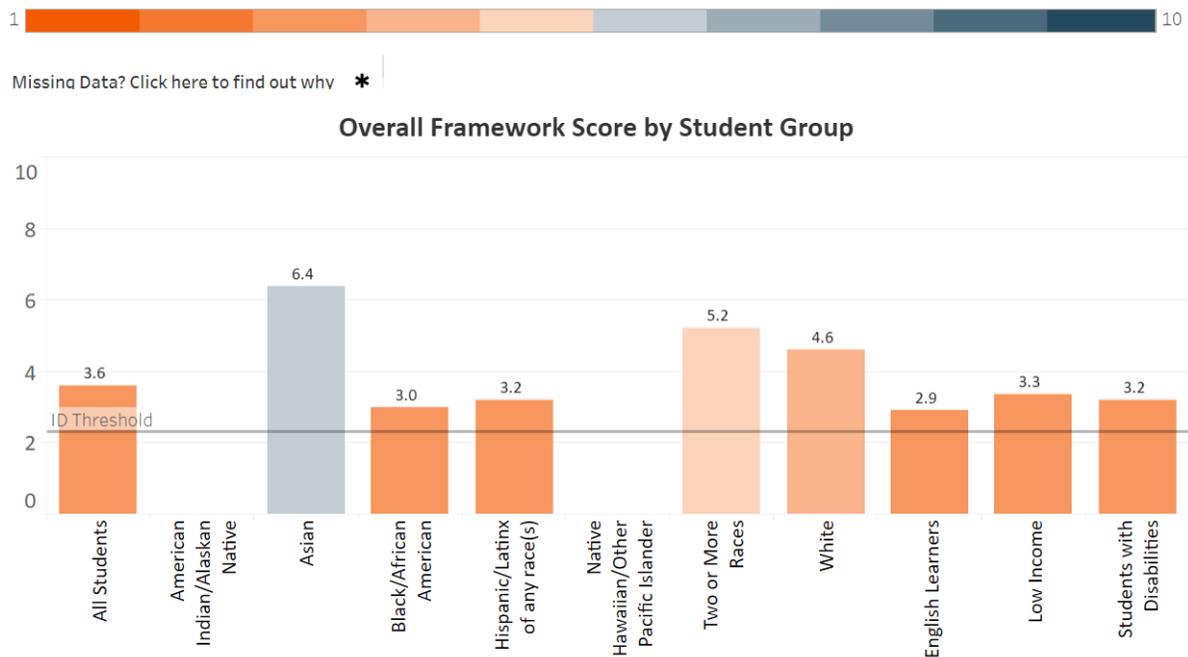


HOW DID THE SCHOOL PERFORM OVER TIME?



Finally, **Washington** shows how color can be used to visually enhance users' understanding of patterns.

Exemplar: Washington (understanding of patterns)



Questions for state leaders to ask colleagues within their state education agency

- How can visuals help support understanding of our highest-priority data?
- What kind of visuals would best support our efforts to drive use of the data? What have we learned about how individuals best interact with data?
- Are the visuals used for similar data consistent to help users interpret the visualization?
- What comparisons are most useful for us to highlight? Examples might include school to district and state, school to school, or school to similar schools.
- Where is it most useful for us to display trends over time?

Questions for state leaders to ask through user engagement and feedback

- For parents and families: How do you look at the school report card (e.g. on a webpage or do you download a file)? Do you see it on a hard copy sent home from your school? If so, is it in color or black and white?
- For teachers and school leaders: How would you talk to parents and families, community leaders, school board, etc. about the data in this image? In what setting? What questions would you anticipate they would have?
- What do you learn from this image? What questions does it raise for you? Does anything confuse you?

FUNCTIONALITY

School report cards can offer users functionality that encourages them to access the right information in the right format. States need to design report cards to offer options to meet the needs of an array of users, taking care not to overload users with too many options.⁵ Some users will spend a few minutes with the report card to get quick information, while others will go deeper and spend more time navigating through the report card platform. For those report cards that go deeper, states are finding success using “breadcrumb”⁶ structures to help users navigate the hierarchy of data or pages within a website. Analyzing “breadcrumb” data can shed light into how users are searching for specific information or how efficiently users are able to access specific pages within the site. States are only beginning to undertake “breadcrumb” analyses and using those insights to shape continuous improvement of state and school report cards.

One way that states have been making decisions about functionality is to define several priority “use cases” and build the state and school report card platforms around those cases. A common use case may be a parent looking for general information about elementary schools within a certain school district. A more specific use case could be a business or community leader looking to partner with a school district within a certain region for an early literacy initiative.

Questions for state leaders to ask colleagues within their state education agency

- What do we know about our users and how they use the school report card?
- Who are potential users who are a priority for us to reach? How do we want to encourage them to use the school report card?
- Given what we know, what are the use cases we could design for?
- What is our highest-priority use case?

Questions for state leaders to ask through user engagement and feedback

- How do you use the school report card? How much time do you spend on it? How often do you access it?
- How many steps does it take for you to find the information you need on the school report card?
- When you find the information you need, what do you do with it? Do you want to print, download, or export the information to another format? Are you able to view it on your mobile device?

5 In 2017, CCSSO released [Communicating Performance: A Best Practices Resource for Developing State Report Cards](#), which outlines considerations for the development process. In 2016, CCSSO, Learning Heroes and National PTA released [Guidelines for SEAs on Engaging Parents](#) with specific suggestions for engaging with parents through report cards.

6 For more on breadcrumb navigation and analysis, see <https://www.smashingmagazine.com/2009/03/breadcrumbs-in-web-design-examples-and-best-practices/>

RELIABLE, RELEVANT AND TIMELY DATA

Strong state and school report cards ensure users have confidence in data quality. Building accessible report cards is one step in a state’s process to instill trust in the data and provide users the opportunity to use the data. Report cards should illustrate to parents and families how the data they see on a student’s assessment score report, student report card, and other student-specific sources roll up into the data they see on the state and school report card. State and school report cards should be part of a coherent, consistent, and aligned set of data tools to help parents and families understand how the pieces of data relate to each other and provide a more complete picture of student performance and readiness. These tools should also utilize consistent terminology, providing users access to technical definitions, dates, and data sources.

As state leaders, here are some ways to build this confidence among users:

- Add timely data to the report card. For example, **Washington** adds new measures as they become available throughout the year.
- To promote consistency, draw on data from the statewide longitudinal data system rather than aggregate data from other sources. In **Connecticut**, the evolution of the state’s back-end data system has improved data quality on the state report card.
- Build continuity and relevancy by reporting data from early childhood through post-secondary education. For example, **Louisiana** integrates early childhood program information and performance ratings into its school report card system. A number of states, such as **Rhode Island**, build in data from post-secondary education.
- Build toward interoperable data systems, where multiple systems use shared data standards. **Arkansas** has accomplished this through their Ed-Fi partnership.⁷
 - In **Illinois**, longitudinal data from K-12 into post-secondary education allows the state to give users access to data on remediation rates for high school graduates by school and compared to the district and state.

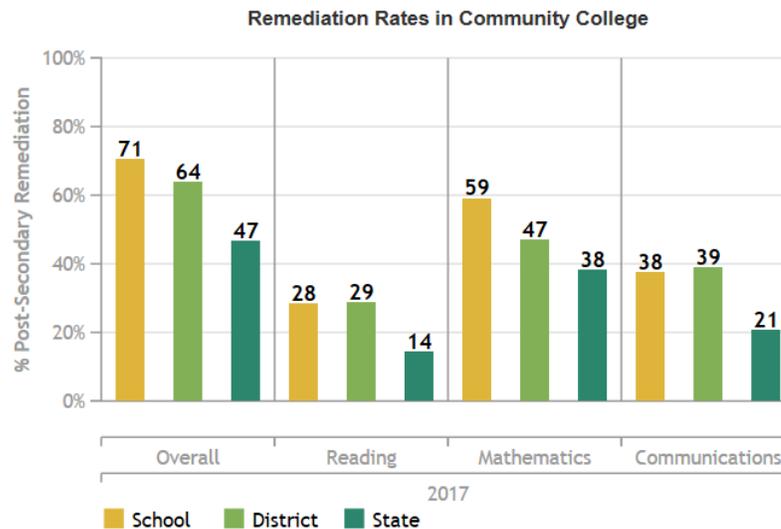
⁷ The Ed-Fi Data Standard is a set of rules that allow (previously disconnected) educational data systems to connect. For more information on Ed-Fi, see <https://www.ed-fi.org/>.

Exemplar: Illinois (post-secondary data)

Questions for state leaders to ask colleagues within their state education agency

Post Secondary Remediation

Percentage of students at Illinois community colleges taking remedial courses.



	Class of 2015		
	School	District	State
Graduates (N)	550	17,504	128,527
Attending Illinois Community Colleges (N)	228	4,704	41,464
Attending Illinois Community Colleges (%)	41.5%	26.9%	32.3%
Enrolled in Remedial Courses (N)	161	2,999	19,388
Enrolled in Remedial Courses (%)	70.6%	63.8%	46.8%

- Which measures on the school report card arise from our state’s longitudinal data system? Is there information captured via our state longitudinal data system (SLDS) that we are not leveraging that could help answer critical questions?
- Which measures are reported to the state in aggregate, if any? Can we move to reporting them from a different system?
- Where have we had issues in the past with data quality? How did we learn about these issues and how did we resolve them?
- On which measures do we need to provide definitions, dates pulled, and data sources?
- What does it take to move a measure from collection to external facing? What needs to happen across the agency with respect to technical requirements, data flow, communication and collaboration?

Questions for state leaders to ask partners, such as early childhood and post-secondary agencies

- Do we have measures that are reported on multiple reports or tools (e.g. high school feedback reports?)
- Do we use consistent definitions and data sources across these sources? If not, how can we resolve these differences and ease use for users?
- Can we link to them so that users can find all levels of detail via one search?

INTEGRATION

States offer a variety of data reporting tools, from publicly-available school report cards, financial reports, and high school feedback reports, to restricted-use tools that provide data on individual students to educators, parents, and families. Many states aim for users to learn and act based on using more than one of these reporting tools. States need to build awareness of which data and tools exist and where they live. This level of awareness building needs to be intentional and directed both internally to agency staff and state instructional partners as well as with administrators, educators, and community partners in the field. By focusing on the “what” and the “where” the state will increase opportunities for integration and in turn hopefully increase utilization. Coherence across these tools will make them easier to use. For example:

- Staff from a local nonprofit organization that provides after-school tutoring to students may use the school report card to track progress on key measures but may also have access to a district- or state-wide data system where they can see individual student grades and progress through a curriculum.
- A parent leader may use the school report card to learn about how schools within a neighborhood compare on chronic absenteeism but may also have access to her own child’s attendance and grades within a district parent portal.
- Teachers and other school leaders may use information on the school report card to track “big picture” how school progress overall has changed through implementation of new instructional strategies, while they use an array of data from the district and school to monitor individual student progress and inform instruction.

Given this context, states have an opportunity to encourage use of state and school report cards by creating seamless connections with other well-used data systems. Both **Texas** and **Louisiana** have taken steps to integrate report cards and student-level data systems for school leaders through a secure portal. **Massachusetts** uses similar visualizations for parents and families across student-level assessment score reports and school report cards. **Illinois** has a history of piloting ideas and seeking feedback to make modifications to report card design. They have looked at site visit data and examined paths users take once they get to the site. They have elevated examples of how the report card is being used. The Director of Internal Communications created a monthly

e-newsletter for superintendents and principals designed to share information about upcoming data collections and to spotlight local examples of using data tools, including the report card, to drive improvement. Illinois also hosts an annual “Using Your Report Card Data” webinar featuring three school districts who share how they use their data to improve instruction, collaboration, family engagement, and student achievement.

Achieving integration will require proactive engagement of internal state education agency staff, bringing them together across units throughout the continuous improvement process, including deployment and messaging to drive use.

Questions for state leaders to ask colleagues within their state education agency

- What other education data tools do we provide? Who are the users of these tools?
- How are these users accessing the tools? What do they use them for?
- What do we know about frequency and duration of use of each tool?
- What array of tools would we expect particular stakeholders to use? Which tools do you want them to utilize? How so?
- What steps could we take to integrate these tools to ease and encourage use?
- How does the school report card support your state’s school improvement strategy?

Questions for state leaders to ask through user engagement and feedback

- Do you know what education data tools are available for you to access?
- What array of education data tools do you use each week? Each month? Each year?
- How do you access these tools?
- What do you seek to learn from these tools? Do you find what you need to learn?

UNDERSTANDING AND DRIVING USE

States are striving to understand and encourage use of state and school report cards. They are analyzing more data and taking advantage of engagement mechanisms to understand how school report cards are used, taking more time to model different ways they could be used, and driving the use of school report cards among key audiences. They are using report cards as conversation starters, generating dialogue and partnerships to advance student learning and educational attainment. There remains opportunity for all states to continuously encourage and engage more parents and families, community leaders, business leaders, and policymakers in using state and school report cards to better understand performance and inform efforts to improve equity and outcomes for all students.

Understanding Use

State leaders can take several steps to learn how their state’s school report card tool is being used, including by examining quantitative data, learning from constructing use cases/personas, observing users as they walk through the school report card, and sharing examples about how people are using the report card.

States can also evaluate Google analytics at regular intervals to learn how, when, and from where users are accessing the tool (e.g. via desktop vs. phone), which pages or functionality are visited or utilized more frequently, and how these dynamics change over time. How do new users explore the state and school report cards—where do they click and how do they navigate? How do these patterns change based on different types of users, such as first-time users versus regular users? How have these patterns changed as new indicators are added to the report cards?

States can learn by constructing user profiles or personas, working in teams to construct scenarios of how a particular user interacts with the report card. Teams that include multiple perspectives, including parents and families from diverse backgrounds, can refine states’ understanding of the purpose and utility of the tool through this construction process. The hallmark of such user-centered design is a feedback loop that informs each stage of the process.

User-Centered Design - Understanding Use

Stories about a user’s experience and motivations

⇒ personas or profiles of user types (including their goals and behaviors)

⇒ scenarios (how personas or profiles fit in a natural context)

- adapted from User Experience Deliverables (http://semanticstudios.com/user_experience_deliverables/)

One other way to understand how users interact with the school report card is to observe them during engagement/feedback sessions. State leaders can watch and listen as parents and families, community leaders, business leaders, and policymakers walk through the report card, noting the path they take, obstacles they might encounter, and what they learn from the information they find.

Finally, state leaders can share their understanding about how people use state and school report cards with others. Building and sharing stories about how a parent uses the report card can guide how stakeholders use the tool and encourage new users to engage with the school report card.

Modeling Use

State leaders can also lay a foundation for more—and more intentional—use of the school report card by building use cases. Use cases can help states craft more targeted supports for using the school report card, and speak more concretely to specific audiences.

For example:

- **Parent-teacher conferences and parent/community meetings.** State leaders can work with parents and families, teachers, and students to model how a school report card could be used in a parent-teacher conference and with parents and families during community meetings. How can the data be used to help parents and families understand their student’s performance and readiness in the context of the school’s performance? How can state and school report cards be paired with other critical pieces of data, including student work, individual student report cards, and assessment score reports to provide a more complete picture? How should school leaders create opportunities to discuss and review the report card with other school level data to engage families in school improvement? With this model in mind, states can create toolkits and other supports around each use case.
- **School improvement plans.** State leaders can work with school improvement teams to model how a school report card could be used in developing and monitoring local school improvement plans.⁸ **Kentucky** integrates the report card with the state’s Comprehensive Improvement Planning for Schools and Districts through its [data review](#) and quarterly review template. The **South Carolina** [District Strategic and School Renewal Plans](#) requires plans to reduce achievement gaps identified on the annual state report card. The state’s needs assessment process also includes a close review of the report card data.
- **Local budgets.** State leaders can use data and analysis from the state and school report cards to inform budget priorities, potentially gleaning insights into the relative impact of particular strategies or identifying challenges that need to be more fully addressed. In **Vermont**, the school report card is a valuable tool at the local level as voters approve school budgets.

Local boards of education and other elected officials at the local level are valuable partners in the release and use of state and school report cards. Building familiarity with these data reporting tools, metrics, and data sets encourage local policymakers to work from the same set of metrics that the state is using, leading to greater consistency and coherence in conversations about performance and priorities. Modeling use cases around financial information can be a particularly salient “hook” to strengthen these partnerships.

⁸ CCSSO recently released a new resource focused on the connections that exist across accountability and school improvement systems. [Improving Outcomes for Students: Bringing Accountability and School Improvement Together to Drive Change](#) is a new resource focused on providing state leaders with guidance on the connections that exist between accountability and school improvement systems and to pose key questions for states to consider as they work to make the connections more explicit.

Under ESSA, starting with the 2018-2019 state report card, states must include the per-pupil expenditures for the preceding year of federal, state, and local funds, including actual personnel and non-personnel, disaggregated by source of funds, for the state as a whole and for each LEA and public school in the state. Accounting for and transparently reporting this data in an accessible manner may be a complex undertaking for some states. The [Building State Capacity and Productivity Center](#) site has produced several resources, including a [data visualization checklist](#). States can also consider utilizing the guidance in the [Edunomics Interstate Financial Reporting](#) resource. The Education Trust developed the [New York School Funding Transparency Tool](#) to help the public better understand district spending practices, and whether resources are reaching the students who most need them. The Council worked with Tembo to produce the [CCSSO School Finance tool](#) to provide states data visualization guidance with respect to per-pupil expenditure reporting.

Many factors influence per-pupil expenditures and student outcomes. However, the release of this data provides a powerful opportunity to improve equity through more aligned strategies. States and LEAs will need to communicate clearly, providing context to interpret financial reporting, and support analysis of the data. There will be meaningful opportunities to engage with community organization and advocacy groups, local boards of education and other elected officials to have a more complete picture of equity within the state, LEA, and school level.

Questions for state leaders to ask colleagues within their state education agency

- What use cases, if any, have we already developed?
- Given our state’s goals and theory of action for improving student outcomes and promoting equity, what additional use cases might we develop?
- Who needs to be involved in helping us refine or develop use cases, including local boards of education and other elected officials, community organizations, and advocacy groups?

Questions for state leaders to ask through user engagement and feedback

- Have you been using the state and school reports card for this particular purpose (e.g. parent-teacher conferences, community discussions, budget decisions)? Why or why not?
- What questions do you have about how to use the school report card for this particular purpose?
- Do any barriers or obstacles prevent you from using the report cards for this purpose?
- How can we help you better use the school report card for this purpose?

Encouraging Use

States have made substantial strides in encouraging the use of school report cards. As prioritization, language, visualization, functionality, and data quality have improved across an array of integrated systems, the next horizon has been for states to take proactive steps to promote report card use.

Raising awareness and building champions among key stakeholder groups. State leaders can focus on laying the groundwork for awareness and use *prior to report card release* by giving presentations about state and school report cards to stakeholder groups such as local school board members. The state can also jointly present with parent and community groups that were part of the development, deepening their connection and elevating these individuals as champions. This approach helps broaden the user base, while building champions who use the report cards and can help support continuous improvement. It also empowers multiple stakeholder groups to feel connected to the data and regularly utilize it.

Partnering with local education leaders and community organizations. District and school leaders are critical allies in moving from access to action based on use of the report card. Partnerships can involve can leverage key partnerships to keep local leaders informed, give them avenues for regular feedback, provide tools and resources to encourage use among parents and families and other user groups, and build their capacity for using data. Kentucky has been keeping district-level chief information officers (CIOs) informed with monthly webinars throughout the school report card development process. **New Jersey** provides districts with a template letter about the school report card to send to parents and families. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in **Washington** has been building tools to support data practices at the school and district level. They have identified nine regional staff members who support regional offices on school improvement strategy implementation. This effort intentionally includes training on data analysis, data literacy, and using data tools, including the report card, to help drive continuous improvement. Although this scope is admittedly broader than the report card, it serves as an example of how to tie together the report card as a one of many pieces of information informing school improvement strategy.

Branding the school report card. To increase access and brand recognition, several states have branded the school report card with easy-to-remember, state-specific URLs such as nevadareportcard.com, nmschoolgrades.com, and txschools.org.

Leveraging social media. States have carefully timed their social media promotion strategy to coincide with the report card release and other key touchpoints. **Illinois** launched an email campaign six weeks before the release of their 2018 state report card. They used Mailchimp to send a series of emails to all district superintendents, assessment directors, Title grant directors, school principals, education associations, and other key stakeholders. The emails had between 40 and 56 percent open rates and between 3 and 11 percent click rates. Some states have built social media messages and images around actual data from the report card. Illinois also posted one-pagers based on the content in the emails on their [Support & Accountability](#) webpage and shared these one-pagers on social media as well.

Developing new ways of interacting with the report card. States can also lead the development of tools and establish the forum to promote a particular use case. For example, **Louisiana** has supported specific use cases of their state and school report cards, actively encouraging use during conversations with the local community about education data. Louisiana created a [one-page flyer](#) and social media graphics that schools, pediatricians, realtors, and others can use to promote the report card.

Celebrating success. State and school report cards are designed to both reward successes and identify challenges, but many stakeholders see them as an exclusively punitive tool. Report cards can identify and celebrate success stories. How can report cards help understand what led to students' successes? How can report cards build engage stakeholders around these success stories so they are seen more for their ability to show and positive outcomes?

- **Minnesota** is stepping up their recognition of and accountability for high-performers. During the 2018-2019 school year, Minnesota began recognizing schools based on a variety of measures including:
 - o Schools that perform in the top 5 percent within any one indicator (math achievement, reading achievement, progress toward English language proficiency, math progress, reading progress, four-year graduation rate, or consistent attendance).
 - o Schools whose student group performance is similar to the top 5 percent of schools within any one indicator.
 - o For credit or dropout recovery schools only: schools that have a high seven-year graduation rate (still determining an appropriate threshold).

Schools already demonstrating success on the five key measures will be recognized annually with badges for their websites.

Questions for state leaders to ask colleagues within their state education agency

- Is our school report card easy to find? Does it have a URL that is easy for users to remember, and for us to use in marketing?
- How can we use social media to create momentum around the report card release? At other key points throughout the year?
- What existing mechanisms can we utilize to increase awareness and use of the state and school report cards? Are there existing newsletters or meetings we can leverage?
- How can we begin building awareness about the school report card among key user/ stakeholder groups?
- How can we help districts communicate with parents, families, and other priority users?
- What key messages do we want to convey about the data provided on the school report card?
- How can you use the state report card to have conversations with partners—and encourage them to use the data with their constituents? How does this data fit with the data the partner already uses or shares?
- Among our current partners, how can we engage them in efforts to promote use of the school report card through their networks and ongoing constituent engagement? Which new partners can we engage to help reach priority users?

- What is the broader tie between the school report card and engagement with stakeholders around school improvement strategy?

Questions for state leaders to ask through user engagement and feedback

- Who else do you want to use the school report card, and why? Who are you having trouble reaching, and why?
- Who can credibly convey messages about using education data?
- How can your community, neighborhood, or other groups important to you use the school report card?
- What changes or improvements do you want to see in their schools or districts based on the data?
 - o How can state education agencies and local education agencies use disaggregated state and school report card data to develop a knowledge management system? How could they collectively use the data to determine which schools/districts are achieving the best results with different student groups, understand what those schools/districts are doing to achieve those results, and then share those findings broadly across the state or district to try to replicate them?

CONCLUSION

State and school report cards have enormous potential to help states meet ambitious goals for student performance and equity, but only if the people closest to students—educators, parents, and families, local boards of education and elected officials—know about it, use it, and learn from it. States have taken great strides in recent years to make report cards an accessible, helpful tool for these users. In the spirit of continuous improvement, states can identify next steps in the development, integration, and promotion of state and school report cards to increase use and reinforce efforts to improve student performance and equity.

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One Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20001-1431
voice: 202.336.7000 | fax: 202.408.8072