

Using Data to Advance Education Equity

State Policy Can Help K–12 Leaders Measure Progress on Goals to Support All Students

Education leaders can't meet their equity goals without data. To make decisions about how to support all students, they need access to data that shines a light on the education experiences and outcomes that matter most to their communities. State policymakers can and should take steps to improve access to this data for everyone who needs it.

Leaders Need Data to Advance Equity Goals



Grace is in high school and planning to be the first in her family to go to college. She wants to attend a four-year college that will support her through graduation and set her up for a high-quality career close to her family. But her school doesn't offer the advanced courses that she needs to be able to get into her dream college.

When state and district leaders have access to disaggregated data on the availability of advanced courses and postsecondary enrollment for their students, they will see that historically underserved students like Grace are more likely to be in a school that doesn't offer those courses and are less likely to enroll in a four-year college the year after graduation. Leaders must access this data and examine it to identify such patterns of inequity, make better decisions on behalf of their students, and regularly revisit these measures to track improvements over time. With this data in hand, leaders can make investments in resources and partnerships that offer Grace the support she needs to reach her goals.

Everyone should have access to opportunities and supports that lead to success in education and life-sustaining careers. For generations, historically underserved students like Grace—including students of color, students with disabilities, and students in rural communities—haven't had access to high-quality

education and options for what comes next. As a result, they have not been able to achieve the same outcomes as their peers. State and local leaders across the country have been committing to addressing these inequities. But there is more work to do.

As they pursue their equity goals, state and local education agencies need to examine a robust set of indicators to understand which policy, practice, and systems changes are necessary to support all students. And they must consider the whole student experience, beyond academic outcomes, as they seek to understand students' needs and identify solutions. These considerations include factors that affect students' ability to succeed academically, such as access to opportunities, school discipline practices, and school climate.

Leaders can't address problems they can't see. To advance their equity goals, state and local leaders must be able to develop indicators tailored to help them understand student success across a variety of measures and use the resulting data to drive change across their systems. They need to design equity indicators so that they offer insight into the aspects of students' experience that are most relevant to the goals and the unique needs of the leaders' communities. They also need to be able to break down, or disaggregate, the data that results from

these measures so they can understand the experiences of different groups of students.

With disaggregated data from a broad set of indicators designed to help them understand equity across opportunities and outcomes, leaders can identify where

help is needed most; develop data-driven equity goals; and work with educators, community partners, and families to find the best solutions. They also can track progress over time to evaluate whether those solutions are working and make changes as needed.



Exploring the Promise and Feasibility of Equity Indicators

In 2019, a committee of experts convened by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine developed 16 education equity indicators that span from prekindergarten through the transition to postsecondary. The committee proposed that the indicators could be used by K–12 leaders to identify and measure disparities in key education outcomes and access to learning opportunities. These indicators include both “opportunity indicators,” such as school climate, nonacademic supports for student success, and access to effective teaching, and “outcome indicators,” such as academic readiness, engagement in schooling, and postsecondary readiness. The indicators provide a sturdy foundation that federal, state, and local policymakers can use as a starting point

when developing new equity measures that help them better understand student experiences.

The Data Quality Campaign (DQC) convened state and district leaders from several K–12 agencies (list available in the Acknowledgments) for a series of meetings from May 2022 to August 2023 to discuss the possibility of implementing these education equity indicators. During these conversations, leaders expressed a desire to develop and use new measures of equity to support student success. But they also shared the need for support through policy, funding, and advocacy to address the many challenges they face when considering implementing and using new measures. This brief has been informed by these conversations.



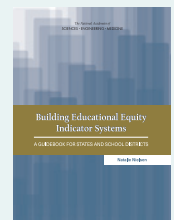
Implementation Challenges: Lessons Learned from Leading States and Districts

Leaders need data to promote education equity, but state and local education agencies need support to use it.

Many states already collect the data that K–12 leaders need to develop indicators that align with their equity goals. The Every Student Succeeds Act required that state education agencies include a nonacademic indicator, such as school climate or chronic absenteeism, in their school accountability systems alongside traditional achievement measures. As a result, states can provide a broader picture of student success than ever before. While some agencies might want to collect new data to inform and advance their equity goals, existing data provides a good start. For example, 10 of the 16 indicators of educational equity outlined by the National Academies committee can be formed in whole or in part with data that states are already required to report.

LEVERAGING EXISTING DATA

State leaders looking to develop equity indicators can take inventory of their current data collections and determine what measures could be created using existing data, reducing the burden and time needed to implement new measures. The National Academies has published a guidebook that leaders can use to get started.



But data collection is only one of many steps leaders need to take to implement equity indicators. In conversations with DQC, state and local leaders raised several challenges they face when planning to use new measures of educational equity. Designing and implementing new measures that effectively inform policy and practice involve a number of considerations, including:

- **Stakeholder engagement.** Leaders must be able to consult a range of voices—including educators, families, and community partners—to identify and prioritize concerns that form the foundation for equity measures. Not only do these audiences provide essential insight into students’ needs, but they will also have to play a role in implementing solutions. Engaging the right stakeholders in the process of developing new measures means that insights from equity data are more likely to translate into action that supports students. While they see the importance and value in taking these steps, most agencies that want to perform stakeholder engagement have limited capacity to do so.
- **Embedding new measures into practice.** Leaders will need to determine how new equity measures and their insights will inform decisionmaking across their systems. This work involves clarifying how these measures fit alongside existing data, including school accountability indicators, and how they should translate to changes in practice. Leaders will need to build internal alignment among the many offices that have a role to play in supporting students, such as teams that focus on data, student support, and equity. While such collaboration is critical to the implementation of new measures, it can take time and requires prioritization from leadership.

- **Capacity for data analysis and use.** Using data requires people, time, and money. State and local education agencies have many data responsibilities, including adhering to federal and state reporting requirements. Taking on additional data priorities can put a strain on data teams, which are often already facing high staff turnover. Funding for data work can be unpredictable, limiting the breadth, depth, and sustainability of the projects state and local leaders can take on. To develop and use equity measures, most agencies will need to consider how to leverage existing resources and funding streams.
- **Clear communication.** People won’t use data they don’t trust or understand. To this end, leaders and data teams have to make sure that they take steps to clearly communicate and provide context any time they roll out new measures. They have many audiences to consider when they do this work, including educators, families, and members of the public. Communicating about equity data is a particular challenge because states and districts often define equity concerns and goals differently, and sometimes, conversations about equity can be politically charged. Leaders need to be clear about what equity means for their communities and explain how new measures connect to state and local education goals. Determining the best way to present new measures so that people can understand them, and developing related communications strategies, requires agency leadership, communications staff, and data teams to work together. Agencies need support for this important step in the process.

Each of these considerations is essential for implementing new measures, and each poses a challenge for busy agency staff. They need support from state policy to use data to pursue their equity goals.



State Policymakers Should Support Access to Equity Data

State policymakers must create the necessary policy conditions to equip state and local K–12 leaders to overcome implementation challenges and use equity indicators to inform decisionmaking. To do so, they can prioritize the following actions:

- **Ensure that local leaders have role-appropriate access to disaggregated state data.** School and district leaders, educators, and other local data users need individualized access to disaggregated data that shines a light on the experiences of different student groups and allows them to pinpoint education
- **Leverage statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) to support access to equity data.** SLDSs, which connect individual-level data over time from early childhood, K–12, postsecondary, and the workforce, can be a powerful tool to support access to equity data. These systems allow leaders to analyze K–12 data in the context of students’ full education

journeys and longer-term outcomes, which is essential for setting equitable outcome goals that extend beyond high school graduation. But state policymakers must take steps to design these systems so that they support access to the equity data that leaders need. This work includes prioritizing the following:

- **Codify an equity charge for the SLDS and a cross-agency governing board to uphold this charge.** State leaders should enact a law that charges a leadership-level governing body with ensuring that the SLDS meets state needs, including equity goals. Codifying both a purpose for the system and formal data governance is the best way to ensure sustainability.
- **Establish and fund an independent office to manage the SLDS and require it to produce access tools and analyses.** The law can specify that this office should be responsible for producing tools for the public and other stakeholders, including K–12 leaders. This office can also be charged with providing technical assistance to help users understand how to use data tools.
- **Require managing entities to provide feedback data to K–12 agencies.** K–12 leaders should have access to data they provide to the SLDS in a format they can use to answer their questions about their students’ long-term outcomes. An independent office that manages the SLDS can provide this feedback data to state and local agencies. For example, the Kentucky Center for Statistics (KYSTATS), which manages Kentucky’s SLDS, creates [High School Feedback Reports](#) that provide information about how graduates from individual high schools fared after graduation, including the type of postsecondary institution they enrolled in and their average first-year grade point average.
- **Provide funding and support for state and local leaders to conduct stakeholder engagement and communicate about new measures.** State legislators can identify mechanisms to fund or incentivize state and local education agencies to build out their capacity for stakeholder engagement and communications. State education agencies also

STATE SPOTLIGHT: CALIFORNIA



California’s developing Cradle-to-Career Data System has equity baked into its design. State law [enacted in 2021](#) establishes formal governance for the SLDS and states that two of the system’s key purposes are to “illustrate inequities in opportunities and outcomes” and to “support the creation of user-facing tools and services.” The law mandates a leadership-level governing board charged with overseeing the data system and ensuring that it meets this purpose. The law also establishes the Office of Cradle-to-Career to manage the data system. This office is responsible for scaling data tools and providing technical assistance to help people, like students, counselors, and local leaders, use these tools. By codifying a clear purpose and charging a governing board and managing office with overseeing the system’s implementation, California leaders ensured that the new data system can be held accountable for supporting access to equity data for everyone who needs it.

can provide additional capacity to local education agencies by circulating engagement toolkits, drafting communications templates, spotlighting best practices, or creating peer-learning communities of practice among districts with similar goals.

- **Seek out ways to establish more predictable funding for equity data use, starting with clarifying ways agencies can leverage existing state funds.** Establishing more predictable funding would help agencies better plan for the future to meet their equity goals. State leaders can start by providing guidance on available funding streams for local education agencies to develop and use equity indicators.

By taking these steps, state leaders can ensure that K–12 leaders have the support they need to be able to use equity measures to identify patterns, direct resources where they are needed most, and pursue system improvements for all students.

LEARN MORE

For more about how state policy can support access to SLDS data, see DQC’s [vision to transform state data systems](#).



Acknowledgments

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State Education Agencies

- Hawaii Department of Education
- Maryland State Department of Education
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- Oregon Department of Education
- Rhode Island Department of Education

Local Education Agencies

- Austin Independent School District
- Denver Public Schools
- Metro Nashville Public Schools
- Tulsa Public Schools