

How District Leaders and Advocates Can Build Parent Support for Statewide Assessments



Adam Ezring,
Nicholas Munyan-Penney,
and Anna Skubel, Ph.D.



Introduction



Addressing inequities in educational outcomes — particularly for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners — cannot happen without data from statewide summative assessments. Statewide assessment results help schools and district leaders target resources to the students and schools with the greatest need and track whether these resources are impacting student achievement.

However, the implementation of assessment systems has left the education field strained by a love-hate relationship with academic performance data and the statewide summative assessments mandated by law to produce it. Beginning with the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 — when federal assessment requirements were first introduced — a bright spotlight was cast upon the importance of assessment data along with the failure of the education system to adequately meet the academic needs of all students. Annual assessments have since been caught in a ceaseless tug-of-war around the direction of federal education policy, with supporters underscoring the value of testing as a tool that can target resources and advance equity, and opponents disparaging standardized exams as a punitive measure against teachers and a burden on students. Fatigue has set in, and advocates are wondering whether the requirement for statewide annual testing will survive Congress if it ever gets around to re-upping the federal education statute.

With this looming uncertainty, the questions facing supporters of state assessment data are multi-faceted. Can the field organize around a commitment to improve upon the testing-regime status quo? Are there innovations in test format and delivery that viably offer substantive alternatives? And what can be done in the meantime to build greater support for assessments amongst key education stakeholders as well as the broader community?

EdTrust and the Collaborative for Student Success set out to answer the last question — how to build greater support for annual testing — with backing from the National Parents Union.

A recent EdTrust [analysis](#) found a pervasive and harmful disconnect between policymakers and parents: School leaders stated that they used assessment data to make critical decisions about how resources were distributed amongst and within schools, but families were often in

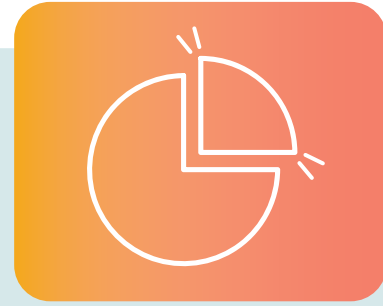
the dark about how assessment results helped target supports and programs. Specifically, parents and families didn't know that the tests their children take at the end of the year are used to strategically deploy limited resources based on student need. How leaders say they are using the data to support student needs is a far cry from the punitive vision of testing that stubbornly dominates popular perceptions, yet this pervasive narrative is likely to remain unless clear examples of equitable uses of assessments displace the current public discourse.

To bridge this disconnect and to ensure education equity advocates are best equipped to make the case for student assessment data, our organizations conducted a qualitative study of district leaders across the country. We asked district leaders in five states (Massachusetts, Illinois, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington) about specific resource allocation decisions they make based on the student data they receive from their annual tests, so we could compile a list. We were delighted to discover that there were, indeed, specific examples of district leaders addressing needs and inequities — including reallocating educators and other staff to lower-performing schools, grades, and classrooms; adjusting curriculum and school schedules; and providing targeted supports to educators, students, and families. The specific strategies we identified were then used in a nationally representative poll of more than 1,500 parents of school-age children administered by the National Parents Union to better understand how parents and families perceive the use of assessment data in schools and ascertain the extent to which these use cases resonated. For more information about the research process, see the methodology section.

The response was loud and clear: Across demographic groups and political ideologies, parents overwhelmingly support the use of assessment data to drive resources to the schools and students with the greatest need. Moreover, we learned that by engaging families in how data is used, we can improve their perceptions and opinions of assessments, even among those who are skeptical. Parents were also eager to provide input to district leaders and expressed their desire to be partners in leveraging assessment data to support student success.

Taken together, these insights offer a roadmap for district leaders and advocates alike on how to build support for testing and testing data. The takeaway couldn't be clearer: By focusing on how data is used to support students and educators, leaning into the specific resources that are directed based on data, and deploying additional engagement strategies favored by parent and family stakeholders, our organizations believe we can show more parents and families the value of assessments in their students' learning outcomes. We will help grow support for annual statewide summative assessments and the essential information they afford while simultaneously encouraging states, districts, and schools to use best practices in using the data and engaging families on its value and use.

Leveraging Data to Achieve Resource Equity



Data on student experiences and outcomes, including summative assessment data, is crucial for enabling education leaders to provide students with the right combination of resources and supports needed for them to reach their full potential.

The Alliance for Resource Equity (ARE) — a partnership between EdTrust and Education Resource Strategies — provides a framework that discusses resource equity across 10 key dimensions of the student experience. In addition to framing resource equity as multi- and cross-dimensional, ARE provides advocates and district leaders with a suite of tools to identify strengths and inequities in their communities, consider root causes, and plan for action through a data-driven process. To learn more about ARE and consider how to operationalize some of the promising practices highlighted in this report, visit educationresorcequity.org.

Findings



The findings below reflect both the qualitative study conducted with district-level education leaders across five states (MA, IL, TN, TX, and WA) as well as the quantitative poll of more than 1,500 parents of school-aged children across the country.

Key Finding

District leaders understand assessment data as part of a greater ecosystem — one piece of a larger puzzle of decision-making. District leaders overwhelmingly utilize state summative assessment data as intended: They identify gaps in student performance and consider the results alongside other local data to inform decision-making.

Most district leaders believe that statewide summative assessments are helpful as a standardized measure for tracking how well the district is meeting statewide academic standards. Upon receiving statewide summative assessment data, most district leaders stated that one of the first things they do is identify areas for improvement (i.e., schools, grades, content areas) where the summative assessment scores were low or lower. Additionally, leaders stated that they track or investigate student group trends in assessment results, which includes exploring gaps in student performance based on student characteristics such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability status, and whether they are language learners. By considering gaps in student performance on statewide assessments, school districts can identify the need for additional resources and where to place them to promote equitable outcomes for all students. Therefore, statewide assessment data can affirm the need for a focus on equity and push districts to think about differentiated interventions for students that need additional academic support.

In conjunction with statewide assessment data, district leaders consider other academic and nonacademic data to inform decision-making.

Statewide summative assessments provide students, educators, and families with a cumulative progress report on long-term academic benchmarks, as outlined by statewide standards. Alternatively, other academic performance data, such as formative or interim assessments, grades, graduation rates,

“I think, absolutely, statewide assessment can inform us on how a student has learned or has not learned the skills they need to be successful in the current grade level and beyond. But we also look at that data piece and know that it is one day in time ... that is a snapshot And so we take that piece of data and triangulate it with other formative assessments that we have in our school district, and we think that more accurately informs how we’re going to move forward and how it helps parents.”

District Leader from Texas

and screeners, allow teachers and administrators to track student academic progress and needs at a classroom level throughout the year. Nonacademic data, including attendance data, behavior and discipline data, school climate measures, teacher and staff observations, and career-readiness indicators, are also used to paint a comprehensive picture of additional factors that are impacting student achievement on both summative and formative assessments. In other words, district leaders felt that statewide summative assessments help clearly identify sustained gaps in student performance, while additional academic performance data and nonacademic data help illuminate why these gaps might exist and how to address them.

Key Finding

District leaders use state assessment data to strategically target resources to address needs and inequities — including reallocating educators and other staff to lower-performing schools, grades, and classrooms; adjusting curriculum and school schedules; and providing targeted supports to educators, students, and families.

Educators and other staff

District leaders indicate that statewide summative assessment data is used to determine the district’s hiring needs and/or redistribution of current staff to support students in certain schools, grades, or subjects who are performing lower on summative assessments. For example, one district leader in Massachusetts added additional teachers and literacy tutors to supplement middle and high schools in the district and help increase literacy scores in response to lower-than-expected scores on the English language arts (ELA) statewide assessment. Another district leader from Tennessee reapportioned instructional coaches to spend more time specifically in grades four and five due to assessment data showing a lack of literacy skills in the upper elementary grades and an influx of multilingual learner (MLL) students in those grades. By utilizing statewide summative assessment data to examine the gaps in performance, district leaders can allocate extra personnel to support educators in improving instructional practices and increasing academic performance for students who need it the most.

“We’re very intentionally looking at the breakdown of our subgroups of students and seeing where gaps are actually growing and what we are going to have to fund differently ... having those conversations to [figure] out what we fund is how we most use the state testing data [I]n my opinion, why we have state accountability is to better make district decisions or high-level decisions.”

District Leader from Tennessee

Funding for unique needs

District leaders use statewide summative assessment data to advocate for, disburse, and adjust school and program funding to address the instructional needs in their district. They also utilize statewide summative assessment data to identify lower-performing schools and divert additional discretionary funding for school leaders to use on additional resources, such as paid time for training, additional paraeducators, or afterschool tutoring.

Curriculum

Statewide summative assessment data is also used to guide curriculum and material adjustments within the district, including implementing a new curriculum and determining needs for supplemental educational technology. For example, a district leader from Massachusetts piloted what they

described as a culturally responsive, rigorous literacy program in their district based on the statewide summative assessment (MCAS) data that indicated a need for additional support for their students. Another district leader from Illinois explained that their district’s instructional faculty determined next year’s instructional plan based on the incoming class’s statewide assessment scores.

Scheduling

District leaders use statewide assessment data to determine course offerings and make scheduling decisions. For example, one district leader in Massachusetts explained that to address low proficiency scores on ELA phonics questions, district elementary schools implemented an extra block of specific and explicit phonics foundational skills instruction in addition to the existing literacy block. A district leader from Washington changed course placement for accelerated math pathways in middle school to better teach sixth-eighth grade math to students before moving to advanced algebra options based on math summative assessment data indicating a gap in pre-Algebra math skills.

Professional development

By examining statewide summative assessment data, district leaders can identify potential professional development opportunities. Trends in the data can help identify teachers who would benefit from instructional coaches, additional curriculum training, or other resources to better support their students academically. For instance, one district leader from Massachusetts shared that low ELA summative assessment scores prompted their district to invest in partnering with an outside organization to offer core teacher development work in the science of reading for teachers of grades 6–12.

Key Finding

Parents overwhelmingly see value in the ways district leaders are already using state assessment results, and they value assessments more when they know the data is used to get resources to struggling students. Moreover, engaging families about these uses improves their perceptions of assessments, even among parents who dislike assessments.

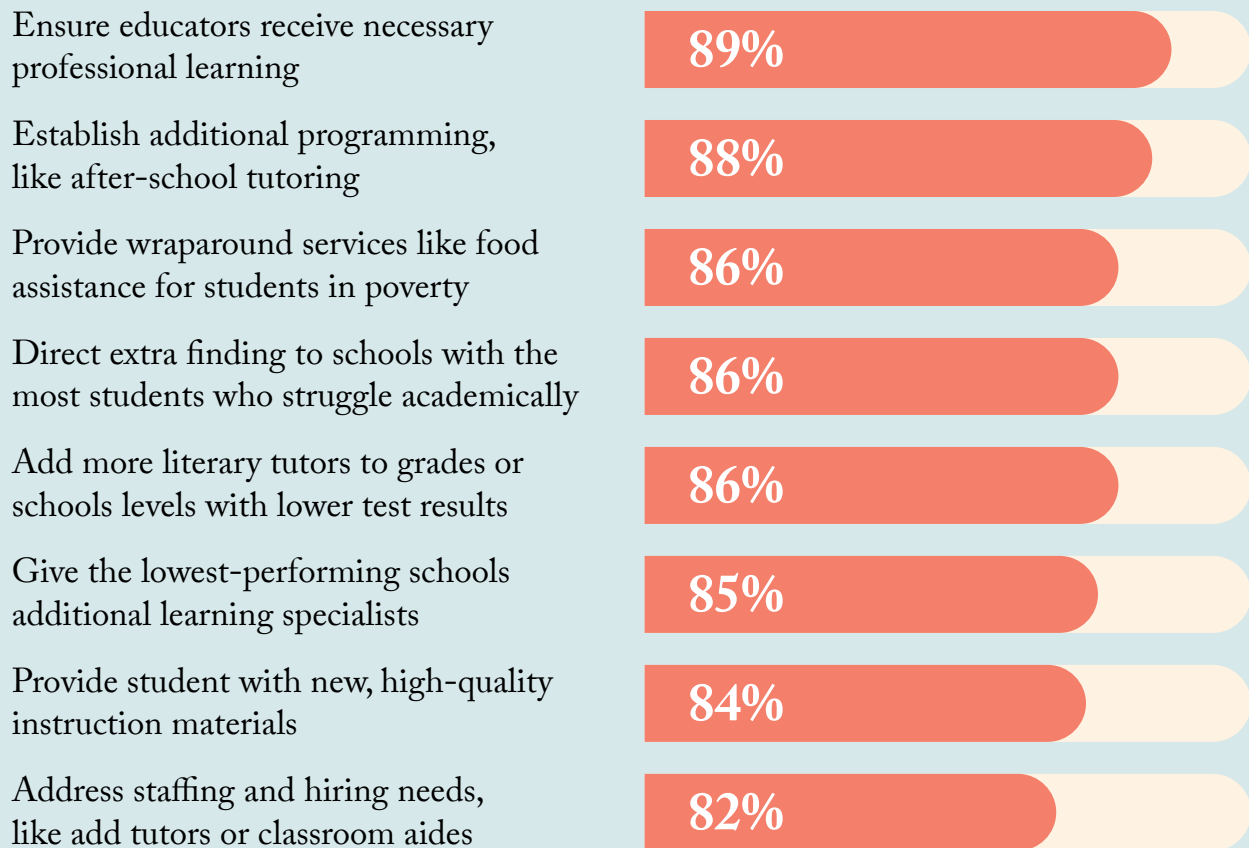
Most of the parents we surveyed (77%) believe statewide academic tests, in general, are a valuable way to measure their child's academic progress and identify areas for growth. Notably, support for statewide assessments was similar across demographic groups and political ideologies. Furthermore, over half of parents (57%) said statewide assessments would be more valuable if the data were used to ensure that schools receive the resources they need to provide academic support programs for all students who are struggling.

Even among parents who feel that statewide assessments have more downsides than benefits, 50% said they would see assessments as more valuable if the data were used to support struggling students. This finding underscores the impact of the knowledge gap that exists between district leaders and families and the need for greater communication on how this data is used. Parents might view statewide summative assessments as more valuable if district leaders explicitly communicate how assessment data is used in resource allocation decision-making to reduce gaps in academic achievement. For example, more parents found statewide assessments valuable when they were given specific examples of types of funding and support decisions district leaders have made based, in part, on the results of annual state academic tests.

Overall, more than eight in 10 parents believe that state test data should be used to send additional resources to schools and students with the most need and to guide decisions about how and where to best allocate resources. As illustrated in the table below, most parents are in favor of how district leaders utilize assessment data to make specific resource allocation decisions. Each option presented to the parents in the poll was an actual example of actions driven by analysis of assessment data from our district leader respondents.

More than 8 in 10 parents agree that assessment data should drive actions that help students

Parents say state test data should be used to...



District-level leaders noted that delays in releasing summative assessment data don't usually allow them to use the current year's state testing data when creating the next year's school budget or school improvement plans, which are usually finalized by spring, while statewide assessment data for the current year is released during summer or fall. Some leaders indicated that they might adjust the use of budgeted funds once statewide summative assessment data is released, while remaining within the constraints of the already approved and finalized budget. District leaders from two states, Illinois and Washington, noted that they have received statewide assessment data more quickly in recent years, and a district leader from Washington explained that receiving statewide assessment data earlier can be a game changer.

Key Finding

District leaders said the timing of state assessments and delays in the delivery of results limit their ability to more effectively use the data to address inequities. Similarly, not all parents received information about their child's assessment results, limiting their ability to understand if their student needed additional academic supports.

Accordingly, district leaders utilize other sources of data collected throughout the school year, such as the academic performance and nonacademic data that makes up the larger information ecosystem mentioned in the first finding. Most of the district leaders we talked to also endorse the idea of smaller, more frequent state testing throughout the year to increase the timeliness of the data and allow educators to use the data to modify student learning plans and resource allocation decisions in the current year.

Results from the parent poll show that not all parents receive their child's statewide summative assessment results. Of the parents who indicated that their child took a statewide assessment, 19% of them said they did not receive any information about their child's assessment results. Furthermore, 37% indicated that their child's school did not offer to discuss their child's statewide student achievement test results to help them understand the results. Consequently, families are often not able to fully understand or utilize potentially valuable statewide assessment data, including whether their child is on track for their grade level, how their child's scores compare to statewide average scores, or whether there are specific areas in which their child did well or could improve with additional supports.

“It's gotten better in probably the last, gosh, two or three years since we've actually been able to get the data back before the end of the school year. I think that has been helpful because I feel like in the past you spend a lot of time in the spring testing and then no one gets anything until October and everyone's like, I don't even know what this is, what was this? Oh yeah, you did this six months ago. So it felt really, really removed. And not that it still can't be useful, but it just felt disconnected, especially in the elementary school where those teachers pass those kids on. If you're a fifth-grade teacher, those kids aren't even in your building anymore ... So I feel like having the data back faster really helps with making it actually more, I'd say, actionable. We would hope that we do all this testing and spend all this time testing so that we can improve the learning experience for kids. And so this actually gives teachers an opportunity to do that.”

District Leader from Washington

Key Finding

District leaders share assessment results primarily via written reports provided by the state, delegating any additional communication to individual school leaders and educators.

Simultaneously, parents indicate that the most helpful strategies for sharing results are through an online portal, discussions with their child's teachers, and mailed reports.

While perhaps not a universal experience, the district leaders that we talked to said that they use multiple methods to communicate with parents and families about the results of statewide assessments. The most commonly cited method of communication was written correspondence sent home to parents, such as a one- to two-page score report, usually published by the state. And 88% of parents polled indicated that receiving a printed report with their child's test results is helpful.

However, when asked about strategies for sharing results, an overwhelming majority of parents (89%) also said that having access to their child's test results through an online portal or discussing their child's scores at a parent-teacher conference is helpful. Yet only 72% of parents said that their child's school or district provided them access to their child's test results through an online portal. Additionally, as mentioned before, only two-thirds of parents who received their child's results were offered an opportunity to discuss these results with someone from their child's school. Therefore, there are additional methods, beyond mailing test results home, that parents and families find useful for understanding their child's statewide assessment results, which are not being employed by all districts.

District leaders acknowledged that statewide assessment data can be confusing for staff and families. They emphasized the need to incorporate various methods for explaining score reports, communicate the importance of the data in evaluating how their child is meeting state standards, and share how the district is working to better support their child's success on statewide assessments. Yet, few district leaders provided examples of how they help families better understand statewide assessments and result reports. Two district leaders said they provide translated score reports in top non-English languages spoken in their districts, as their state only provides the reports in English. Another district developed additional materials within the parent portal to help parents better interpret the data and piloted these materials with parents in the district.

Some districts provide school leaders with accessible presentation and conversation points about statewide assessment results to discuss with families during school town halls, community round tables, and parent advisory council meetings. In one district, leaders hired data coaches to work with school staff on explaining assessment data and how to interpret it. Each school also submitted evidence of artifacts they're using to inform families about score reports and made copies available to district leaders if parents contact the district with questions about assessments. Other districts have students give presentations or data reports to their families about their own test results and set test score goals.

“We’ve developed some materials, beyond what the state has done, to help [parents] understand not just their state, but district assessment data that’s available. When they access our portal, there are links to help them interpret the data, but a lot of it comes down to the school reaching out. There were some limitations in the visualizations that were available in the student information system, so we have a data warehouse system. We developed a more illustrative report to show comprehensive data for each student. We did some focus groups with families to help us in the design of those, but then we also did some . . . public forums where any parent could log in and we walked through the data systems with them and how to interpret reports. That being said, participation in those meetings has been limited, but what we’ve done is push out this report and told schools to utilize it in parent-teacher meetings as an additional resource [to help] them understand the results.”

District Leader from Tennessee

By providing more interactive and collaborative methods for presenting summative statewide assessment data, some district leaders are facilitating discussions between educators and families rather than relying solely on mailed result reports. These discussions can enhance teachers’ and parents’ understanding and use of assessment data to monitor students’ academic progress and identify any potential need for additional support. Overall, many district-level leaders we talked to indicated that they should improve their efforts to engage parents and families in understanding the results of statewide summative assessments and what those results mean for their child. A recent [EdTrust report](#) provides promising practices and recommendations for designing state assessment result reports and integrating the results into asset-based conversations between educators and students and families.

Key Finding

Parents want to be involved in decisions about how state assessment results are used to address their child’s needs.

Yet district leaders across the country are using a limited set of techniques to engage families in these conversations, such as administering a survey to collect families’ thoughts on proposed resource allocation decisions, holding monthly town hall meetings to share school improvement plans, or creating parent advisory councils. Parents find some of these techniques more helpful than others.

When asked how likely they would be to participate in opportunities to engage in resource allocation decision-making with their child’s school or district, 82% of parents

indicated that they were very or somewhat likely to complete a survey sharing their thoughts on the types of programs or supports that are offered or could be offered in their child’s school. The likelihood of participation was lower for more direct or time-consuming engagement opportunities, but most parents expressed interest in engaging in school district resource allocation decision-making. Notably, the percentages of parents likely to participate in each engagement opportunity were similar among white, Black, and Latino parents as well as across all income levels.

Engagement Opportunity	% of Parents Very or Somewhat Likely to Participate
Complete a survey sharing your thoughts on the type of programs or supports that are offered or could be offered in your child’s school	82%
Attend monthly meetings designed to share information with families about how your child’s school is working to improve	69%
Join a parent advisory council that provides direct feedback on proposals for investments and other decisions being considered by your district	64%
Publicly speak up to provide feedback at a meeting where leaders are presenting plans for your child’s school	62%
Participate in a training program to become a parent leader who can help other parents to understand state test score reports	61%

District leaders emphasized the bidirectional nature of school and family relationships and highlighted some techniques to engage parents and families regarding statewide summative assessment data. In one district, individual schools hold monthly meetings with families to share data and school improvement plans.

“We have schools that survey their families, you know, what are you hearing? What do you care about? And really trying to understand in the partnership between a school and a family, what a family’s really looking for. I think we make a lot of assumptions sometimes that families care about these things, when they actually care about those things, but nobody’s slowing down to ask families.”

District Leader from Massachusetts

Another district is working with consultants to build relationships with families and empower families to engage in decision-making discussions.

“I feel like communicating data is really important, but the first part of that is building relationships with families and empowering families... What we’re trying to do there is build our school’s capacity to understand that, [while] the data [is important], what do families care about? What do families really want to know about their school and the progress of their school? And you’re not going to know that if you just ask families to leave their kid at the door and then you close the doors and don’t ever build that relationship.”

District Leader from Massachusetts

Overall, though, many district-level leaders indicated that they should do a better job of engaging parents and families in resource-allocation decisions based on statewide assessment data or other data. They acknowledge that one of the barriers to school-family engagement is figuring out how to meet parents and families where they are and in a manner that works best for them. Additionally, leaders recognize that, even when resource allocation decisions are communicated broadly to the public, there is often little focus on the specifics of how a decision was made, what prompted it, and how statewide assessment data (or any other data) might have contributed to the decision.

Recommendations for Advocates



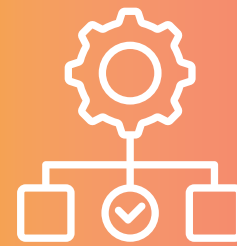
Our district leader interviews and parent poll questions not only confirm the knowledge gap regarding the use of summative assessment data, but they also provide clear evidence of how district leaders are using this data and how parents wish to be engaged. They also highlight that bridging this gap — showing how this data is used to advance the equitable distribution of resources — increases parents’ perceived value of summative assessments. Based on these results, we believe educational equity advocates should do the following to help close this information divide and build support for assessments:

- **Integrate examples of assessment data-driven allocation decisions into our assessment messaging.** While our collective casemaking for summative assessments has always highlighted the intended uses of results, we’ve often failed to provide evidence of how this is happening in practice. The use cases shared by district leaders can make the value of assessments more tangible for policymakers, educators, families, and community members.
- **Work with school and district leaders on public communication efforts.** Since the primary communications that parents and families receive on assessment data and results will continue to come from state, district, and school officials, advocates should partner with education leaders to hone the district’s messaging. Advocates can play a leading role in helping officials connect the dots between assessment results, resources flowing to support investments that are community priorities, and — ideally — improved student outcomes.
- **Urge school and district leaders to expand the methods they use to share the results of summative assessments.** Our findings show that many parents feel they aren’t receiving enough support to understand their child’s assessment results. But they also highlight ways to improve the sharing of results — including increasing online access to results and discussing them during parent-teacher conferences. A recent [EdTrust report](#) provides more details on conducting asset-based conversations about assessment results and how states can change digital reports to enhance understanding of these results.
- **Push school and district leaders to more authentically and consistently engage families in data-driven decision-making.** Our polling showed that most parents across demographic groups would welcome opportunities to engage in direct or time-intensive discussions about how to target resources based on data. However, schools

and districts may need to lay the groundwork for these opportunities by building internal structures and capacity or developing trust with communities. [The Alliance for Resource Equity](#) highlights ways in which districts can build a strong foundation for effective family engagement.

- **Work with state leaders to provide funding and evidence-based guidance to support school and district communication and engagement around assessment results.** Developing authentic family engagement practices can be especially challenging for districts with limited resources. Advocates should urge lawmakers to consider family engagement a crucial use of education dollars when evaluating the adequacy of state education funding formulas. Additionally, dedicated SEA funding to support guidance can ensure that local communication regarding assessment results aligns with best practices for family engagement and the state’s vision for assessment.
- **Advocate for changes to state policy that provide school and district leaders, educators, students, and families with more timely data on student academic performance.** District leaders universally cited the timing of assessment results as a limitation on their ability to use data to make more strategic decisions, particularly around school budgets or school improvement plans. States could require that results be shared with district and school leaders before the end of the school year to facilitate better planning for summer and the upcoming school year. Additionally, states could consider moving to a through-year assessment model. This model provides data on how students are performing against grade-level standards at multiple points during the school year, which can inform changes to instruction or the targeting of resources to address identified skill gaps.

Methodology



District Leader Interviews

EdTrust and the Collaborative for Student Success conducted a series of one-on-one and small group interviews with 19 district level education leaders — including school board members and school district/administration officials across five states: MA, IL, TN, TX, and WA. All participants were serving in an official capacity related to statewide assessments within a public school district where at least 50% of the students were students of color (e.g., Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, etc.), students from low-income backgrounds, and/or students who are English learners.

As this study is a follow up to [EdTrust's Future of Assessments](#) focus groups, participant recruitment started with district leaders who participated in that study. We also recruited participants via partner organizations. Participants were recruited via email, and those who completed the interview were offered compensation for their time. District leaders were assured that their responses would remain anonymous, with their comments attributed only to their district's state.

Parent Poll

EdTrust and the Collaborative for Student Success partnered with National Parents Union, embedding seven questions directly connected to the findings from our conversations with district leaders into a regularly occurring poll. These questions were designed to understand how parents receive information about their child's state assessment results and how districts engage with them in using those results to target resources. The questions also aimed to gather their preferences on how they would like to be engaged. Other questions in the poll also asked parents about their views on state assessments.

The online poll was conducted by Echelon Insights from May 7 – 11, 2024, in English, with a sample of 1,518 parents of public school students in grades kindergarten through 12 nationwide. Results were weighted by Echelon to population benchmarks derived from the American Community Survey and US Census Bureau and have a margin of error of +/- 2.8 percentage points. Full results can be found at nationalparentsunion.org.