

# From Pandemic to Progress

Eight Education Pathways for COVID-19 Recovery

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## Redesigning Accountability

Accountability systems use metrics of student performance and progress along with other school quality measures to gauge school performance and gaps for subgroups of students. States and districts then use those results to inform interventions and provide greater transparency to parents and the public. The general idea that states and districts should know how their students are performing and respond should not be controversial. But accountability and assessment have faced strong pushback, and two decades of variations on the accountability/assessment blueprint have not sufficiently addressed the problems that prompted their creation.

By early 2020, the state accountability systems and the assessments that accompany them were [limping along](#) under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Now with the continuing COVID-19 crisis, the entire enterprise may be hanging on by a thread. It is clear a status-quo approach to accountability this year would be unwise, bordering on totally impossible. But in the coming years, something better could be in reach.

**In the wake of COVID-19, state-level accountability systems should shed the baggage of ESSA and No Child Left Behind and take a new form while preserving the core tenets of equity, transparency, and data-informed action to support improved outcomes for students.**

*From Pandemic to Progress* puts forth eight ambitious but achievable pathways that leaders and policymakers can follow to rebuild education – and student learning and well-being – as the country begins to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. To read more from this series, visit [www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress](http://www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress).

## Accountability systems have evolved and diverged over time, and have not consistently produced the outcomes they sought.

The era of widespread accountability began in earnest with the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, which required states to establish learning standards, test all students' performance relative to those standards, report results, and hold schools accountable for low performance overall and disproportionately low performance among specific groups of students. For the first time, data on student performance was widely available to the public for every school and student subgroup in the country, exposing equity gaps in a way that had never before been possible.

Studies suggest that [student outcomes](#) improved somewhat under NCLB on measures such as math proficiency and high school graduation rates. But NCLB's narrow focus on reading and math proficiency and its rigid system of school-level interventions earned criticism and prompted increased flexibility for states when ESSA replaced NCLB in late 2015.

The core commitments to transparency (through annual testing and reporting) and equity (through disaggregated data and required intervention where the most severe equity gaps emerged) remained through this shift in the law. But under ESSA, state approaches to accountability have diverged. A few states [doubled down](#) on rigorous accountability, with comprehensive frameworks to define performance and take action based on multiple metrics of school quality and student outcomes and growth. Many other states took the flexibility of ESSA as an opportunity to dial back the states' role in addressing low-performing schools and equity gaps.

Despite some real successes and improvements in accountability systems, assessments, and state standards in the past 20 years, opponents of accountability systems have now successfully redefined the concept as punitive, inequitable, and in opposition to a holistic view of learning or other needed reforms. This had made accountability increasingly politically toxic.

And in many ways, current accountability systems do fall short of their stated goals of equity, transparency, and quality improvement. Whether schools are labeled with colors or numbers or something else, too many students do not graduate from K-12 systems prepared for college and careers. This is disproportionately true for Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, English learners, and other historically marginalized student subgroups. The 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores [show only](#) one in three American high school seniors proficient in reading and fewer than one in four proficient in math, a decline from four years ago. Although high school graduation rates have improved in the past 20 years among Black and Latinx students, low-income students, and students with disabilities, these students are still disproportionately likely to attend schools where barely [40% of students graduate](#). In addition, a recent multi-state analysis by the Alliance for Excellent Education showed that schools with [low accountability ratings](#) enroll more students of color, while schools with high ratings serve fewer students of color. And that was before the pandemic hit.

States face a decision point — whether to continue a retreat on accountability and assessment, or pursue the more ambitious work of revising and redefining how accountability systems could look and operate in support of stronger, more equitable outcomes for students.

## **States should not relinquish their responsibility to identify and respond to low-performing schools and achievement gaps.**

Whether or not it is called “accountability,” states must take a leadership role in monitoring school and district performance for equity and educational efficacy, and respond urgently when students are not getting the educational opportunities they need and deserve.

A redesign of accountability systems should still center the critical importance of transparency and data-driven action in schools, districts, and states for the lowest-performing schools and the most historically marginalized and underserved [student groups](#). And it should be informed by the accumulated knowledge of [20-plus years](#) of good and bad accountability systems and school improvement efforts.

As the Biden administration and Congress think through the longer-term approach to K-12 accountability in the wake of COVID-19, these four [design principles](#) should shape the discussion — and the years ahead:

### **Center equity and transparency for underserved student groups**

Any accountability redesign should deepen this commitment to student groups whose voices and needs are too often deprioritized, and whose performance may otherwise get buried in averages. Focusing on the educational needs of historically marginalized groups of students — including but not limited to Black, Latinx, and Native American students, students who speak a language other than English, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families — has long been a core facet of accountability systems. This is evidenced by the [continued support](#) of a broad [cross section](#) of civil rights and disability rights advocates for measures such as public reporting of all assessment results by student subgroup, and targeted action based on evidence that a student subgroup is not being well served. Data-driven transparency and equity for subgroups could also be improved and made more nuanced and useful. For example, some states and districts further [disaggregate](#) race and ethnicity [categories](#), especially for [Asian](#) and Latinx students, to identify needs and trends in particular immigrant and ethnic communities. And the fuzzy definition of “[low-income students](#)” is in need of an overhaul.

### **Measure performance, reward progress**

The disruption in annual assessments due to the pandemic could be an opportunity for states, assessment vendors, and researchers to advance new measures of student learning and progress that might effectively replace proficiency. So much of the accountability debate has centered on the concept of “percent proficient,” the primary measure of performance on which NCLB was built. Although the simplicity of proficiency is useful in some cases, it gives a very limited picture of school performance. The

percentage of students above or below grade level proved to be a proxy measure for student performance when they entered the school, correlating too closely with outside-of-school factors, like family income. And rewarding proficiency alone could incentivize [bad instructional practices](#), like focusing more on students near the proficient bar. A wider array of nuanced, research-driven assessment measures should benchmark student performance against specific standards, to ensure they stay on track for [college and career readiness](#), while at the same time measuring and rewarding growth and progress that students and schools make over time. Many of these measures are already in wide use in state [accountability systems](#) but could be weighted more heavily. Other measures are in [development stages](#) and could benefit from further research and pilots to see how they could function in different accountability scenarios.

### **Embed measurement in teaching and learning**

To the greatest extent possible, states should seek to embed assessment and measurement of learning and school quality into classroom routines. Traditionally, standardized tests used for accountability are rarely useful for instruction. Results come to teachers too late, or not at all, and tests can disrupt schools for weeks at a time, with valuable learning time lost. The most useful assessments from a teaching and learning perspective are a seamless part of classroom routines. There are logistical, instructional, and technical hurdles to this shift. States have struggled in the past to reconcile the test design parameters of statewide accountability assessments and [curriculum-embedded tests](#). But most of the state applications for [innovative assessment waivers](#) under ESSA looked for ways to spread testing throughout the year, get results back faster, and more closely align with what is happening in the classroom while still serving the needs of an accountability system. Classroom-embedded assessments could also be more flexible, allowing students to demonstrate mastery of skills as they learn. Most importantly, this design principle only works if the curriculum itself is high quality and closely aligned to state standards. So enacting this design principle must be done in parallel with state efforts to support and fund high-quality curriculum adoption in schools.

### **Link accountability to responsibility**

New accountability systems should expand the viewpoint of accountability beyond schools and ensure schools have the tools and resources to lead on improvement. One longstanding weakness of accountability systems is that they seemed to punish schools for factors out of their control. In many schools, key enabling factors like staffing, budget, curriculum, enrollment practices, and more are controlled at the district level. And yet schools have been the locus of accountability and performance measurement, not districts. Too often, districts will respond to a low-performing school by changing school leadership or requiring an endless cycle of improvement plans, but not by examining the broader practices and systems that shape school performance. A new approach to accountability should acknowledge that individual schools don't always hold the levers of change and low-performing schools are often the product of inequitable or dysfunctional systems. It should spur on deeper district and state actions to change the conditions and constraints that schools operate within, in order to enable big improvements in student achievement.

### Use research to drive interventions

A redesign of accountability should spend much more time, energy, and thought on uncovering the root causes of low performance in schools and responding with a combination of evidence-based practices and strategies to direct change. ESSA defines [tiers of evidence](#) to differentiate the quality and strength of research on evidence-based practices, and it [repeatedly calls](#) for evidence-driven school improvement strategies. But the mechanisms for a state to actually change outcomes in a school are rarely straightforward. Unfortunately, there is rarely just one clear answer to the overlapping challenges facing the lowest-performing schools. Once a school is identified as low performing in our current system, they will likely enter a recurring cycle of improvement plans that do not lead to lasting improvement for students. In some states, a school could earn the lowest possible rating for multiple years before getting any additional support or being required to [do anything differently](#). State leaders are rarely in the best position to know exactly what a school needs to do to improve, but new accountability systems should build a clearer and more effective framework for school and district improvement actions.

### New accountability systems should complement and strengthen other necessary reforms.

These four design principles could guide a new approach to accountability that incorporates lessons from the past 20 years while moving forward from the remnants of No Child Left Behind. It's also essential to acknowledge that accountability — centered on measurement, transparency, and equity-driven action — is a necessary but not sufficient component of student success. The most successful and impactful vision of future accountability systems would be embedded within a larger suite of structural reforms to advance educational equity in realms such as education finance, teacher training and professional development, school district boundaries, desegregation, and more.

There may always be some schools and districts in need of improvement and intervention. As we begin to emerge from the pandemic, we should have better ways of identifying those schools and districts, and responding in ways that shape students' futures for the better.

To read more from this series, visit [www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress](http://www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress).

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## **About Bellwether Education Partners**

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice. Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.