DISAGGREGATED DATA

Not Just a Box Checking Exercise

Disaggregated data (information about student performance broken down by different student groups) is more than just a federal requirement. This data is essential for understanding how schools serve different groups of students, especially those who have been historically underserved by the public school system. Disaggregated data is also key to identifying opportunity gaps and confronting persistent barriers to student success. But collecting the data isn't enough. State leaders must make sure that it's easy to find and presented with the right context and language so that families can understand and act on it. Publicly reporting disaggregated data is about more than just checking a box. It's about making sure that families have the data they deserve to ensure that their students get a high-quality, equitable education.

Families deserve to understand how their schools serve *all children*. Student performance data broken down by different student groups can help families, along with educators and policymakers, ask and answer critical questions like the following:

- How is this school serving students in foster care or students with disabilities?

- Which schools in my district are best preparing English learners to graduate?

- Do different groups of students in my school or district have differing levels of access to the most qualified teachers?

But answering these questions is difficult when data is buried on a state education agency's (SEA) website or presented without meaningful context on a state's report card. While SEAs have been required to collect and publish disaggregated data since 2001, finding and understanding the data remains difficult. A 2019 review of state report cards by the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) found that 41 state report cards failed to share student performance information for at least one federally required student group. And too few report cards included contextual language to help users understand why the data is valuable or how to use it. This situation is problematic both because the data is federally required and because it represents a fundamental lack of transparency and recognition that families and communities deserve this information.

Historically, this data has been communicated without context and in ways that can seem discriminatory to families. And, as many state leaders make strong commitments to education equity in their state, addressing these issues is especially urgent. State leaders can do that by **making the data easier to find** on school report cards—their most public-facing resource on school quality—and **adding context for the data and more complete explanations** so that users understand why it is being shared and how they could use it to advocate for their students and schools.

Words Matter

State leaders need to consider their audience when talking about school and student data. For those who think about this work every day, terms like *disaggregation* and *subgroup* might seem innocuous, but people, including families, may find these terms unfamiliar and even offensive.

It might require a few extra words, but shifting terminology can clarify the data and make it more understandable to a variety of audiences. State leaders should consider the following terminology shifts when thinking about the language used on their state's report card:

Disaggregation → information broken down by different student groups

Subgroup → group of students

Which Student Groups Are Required?

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, student performance data must be broken down by different student groups to help people understand the degree to which schools are meeting different students' learning needs and to address longstanding achievement and opportunity gaps across the country. As leaders think about how the data will display on their state's report card, they should consider simple shifts to student group names to make the language more inclusive, as is done in several of the group names below.

Required Student Groups for Student Performance Data

- Gender
- Race and ethnicity
- Students with disabilities
- Students from low-income families
- Students learning English
- Students in foster care
- Students experiencing homelessness
- Students from military families
- Students from migrant families

For more information about student groups and other requirements, see the official guidance from the US Department of Education.

TIP *Consider including student groups that reflect community needs even if they are not federally required. Some state leaders use community needs assessments to better understand what data is relevant while others might focus on the most populous student groups in their state, as Minnesota does. Collecting and publicly reporting the data that is most meaningful can help state leaders move past compliance and focus on what's relevant to their communities.*

How to Communicate the Value of Disaggregated Data

Step 1: Make the Data Easier to Find

People can't use what they can't find. Student group data should be easy to get to even if it's not on the first page of the report card. Locating the data should never require a user to run a separate report or independently navigate to a separate site.

The Massachusetts report card includes some student group data in the parent overview but also provides a clear link to the state's more detailed data page where additional student group data lives. When a user clicks on the link it takes them directly to the more detailed data they are seeking. The decision to break up and tier the data this way reflects the feedback state leaders heard from parents.

TIP *List all required student groups even if data is not reported for all of them. Research has shown that when more student groups are included in a display, parents find it less stigmatizing.*

If data for a particular student group isn't available, be transparent about why it isn't. If, for example, the n-size is an issue (i.e., that group does not include enough students to report their data without running into privacy concerns), tell users that on the page rather than eliminating the group completely or labeling it N/A.

When these decisions aren't communicated, users often make their own assumptions about why the state is not fully reporting student group outcomes.

Step 2: Help Families Understand the Data

Too often, student group data is displayed in a table or graph with no context about why the information is included and little explanation beyond the names of the student groups. Report cards should present the data in context so that families understand why the data is being broken down and how they could use it. Following are some strategies that state leaders can use to improve how student group information is displayed and understood.

PUT THE DATA IN CONTEXT

Reporting student group data isn't just about accountability and compliance, it's about helping communities and schools collaboratively identify challenges and successes and work together to improve student outcomes. But communities can't do that if they don't have the necessary context for the data being reported. For example, knowing that students in foster care in School A demonstrated 65 percent growth means little if the user can't also tell whether that's a lot of growth or how it compares to students in foster care in other schools or districts. Adding context not only helps users better understand why the data matters and how they could use it but also helps prevent misinterpretation of the data.

TIP *Explore your state's report card through the eyes of a parent using DQC's report card scavenger hunt tool.*

To add context to student group data, consider the following steps:

- **Display the data side by side with data from other schools, districts, or the state.**

    For example, *Delaware's report card* displays student group performance data next to district and state data in the same visualization.

- **Include a simple sentence that provides a comparison.**

    For example, *Louisiana's report card* includes a single sentence underneath the student group data that helps users understand their school's performance as compared to statewide data: "For this group, the school performed better than 49% of all Louisiana schools."

EXPLAIN WHAT THE DATA MEANS AND WHY IT'S THERE

Listing a student group and how well that group performed on an assessment tells users very limited information and leaves them to fill in the gap. **Without context, the data appears to make a statement about students' abilities when really it is a statement about how the school is serving its students.** Report card language should put the school's performance, not the student's, at the center. This goal can be met by framing data under a simple question that emphasizes the school, such as: How does this school serve different groups of students? This subtle but important wording change applies an asset frame to the data, helping combat existing concerns that student group data reinforces negative stereotypes about different students.

The Louisiana report card frames student achievement data under this key question: "How well is this school preparing students to master key skills measured by assessments?" The student group data in this section is also framed by a simple question: "How did this school prepare specific groups of students compared to the school system and state?"

The New Mexico report card includes clear introductory language that explains what the student group data means and how it might be used: "[The data] is broken down by race/ethnicity and at-risk students to show whether the school is serving all of its students well. When there are gaps for certain groups of students, schools will use that information to understand how they can better serve those groups to ensure all students are performing at grade level."

Report cards should also be clear about who is and is not included in each student group. Some state accountability systems include additional student groups beyond what's federally required, such as "at-risk students." These student group labels aren't always explained, which can lead to the user being unclear about who is actually being included. Making a simple definition available next to or near the data can provide more clarity.

The Idaho report card includes clear explanations of which students are included in the data and uses less-technical terms for student groups. For example, the report card uses the simple phrase "students from low income families" instead of the oft-used (and rarely spelled out) FRPL (free and reduced-priced lunch) or Title 1 labels. The report card also includes explanations of why certain data might not be there (e.g., due to n-size constraints) using short hover-over messages.

Lastly, the text of a report card needs to be as simple as possible so it meets the needs of different stakeholders. DQC found that the average report card text is at a grade 14 reading level (equal to some college) when best practice is an eighth-grade reading level. One easy way to assess a state report card's language is to use Hemingway App, a free online tool that evaluates a text's grade level and sentence structure. Simplified language is also key to making sure that translated material is at an appropriate reading level.

Families and communities deserve to know whether their local schools are serving the needs of every student. They should be able to easily access and interpret student group data to answer their questions and collaborate with local leaders to tackle challenges and celebrate successes. But to meet this goal, families need to see the data presented in ways that do not stigmatize their students.

State report cards can either open or close the door on these important community conversations, so it is imperative that state leaders be more intentional about how student group data is reported, displayed, and explained. Taking these steps will help foster a culture of transparency and signal to families that state leaders are serious about education equity in their communities.