States Have Lost Momentum on Improving Report Cards

During this time of recovery from education disruption, access to data is more valuable than ever. Families need the timeliest possible information on how schools are serving students so that they can make decisions for their futures. But states haven't kept up their end of the bargain by providing this information to the public on their report cards, and the US Department of Education hasn't used its resources to help states push beyond a focus on compliance. As a result, report cards remain difficult to find, use, and understand. During an ongoing health and economic crisis, that is not acceptable.

It's time for the federal government to help states refocus.

This year is the sixth time that the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) has reviewed report cards from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. As we examine how states are sharing information with the public (and if they are sharing certain information at all), we've gotten really good at knowing where to look for data on state websites. As such, we make a lot of effort to click links and explore tabs to find what information is available. But we're not the target audience for these important resources: families should not have to go to the lengths we do to be able to find, use, and understand the information they need. States have lost momentum on improving their report cards, and families are being left in the dark.

This moment is critical in the recovery from the disruption of the pandemic. Leaders are using data to make decisions about how to support recovery efforts that get students back on track, and the public needs to understand how schools are supporting students. Yet, our review uncovered a commitment to compliance rather than the courage to share information, even if the report card shows that students have fallen behind. Despite the flexibility on 2021 report card timelines, timely information on student academic performance is the bare minimum that states should be including on their report cards. States largely failed to provide context for how schools are supporting students during recovery and explain why data was not available, if it was not.

Without investment and pressure, the state of report cards will not change. State report cards are a federal requirement, and it's time for the federal government to step in. By providing investment and support to states, *and* pressure to hold states accountable for what is federally required, the federal government can fulfill the intention of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and ensure that students, families, and the public are getting the information they need.

After years of pressure and the requirement to break down data by all groups of students, report cards still lack this information.

For more than two decades, states have been required to provide achievement data broken down by students' economic background, gender, race and ethnicity, English proficiency, disability status, and migrant status. In 2015, ESSA required that states add foster care, homeless, and military-connected status to their report cards. These requirements are far from new, yet too many states continually fail to include this information on their report cards—and in some particularly troubling cases, states have removed information that they once included.

The information that families need to understand and contextualize academic achievement does not change from year to year, and neither should the data they are able to find on state report cards. Yet, the student group information we were able to locate continues to be a moving target. Without this consistency, families cannot count on states to share the information they really need.

DQC's analysis of 2021 report cards found that only **28 states** disaggregated achievement data by **all federally required student groups**—an increase of three from 2019. While this increase seems like good news, the reality is that nine states added this information to their report cards while six states *removed* it. The table on this page details the number of states that added or removed achievement data for each student group between 2019 and 2021.

Not sharing data broken down by the five originally required groups is unacceptable. The federal government should hold states to the 20-year-old requirement that they share this data on their report cards *now*. And state ESSA plans have been in place for at least five years. If gathering and sharing data for these newer groups of students remains a barrier, federal leaders must provide support to states to help them accomplish it.

Student Group	Year first required by statute	Number of states that: Included achievement data for this group on 2021 report card*	Added data for this group from 2019 to 2021	Removed data for this group from 2019 to 2021	Net change in number of states including data for this group from 2019 to 2021
Race and Ethnicity	2001	45	1	4	⬇ 3
Disability Status	2001	46	1	4	⬇ 3
English Proficiency	2001	46	1	4	⬇ 3
Economic Background	2001	46	1	4	⬇ 3
Homeless Status	2015	36	5	7	⬇ 2
Migrant Status**	2001	31	5	6	⬇ 1
Gender	2001	37	5	6	⬇ 1
Foster Care Status	2015	34	7	7	0
Military-Connected Status	2015	35	10	7	⬆ 3

*In 2020, statewide assessments were canceled due to COVID-19, and states were not required to include achievement data on their report cards. Some states included achievement data from previous years.

**States that noted on their report card that they do not participate in the federal Migrant Education Program were omitted from these counts.

Although most states have updated their report cards, many are missing key information about the 2020–21 school year.

Report cards are meant to give families access to information about state, district, and school performance. However, too many states failed to include up-to-date information for these measures. States must prioritize including performance and progress data, including assessment and graduation rate data, on their report cards.

Without up-to-date performance data, these resources are missing the critical information necessary for people to understand how schools are supporting students. Worse, among the states that failed to include 2021 data, many provided data from inconsistent years—e.g., 2019 assessment data and 2020 high school graduation rates on their 2021 report card—asking users to make sense of a patchwork of information. Students and their families deserve more than outdated data or a scavenger hunt when trying to find information about their school's or district's progress.

Of the 43 states that had already published 2021 report cards:*
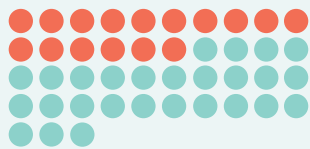
16 STATES did not include **2021 assessment data.**
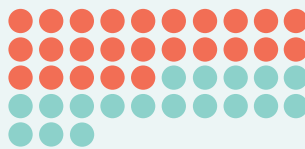
25 STATES did not include **2021 high school graduation rates.**

26 STATES did not include **2020–21 chronic absenteeism data.**

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Families need to be able to act on this data. And no one can act on data they can't find, use, or understand.

Years into their production, state report cards remain difficult to navigate for parent audiences. Data is often spread across different parts of report card websites, which are frequently clunky and slow and require reloading to find information from different schools or years. And the data that is available is oriented toward accountability, not toward actual use by families. Some states have added features designed to support understanding—including parent-facing dashboards—but the quality and effectiveness of these features is uneven.

While some states have failed to remove barriers when it comes to finding information, other states are still failing to translate report cards into languages other than English. Of the **25 states** that included some form of translation, only **seven states** had translations that were considered high quality (e.g., they were not provided by Google Translate, and they included all labels and descriptions). As meeting the needs of populations that speak multiple languages remains a challenge for states, the federal government must provide support and pressure for states to develop and deploy the best methods for translating state report cards.

And as families work to identify the best pathways for students following education disruption, context is more important than ever. While most states acknowledged the impact of the pandemic on reporting and the availability and quality of data, few provided data on the measures that families really need to understand: student access to learning, technology, or supports in the 2020–21 school year.

More states are sharing information on various **postsecondary readiness opportunities,** including postsecondary enrollment at two- and four-year institutions. However, many states continue to rely on "composite indicators," which combine metrics like enrollment in advanced coursework, career and technical education, and dual enrollment programs into one blanket measure of postsecondary readiness. When reported without breaking down their constituent data points, these composite indicators fail to provide adequate context and leave parents and the public without answers to their questions.

Conclusion

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and its current iteration, ESSA, are first and foremost civil rights laws. These fundamental laws were written, in part, to ensure that students and their families have the information they need to navigate their students' K–12 education in a way that prepares students for their futures. State report cards are an integral part of the information that families need. States must do better to share robust information with families in ways that are easy to find, use, and understand.

Over the past decade, states have invested time and money in their report cards but have still failed to provide all of the information families need in ways that serve families best. It's time for federal leaders to double down on the importance of the requirements they laid out in ESSA and provide states with the necessary support to meet every requirement. To keep the spirit of ESSA, federal leaders must support states in recommitting to courage over compliance.