THE CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO DATA

If you use or produce data, this is for you

Data can be a powerful tool to help you answer questions and inform action, but like any tool, it's not perfect. Averages, percentages, and ratings are seemingly objective, but data reflects a series of upfront decisions: What data is collected? How is it collected? Who is reflected in the data? These decisions affect people's perceptions of the data they see—the story that data tells, what it captures, and how it can and should be used to inform decisionmaking.

Understanding the processes that shape the numbers that you see and knowing which questions to ask about that data are critical. This information is a necessary building block of trust and, therefore, essential to consumers as they make decisions based on that data. **Building trust requires unpacking these issues and developing the knowledge and skills to actively change language, policies, and practices.**

So, what now? Knowing what data to trust requires approaching data with the savvy to ask tough questions, resist easy answers, think critically about data, and use it to find solutions. This resource breaks down what it means to build trust in data. It provides practical tips to help you make meaning from the numbers that you see so you can demand clarity, uncover biases, understand how to foster trust in data, and take action armed with full information. For the purposes of this resource, we've used examples about students and schools, but the process for building trust applies to any data across all sectors.

While the pages that follow are described as tools for producers (state and district leaders) or consumers (individuals, parents, families, and communities) of data, you may be both (e.g., district leaders produce local data but also consume state data). Use these tools to reflect on how each of those roles intersect and work to create space for communities to have productive conversations about what the data shows in service of finding solutions to help individuals succeed.

In the pages that follow, you'll find the resources for:

Producers of data to build trust in data through transparency

Consumers of data to ask questions and unpack the decisions that shaped the data

Decisionmakers to shift their mindset toward using an asset frame for data

BE TRANSPARENT
About the Numbers

Sharing decisions and context behind the data helps communities act on data with confidence

Mistrust in data is often the result of incomplete information—and states (i.e., data producers) can overcome these barriers by proactively sharing the context, proximity, and framing of data. This information provides communities (i.e., data consumers) with a greater sense of clarity, builds trust, and enables them to use the data with confidence. Understanding the whole story behind student data helps the public make sense of the numbers that they see.

Context

No single data point or measure can paint a complete picture of what's happening in schools. That's why context is necessary to determine what the data really means and how to act on it; context helps consumers make sense of the numbers. When producers fail to include context, consumers are set up to jump straight to assumptions about what the data means and are not positioned well to act.

WHAT TO DO

- ⊘ Share as much contextual information as possible when you publish data. For example, state report cards should include clear definitions for all indicators.
- ⊘ To ensure that the public can fully engage with and understand the contextual information, avoid overly complex text and translate it into the state's most commonly spoken languages.
- ⊘ Provide business rules (e.g., collection dates) so that consumers can easily compare similar indicators and quickly gauge why they're different.

Proximity

We inherently trust and value data that we collect ourselves. Consumers' trust in data diminishes as they move farther away from the source of the data. The Data Quality Campaign's national polls of parents consistently show that parents trust teachers the most to collect and use their child's data—much more than state departments of education, which have less proximity to the classroom. This distance also has practical applications. If a source is farther away from students, like a district superintendent or state education agency, and their data does not reflect what parents and teachers are seeing and hearing, communities may see this information as a nonstarter.

WHAT TO DO

- ⊘ Engage your consumers and listen; bridge the distance to mitigate this proximity challenge. Providing avenues for stakeholder engagement and showing evidence that you are listening go a long way to building trust in data.
- ⊘ When collecting feedback, be transparent about what seems feasible, what you might not be able to accomplish, and why.
- ⊘ Publicly share opportunities for future engagement.
- ⊘ Extend these efforts to building relationships with districts and schools. District and school leaders are closer to students and families; as trusted community sources, they can provide feedback about the data and reinforce the findings in communities.
- ⊘ Keep it up. Listening and building community relations should not be a one-time activity based on a specific project but an ongoing effort to build trust.

Framing

People want data framed in a way that maximizes their ability to be successful (e.g., focusing on their assets) and doesn't increase existing challenges (e.g., focusing on any deficits). Data that is asset framed—meaning that it is used to support individuals and recognizes that they bring their own backgrounds and experiences into the classroom—engenders trust. Data framed as a deficit blames individuals—including students and families—for the actions of leaders and decisionmakers and is inherently disempowering.

+ ASSET FRAME
Students experiencing homelessness are facing extra challenges and might need additional support.

— DEFICIT FRAME
Homeless students aren't attentive in class.

WHAT TO DO

- ⊘ Adopt an asset frame when publishing data. Recognize what individuals or groups of students *bring* to classrooms and schools and frame data accordingly.

- ⊘ Build an understanding of how communities perceive data about their students and be sensitive to how members of a community will receive information about them.

- ⊘ Open a dialog to understand how data should be framed in the future.

- ⊘ Provide a way forward; include information on what will be done as the result of this data to solve the problem.

If you can't trust the messenger, it's much harder—if not impossible—to trust the message. Listening to and engaging with the communities reflected in the data are crucial to ensuring that communities trust the data you're providing. People want evidence that the person or entity collecting and messaging the data has good intentions so that they know the data is trustworthy. Trusting the messenger has as much to do with who is conveying the message as how the message is being framed.

READ BETWEEN
the Numbers

Knowing what questions to ask can help you act on data with confidence

Data is all around us every day—from restaurant reviews to sports statistics—and everyone is a consumer of data. But building trust in data requires asking questions to become a savvier consumer. You might have come across data— your state's report card or discipline rates at your school—that made you question its veracity or didn't match what you saw happening locally. By asking the right questions and unpacking the decisions that shaped the data you can better understand the numbers and build your confidence in using them to take action. **To be a critical consumer of data, ask questions about how data is collected, communicated, and consumed.**

Collected

The data you see reflects a series of decisions made by people (e.g., legislators, agency policy and information technology personnel). Leaders in your state make decisions about what data to collect, how to define it, and who is (and isn't) included in the measure. For this reason, methods matter. Knowing all the steps that were taken will help you understand the context behind each number.

WHAT TO DO

- ⊘ Ask questions about how the data was collected and what decisions were made along the way that shaped what you're looking at.
- ⊘ Determine who was part of the process of generating the data and if anyone or anything important may have been left out of the data collection process.

  For example, a school's enrollment data looks different and tells a different story if collection happens on September 15, October 1 or December 1. Information including data definitions, collection dates, and numerators and denominators (who is in the population) is important to understanding what the data means.

Communicated

Data does not create meaning; people create meaning. Examine how data is communicated to determine if the narrative being presented reflects the truth as you know it and captures the complete story. Too often, data can be used to confirm existing narratives instead of to objectively inform. It's important to ask questions about the data to be sure that you are drawing clear and credible conclusions from the data that you see.

Focusing on communications should also mean taking steps to ensure that communities can understand the data being shared. These steps should include translating resources into commonly spoken languages to meet the needs of communities.

WHAT TO DO

- ⊘ Consider if the narrative being presented captures the whole story, if there are any other possible explanations for the findings, or if there are other factors that have not been properly accounted for. Is the data disaggregated to show how different groups of students are affected? Does the data reflect what you see in your community, or what you know to be true?

  For example, how graduation rate data is presented can significantly affect the inferences people draw from it. Data showing that 80 percent of students graduated makes it seem like 20 percent did not. Collecting and sharing data about how many continued on for a fifth year, received special education or high school equivalency certificates, dropped out, or simply moved to another district provide important context about the outcomes students experience in this school.

- ⊘ Evaluate whether the data is presented with sufficient context to help you develop a complete picture or if other relevant data and background information are needed. If context is not provided, ask for it.

Consumed

Data use (i.e., consumption) drives quality. When data is shared, the public has a vital role to play in the auditing process—identifying errors and missed opportunities—and ultimately, ensuring quality. A new data collection generally takes two years to produce high-quality information for consumers through this public audit process, and it's important for consumers to voice the issues they see. Because with better data, you can make better decisions.

WHAT TO DO

- Ask yourself if the data you're looking at reflects what you know to be true.

- If not, dig into when the data was released and how established the data set is. Especially if the data collection is new, there may be errors that require updating.

  For example, when the Civil Rights Data Collection was last released in 2018, news reports noted glaring errors in the data, and the public was upset about quality. While this collection wasn't new, it hadn't been very accessible before 2018 and, therefore, hadn't gone through this critical data quality process. Pointing out the errors in the data set was a natural and important step and led to changes in how some districts report this data.

Now that you know what questions to ask, it's important to know how to move forward.

Being a critical consumer of data isn't a one-size-fits-all endeavor. It looks different, for example, if you're a parent or if you're a member of the media. While consumers can take steps to learn more about the data in front of them, the onus should always be on the producer to provide the opportunity and conditions for the consumer to engage in the ways outlined below.

- **Follow up with the source of the information.** If the information was sent to you by the school, district, or institution, ask questions of educators and leaders. If they can't provide answers to your questions, ask them to point you in the direction of people who can.

- **Seek out avenues for stakeholder engagement.** States and districts often seek out public opinions before starting new initiatives and making changes. Find public forums to share your concerns and ask leaders for additional context.

- **Research advocacy organizations or others with similar concerns in your area.** If you have questions, chances are that you're not alone. Find an advocacy organization or group of individuals you can learn from and work to find answers together.

REFRAME
Data and Attitudes

Data reflects a series of decisions made by people. And the way data is collected and reported gives insight into what leaders have prioritized, their attitudes, and often, common stereotypes that are ingrained in how people have collected data in the past. Asset framing asks decisionmakers to rethink how they discuss individuals and what those individuals bring to the classroom and, by extension, how decisionmakers collect, frame, and report data. **Asset framing is *not* about spin or hiding real gaps.**

How to think about it

Asset framing defines communities by their aspirations and contributions, rather than their challenges and perceived deficits, according to Trabian Shorters, founder and CEO of BMe Community.

Describing a student as "at risk" implies that they have nothing to offer and no hopes or dreams. Calling a student "at risk" starts the conversation with a deficit frame, with challenges to overcome. Describing this same student as a student "who aspires to go to college" recognizes that this student has strengths, or assets, that should be explored. Thinking about students with an asset frame recognizes that they are experiencing temporary circumstances (e.g., students experiencing homelessness) or have future aspirations that should be supported (e.g., students who aspire to go to college).

Conversations about asset framing help leaders at all levels change narratives and reframe their goals. These conversations can also help reshape attitudes about their role in educating students. While doing this work, it's important to recognize that data is often about students and student performance, but students are not often the actors who can change their circumstances. This lack of power is even more present in historically underserved communities—Latinx, Native, and Black students; English learners; students with disabilities; and students experiencing poverty. As those engaged in improving outcomes, you must explore the levers of change that you are making available. What does the data you're sharing say about who can make change? Does the responsibility rest entirely with individuals, or does the data show that decisionmakers are responsible? And what is that answer telling underserved communities?

How to asset frame

Asset framing is often easier to understand when you compare real-life examples side by side. Use the situations below to think about how you can reframe situations to focus on assets.

Asset framing recognizes that it is the responsibility of leaders and adults to support individuals. No one wants to be defined by the worst moment of their life, and asset framing reminds leaders that these circumstances are often temporary.

+ ASSET FRAME
Students experiencing homelessness are facing extra challenges and might need additional support.

− DEFICIT FRAME
Homeless students aren't attentive in class.

Asset framing encourages a solutions-oriented approach, lifting up students instead of defaulting to blaming them for issues. Underperforming student groups can be interpreted in two ways.

+ ASSET FRAME
School leaders failed to provide the necessary support for Black ninth graders to get up to speed on the concepts found on the English assessment. More work needs to be done to ensure that Black students learn these concepts.

− DEFICIT FRAME
Black students scored worse than white students on the ninth-grade English assessment. They failed to learn the content.

With education data, asset framing can accomplish the following:

Prioritizing the positive

Instead of recognizing what is not happening, focus on how solutions can shape outcomes. For example, instead of focusing on the fact that 40 percent of parents have not looked at their state's report card in the past year, celebrate that 60 percent have viewed this information and identify what leaders can do to ensure that the rest of the parents have access to this information.

Recognizing the benefits of an individual's background

Students arrive at school with knowledge that should be celebrated. States like California and New Jersey offer a Seal of Biliteracy, which celebrates a student's ability to speak more than one language rather than stigmatizing a student whose first language is not English.

Providing a solution

Who are the actors in education, and who holds the power to make change? Looking at data with an asset frame—weeding out the harmful narratives and approaching challenges with an acknowledgment of an individual's assets—can cause perspectives to shift to support individuals.

For more on shifting perspectives through asset framing, read the Data Quality Campaign's blog series.