

Empowering Parents and Communities through Quality Public Reporting

A FEDERAL POLICY GUIDE

Publicly reporting timely, actionable, and comprehensible education data is one of the most powerful ways states can promote transparency, strengthen accountability, and ensure that everyone with a stake in education—parents, educators, policymakers, and members of the public and press—has access to the information they need to make good decisions.

Data can be made available in a variety of ways, including through federally mandated school report cards, through public-facing data portals, or as raw data sets. Regardless of their format, publicly reported data never include personally identifiable information (i.e., information that could be used to identify an individual).

Currently, public reporting efforts in most states are geared toward complying with state

and federal laws, rather than being intentionally designed to meet people's needs. As a result, most publicly reported data go unseen or unused, limiting their ability to promote and support improvement in student achievement and system performance.

Current Federal Requirements and Opportunities for Improvement

Through state report cards required by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), states must publicly report school-level information on student achievement, accountability, teacher quality, and college going and college-credit accumulation. This provision in ESEA is one of the only ways the US Department of Education requires states to make information publicly available directly to the community, rather than publishing information itself at the federal level.

Requiring states to gather and publicly report this information is an important step toward ensuring that the public is informed; however, these reports tend to function more as a compliance task to receive federal dollars, rather than as answers to the questions parents, educators, and the community have.

While the brief *Empowering Parents and Communities through Quality Public Reporting* highlights the states that have made efforts to address the public's ability to use the data they collect and share, many states are still struggling to share information in formats and locations that are easy to access and use, leaving an opportunity for the federal government to help states implement the steps we know work. For example, the states that have been most effective at framing and sharing information with the public are the ones that start with questions such as those below.

DATA	FEDERALLY REQUIRED COLLECTION	QUESTIONS THE DATA CAN ANSWER
Student Achievement	Most recent two-year trend data in student achievement for each subject and grade level assessed	Is student performance in my school and district improving, decreasing, or staying the same?
Accountability	Annual measurable objectives (met/not met)	Is each and every student mastering content standards at the rate necessary to prepare that student for success?
Teacher Quality	Professional qualifications of all elementary and secondary school teachers in the state (e.g., bachelor's and advanced degrees, licensure)	Are teachers in my school and district effective at improving student learning?
College Going and College-Credit Accumulation	Total number of students who enrolled in any institution of higher education within 16 months of earning a regular high school diploma	How prepared are students at this school for postsecondary education?

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

Federal leadership for high-quality public reporting promotes the goals of accountability, transparency, and empowering people with information. Public reporting also enables the federal government to measure the impact of federal investments in education and provide actionable data to the public.

Federal policymakers have the opportunity to drastically refocus the way we think of public reporting, moving it from a compliance activity that provides public information to a system of public information that can be used to ensure federally administered programs are meeting their requirements. By pivoting the responsibilities of states from compliance reporting to sharing information with the public in a format that they can understand and use, federal policymakers could significantly improve the way the public thinks about and uses data. Although framed differently, the federal government could still use this information to ensure proper compliance with federal rules.

Federal policymakers can also take steps to incentivize, support, and promote quality public reporting in the following ways:

INCENTIVIZE: Use available resources to incent state and local education agencies to implement public reporting projects and policies that support the effective use of education data.

- Include priorities or bonus points in federal grants from the US Department of Education and other agencies for applications that incorporate making the information they report on their program available in a manner that the public can easily access and understand.
- Use federal grant dollars to highlight and further the collaboration of agencies within a state in publicly reporting information.
- Incorporate opportunities for capacity building around the public’s ability to understand and use data.

SUPPORT: Enable the functioning of effective public reporting of education data at the federal, state, and local levels.

- Align federal collection requirements to the questions stakeholders actually need, want, and deserve answers to.
- Ensure that federal reporting requirements do not require state and local education agencies to duplicate efforts, reporting similar information to multiple programs or agencies.
- Annually review the data that are required to be collected, and sun-set collections that are no longer necessary.

PROMOTE: Actively encourage the access to and use of education data by relevant stakeholders.

- Model good public information practices by making federal information available in easy-to-use public formats and by ensuring that agencies work with one another to make federal information available.

- Use publicly available data when making policy decisions at the federal level.
- Serve as a vocal supporter of your state’s publicly available data, directing your constituents to the resources available to them within your state and district.

Illinois: Leading the Way from Compliance to Continuous Improvement

Just a few years ago, Illinois’s state report card was focused exclusively on complying with the requirements set by the federal government. There was no connection between the information, the user, and the intended outcome.

The state’s P-20 council made a major push for a new way to report information to the public and brought together nearly 60 focus groups that included administrators and principals, teachers, families, and community members to ensure that the newly designed report card would be helpful to the public.

The result is a publicly available state report card that meets the following goals:

- It ensures that the public has a shared understanding of school performance.
- It improves family and community engagement.
- It aligns information collected with information publicly reported and used.

“Parents do not deal in edu-speak, acronyms, and statistics. They just want—and deserve—to know how their local schools are doing and how they can get better.”

— Christopher A. Koch,
Illinois State Superintendent
of Education