

ESEA Reauthorization: Why Data Matter

An Opportunity for Federal Leadership to Support the Use of Data to Improve Student Achievement

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides an opportunity to transform how data are used in education. The 2002 ESEA requirement to disaggregate data and provide them to the public has made it possible to have greater transparency and more accurate measures of academic performance than ever. Congress now has the opportunity to build on this success and leverage data as a tool to shine a light on what is working; inform continuous improvement; and empower stakeholders, including parents and educators, and with information they can use to help students succeed.

To transform how data are used in education, the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) recommends four strategies for federal leadership to create the conditions for data to be used to improve systems and, most importantly, increase student achievement:

1. Shift the role of data from compliance to meeting the needs of people.
2. Use data to improve teacher effectiveness.
3. Ensure student data are safeguarded.
4. Reduce burden and build state and local capacity to use data effectively.

While states have built tremendous data infrastructure, ESEA reauthorization provides federal lawmakers an opportunity to further support and incentivize data use in the service of student achievement and to ensure that every stakeholder—from parents to policymakers—has access to the information that meets their decision-making needs.

1. Shift the role of data from compliance to meeting the needs of people.

The data infrastructure in states has grown tremendously over the last several years, and now every state can produce valuable tools like student growth measures, high school feedback reports, early warning systems, and more. Yet data are still used primarily for meeting compliance needs, and too few parents and educators have direct access to this information. Federal lawmakers now have an opportunity create conditions that ensure stakeholders—including parents, educators, and the public—have the useful information they need.

ESEA reauthorization should create the conditions for states to:

- **Ensure that every parent has data about his or her own child.** Parents need access to data that show their children’s performance over time. Annual statewide assessments have created the ability to report comparable information about students and schools and made it possible to calculate growth data about individual students. No one values this type of information more than parents. With data in their hands, parents are best positioned to make informed choices that support their children’s learning. Federal lawmakers should:
 - Support and incentivize states to work with their districts to develop parental access tools (like parent dashboards), early warning systems, and student data backpacks.¹

¹ [Data Backpacks: Portable Records & Learner Profiles](#)

- **Ensure that parents, educators, and the public have quality information about how schools are performing.** The implementation of the public reporting requirements of No Child Left Behind has been geared toward mere compliance with the law, providing little value to parents and the public looking for the best educational opportunities for children. The one federally required longitudinal statistic (cohort graduation rate) has changed the conversation nationally about student success, and more indicators of its kind are needed to inform parents and the public. Additionally, information about school resources helps parents and communities better understand and advocate for the supports their students need. A shift to high-quality public report cards will provide better transparency about student and school performance and lead to actions that will improve student outcomes.² Federal lawmakers should:
 - Support and incentivize states in the development of high-quality, accessible school report cards that are focused on meeting parent and public needs.
 - Require states to leverage state longitudinal data systems to publicly report valuable statistics, such as cohort postsecondary enrollment, remediation, and graduation rates and aggregate student growth data.
 - Require states to include information about school funding and resources on school report cards, including whether resources come from federal, state, or local sources.³
 - Where possible, consider replacing federal compliance reporting from states with high-quality report cards (as described above) and longitudinal statistics in order to free up state capacity to create public reports that meet the needs of people, rather than simply comply with federal law.
- **Ensure that high-quality data are available to meet the needs of people by linking limited data across sectors while protecting privacy.** The most pressing questions parents have about their children’s education require limited data (not all information about each student) that are linked across sectors. That includes data from early childhood, K–12, postsecondary, and the workforce, and takes into account unique experiences like foster care. Useful information is tailored to answer educators’ and parents’ questions about student achievement. Federal lawmakers should:
 - Support and incentivize states to create purposeful cross-sector linkages, while putting practices in place to ensure privacy and security.⁴
 - Support and incentivize states to develop systems and processes to share relevant information across states. A critical challenge to providing a complete picture of student (and teacher) outcomes to educators and parents is the inability of states to share data across state lines.⁵

² [Empowering Parents and Communities through Quality Public Reporting](#)

³ [Using Financial Data to Support Student Success](#)

⁴ [Preparing Every Citizen for the Knowledge Economy](#)

⁵ [Limited Out-of-State Data Needed to Produce Robust Indicators](#)

2. Use data to improve teacher effectiveness.

Using high-quality data to inform preparation and practice can improve the quality of our teachers and ultimately outcomes for our students. Federal lawmakers have an opportunity to ensure that data are used in service of effective teaching.

ESEA must create the conditions for states to:

- **Use data to continuously improve teacher preparation.** Preparation programs need at least annual feedback about how their graduates perform in the classroom, as measured by student achievement.⁶ Because of federally required annual statewide assessments, every state has the ability to calculate comparable growth data about their teachers and report it to preparation programs. Federal lawmakers should:
 - Require states to share teacher performance data (based on student growth) with teacher preparation programs, along with other measures such as job placement and retention. Require the preparation programs to use these data to improve.
- **Ensure transparency of teacher quality across schools and districts.** Because of federally required annual assessments, states have the capacity to calculate and report growth data about their teachers, along with other measures of teacher quality, including inputs *and* outputs. Parents and the public deserve a clear picture of whether students in their school, district, and state have access to effective teachers. Federal lawmakers should:
 - Consider requiring states to publish useful, aggregate teacher effectiveness data, beyond highly qualified teacher (HQT) data, by school.
- **Ensure teachers have access to quality data about the students in their classrooms.** While tremendous state data systems exist, too few teachers have timely access to data about the students in their classroom. To improve instruction, teachers need timely, longitudinal data—including information on growth, attendance, behavior, grades, and assessments—about their students. To provide timely, quality data access to educators, districts and schools need the technical infrastructure in place to implement necessary systems and tools.⁷ Federal lawmakers should:
 - Require states to ensure that all teachers have access to longitudinal data about their individual students, including through instructional improvement systems and early warning systems.
 - Support and incentivize states to build necessary technical infrastructure for educators (districts and schools) to access and use timely data.
- **Ensure teachers have the skills necessary to use data to improve student outcomes.** Access alone is not enough to ensure that teachers use data to improve student achievement. Teachers need pre-service and ongoing training in *data literacy* to use data effectively. Federal lawmakers should:
 - Embed the definition of data literacy into relevant federal policies:

⁶ [Leveraging State Longitudinal Data Systems to Inform Teacher Preparation and Continuous Improvement](#)

⁷ [Roadmap for Teacher Access to Student-Level Longitudinal Data](#)

- *Data-literate educators continuously, effectively, and ethically access, interpret, act on, and communicate multiple types of data from state, local, classroom, and other sources in a manner appropriate to educators’ professional roles and responsibilities.*
 - Require states to embed the definition of data literacy into relevant state teacher policies and guidelines, including program approval and professional development.
 - Include *improving educators’ data literacy* as an allowable activity for improving teacher effectiveness.
 - Require that states measure educator data literacy skills through licensure exams and performance assessments before educators enter the classroom.
- **Ensure high-quality links between teachers and students to promote trust in data and their use.** For teachers to use data, they must trust the data are accurate, valid, and reliable. Quality teacher-student data links are also the linchpin to building feedback loops to teacher preparation and providing teachers access to their students’ data. States can and must implement high-quality teacher-student data links.⁸ Currently every state has implemented this link, but many need support and incentive to make the link higher quality. Federal lawmakers should:
 - Require states to develop a high-quality teacher-student data link based on best practices.

3. **Ensure student data are safeguarded.**

Everyone has a role to play in safeguarding data and building trust in the ways education data are used and protected. Federal lawmakers can strengthen their role and support the role of states in two ways: by clarifying and providing better guidance around existing federal privacy laws and by incentivizing strong privacy and data governance practices in states and districts.

ESEA reauthorization should:

- **Provide clarity on existing federal student data privacy laws.** While FERPA (the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) is often considered the chief federal student privacy law, several federal laws, including the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), govern student data privacy. These laws address different aspects of student privacy and are overseen by different federal agencies, resulting in a disjointed patchwork of rules for states and districts, who must work across agencies to receive guidance on important data privacy and security questions. As such, states need clarity on how federal privacy laws interact and support around evolving data uses and applications. ESEA’s reauthorization provides an opportunity to break down silos (without creating new ones) and better coordinate federal guidance and communications on protecting student privacy. Federal lawmakers should:
 - Coordinate across agencies to speak with a unified voice on issues of student data privacy and how federal laws protect it.

⁸ [Roadmap for a Teacher-Student Data Link](#)

- Provide additional and more comprehensive technical assistance and guidance to states and districts. Broaden the US Department of Education’s (ED) Privacy Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) to provide coordinated guidance on the implementation of multiple federal laws overseen by ED and the Federal Trade Commission.
- **Support and encourage robust data security, privacy, and governance practices in states and districts.** States and districts are prioritizing the protection of data and need support in meeting that goal. When states and districts are transparent about how they protect data and use them to provide value to families and educators, the public can better understand and build trust that data are being used to support student achievement.⁹ Federal lawmakers must support the work states are already doing and should:
 - Require states and districts to conduct an annual audit of their education data collections and publish the results, along with the education rationale for each collection.
 - Require that states and districts establish or leverage existing data governance structures to guide their data use decisions.¹⁰
 - Incentivize states and districts to regularly review privacy and security policies and adopt best practices.
 - Build capacity to safeguard data at the state and district levels by supporting the development of data use trainings, professional development, and communications plans.

4. Reduce burden and build state and local capacity to use data effectively.

Every data collection and reporting exercise has a cost in terms of time, energy, resources, and risk. Federal efforts should ensure that the education data collected are only those that are most useful. Federal lawmakers can take steps to reduce burden and duplication and increase efficiency.

ESEA reauthorization should:

- **Ensure data reporting requirements are purposeful.** Current federal reporting requirements use tremendous state resources and capacity that could be better used ensuring data meet the needs of educators and families. Refining federal data collection and reporting requirements can support this shift from mere compliance to using data in service of student achievement. Federal lawmakers should:
 - Ensure that federal reporting requirements are not duplicative and are necessary to provide actionable information.
 - Institute a routine review of federal data collections and sunset all unnecessary or duplicative collections.
 - Require ED to publish annually an inventory of data collections and the educational rationale for each collection.
- **Ensure data are comparable.** District and state ability to use data effectively can be hampered by inconsistent and incomparable systems. To harness the full potential of education data in service of student achievement, states and districts must have high-quality, comparable data. Federal lawmakers should:

⁹ [Roadmap for Safeguarding Student Data](#)

¹⁰ [Pivotal Role of Policymakers as Leaders of P-20/Workforce Data Governance](#)

- Federal lawmakers should require federal data collections to use data definitions, formats, and code sets articulated through the Common Education Data Standards (CEDS) Initiative.
- To ensure comparability across state lines, federal lawmakers should encourage and incentivize states, districts, and schools to use common data definitions, formats, and code sets, such as those articulated through CEDS, when publicly reporting education indicators.
- **Build capacity within state and district agencies to support the effective use of data.** Federal resources have helped states build their longitudinal data systems. Now federal lawmakers can strengthen state and local capacity to ensure stakeholders have the data they need in a timely and tailored format. Federal grants and programs should focus on helping states address the greatest challenges to achieving this goal, including linking data across systems, sectors, and states; establishing robust data governance and protection; promoting data literacy of educators; and prioritizing both public reporting of education data and ensuring parents and teachers have rich information on children in their care. Federal lawmakers should
 - Prioritize the governance, protection, access, and capacity to use data in federal grant programs authorized by ESEA.
 - Consider moving the State Longitudinal Data Systems grant program from the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA) to ESEA as one way to shift the focus of state systems from compliance and research to capacity building and innovation.

Conclusion

States have made tremendous progress building data infrastructure; the field must now deliver on the promise of data as a flashlight to support student achievement. The above recommendations represent specific, concrete opportunities for federal leadership to build on the tremendous momentum of the past decade. Federal leadership can help change the role of data from one centered on compliance reporting and accountability to one of empowering everyone—from parents to policymakers—with the information needed to get the results our children and nation deserve.

Appendix

DQC Knowledge and Expertise

The Data Quality Campaign (DQC) believes that when stakeholders—including state leaders, educators, and parents—are empowered with education data, they make decisions that help improve system performance, increase transparency, and most importantly improve student achievement. To achieve this vision, DQC supports policymakers and other key leaders to promote the effective use of data to improve student achievement. Launched in 2005 by 10 founding partners, DQC now works to realize the vision of an education system in which all stakeholders—from parents to policymakers—are empowered with high-quality data from the early childhood, K–12, postsecondary, and workforce systems to make decisions that ensure every student graduates high school prepared for success in college and the workplace. DQC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, national advocacy organization based in Washington, DC.

The increasingly robust statewide longitudinal data systems have significant potential to help improve student achievement while reducing burden, increasing efficiency, and improving transparency. DQC’s 10 State Actions to Ensure Effective Data Use¹¹ provide a roadmap for state policymakers to create a culture in which quality data are not only collected but also used to increase student achievement. Using DQC’s annual survey of all the states, we know that states have made progress across four key areas in support of improving schools, which make up the foundation for DQC’s recommendations.

States have demonstrated data capacity needed to support teacher effectiveness efforts:

- 22 states report that teacher performance data are shared with the programs that prepared them.
- 32 states report that data literacy is a requirement for teacher certification or preparation program approval.
- 35 states report providing teachers access to longitudinal data about the students in their classroom.
- 44 states have implemented at least a basic link between teachers and students.

States are making strides but need support in ensuring that parents and the public have access to the data they need:

- 17 states ensure that parents have access to their students’ longitudinal data.
- 45 states report creating publicly available aggregate, longitudinal reports.
- 41 states report creating and making available a high school feedback report.
- 19 states report linking K–12 data with early childhood, postsecondary, and workforce data.

¹¹ [DQC’s 10 State Actions for Effective Data Use](#)