

EDUCATION ASSESSMENT, ACCOUNTABILITY &



September 2022:
An Interim Report



National
Urban League

UNIDOSUS
STRONGER COMMUNITIES. STRONGER AMERICA.

Emerging Areas of Agreement for the Future of Assessment and Accountability.

The National Urban League (NUL) is one of the nation's most prominent civil rights organizations focused on empowering the African American community and other underserved communities. NUL aims to remove barriers and provide opportunities through direct program approaches, research, policy, and engagement around important and seemingly intractable issues that impede communities from thriving. For over 100 years, NUL has engaged in this work alongside our 90+ regional affiliates, serving over 300 communities in 37 states in an effort to realize a more equitable society whereby one's circumstances at birth do not predict their life outcomes.

UnidosUS (UUS), previously known as NCLR (National Council of La Raza), is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers at the national and local levels. For more than 50 years, UUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration and a desire to make our country stronger.

The Future of Assessment and Accountability Project.

From a civil rights perspective, annual statewide standardized assessments have revealed longstanding disparities in academic opportunities and outcomes for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, learners of English, and students with disabilities.

As such, our two leading civil rights organizations, the NUL and UUS, who have long fought together and alongside our communities to advance education equity and hold systems accountable, are committed to protecting the role of assessments as an important equity guardrail in federal law. At the same time, we believe that much of the accountability systems and interventions that have been implemented over the past two decades have not proven particularly useful in improving student outcomes for these populations.

Although there has always been a debate about the role of statewide assessments, the issue became a flashpoint in the education field when disruptions caused by the pandemic elevated calls to eliminate the mandated statewide assessments altogether. While the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) upheld the requirement for the 2021-2022 school year (with an optional state waiver application)¹, the debate over assessments and accountability has not dissipated.

The Education Field Is Now Grappling With What the Future of Assessments and Accountability May Hold in the Long Term.

Because it is so critical that the civil rights community be meaningfully represented in this ongoing dialogue, we must be proactive in presenting a clear vision that brings alignment amongst stakeholders and across the civil rights and equity advocacy/policy community even though we acknowledge that there are deep disagreements and differing perspectives on what the future should hold.



¹ This followed USED waiving assessment and accountability in the spring of 2020 for the first time since No Child Left Behind began in 2002, and then in 2020-21 waiving accountability requirements.

We Know From Experience That Decisions and Investments Made Now Will Have Long-Term Implications, Not Just for Students of Color but for the Nation as a Whole.

With this in mind, and through our advocacy, engagement, and policy work, we set our intentions on:

- Advancing equity, excellence, and innovation in the P-16 education system
- Leading more substantively
- Diversifying stakeholder coalitions
- Communicating relevant messages more broadly and effectively.

We then coordinated a learning process that would allow us to set a path that intentionally:

- Engages a wide set of stakeholders in the best interest of young people of color
- Identifies and upends inequity
- Advances better child and youth outcomes

As Part of This Multi-Pronged Effort, We Engaged Dax-Dev, a Social-Impact Consulting Agency, to Facilitate a Series of Closed-Door Sense-Making Roundtables With a Group of Experts and Leaders Within the Civil Rights and Education Equity Community.

The aim of these roundtables was to generate authentic dialogue that would yield points of alignment, divergence, and unresolved questions for future consideration.

Early in the roundtable process, Insight Policy Research provided the group with a briefing of its preliminary findings from over 60 focus groups and interviews with:

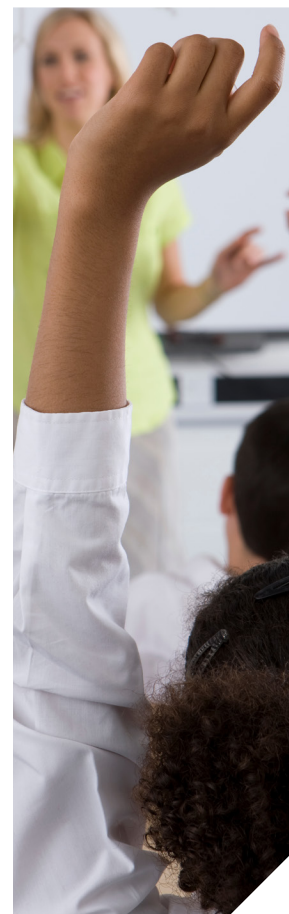
- Black and Brown Students
- Parents and Guardians
- Teachers and Youth Development Staff
- High School and College Admissions Counselors
- Assessment Directors and State Board of Education Members
- Researchers
- Education Equity Leaders and Civil Rights Leaders

This briefing proved pivotal as it provided a rich set of voices and perspectives from people not typically heard from in education policy discussions such as students and parents or those who are often sidelined

“

My standardized test scores never accurately reflect how well I can do...”

— STUDENT



in the assessment and accountability debate. Thereafter, we anchored our discussions in the lived experiences of those who are the most marginalized.

Likewise, interacting with experts and thought leaders provided the group with valuable, evidence-based perspectives that helped to support the necessary future work we envision and what we want the group to feel empowered to engage in.

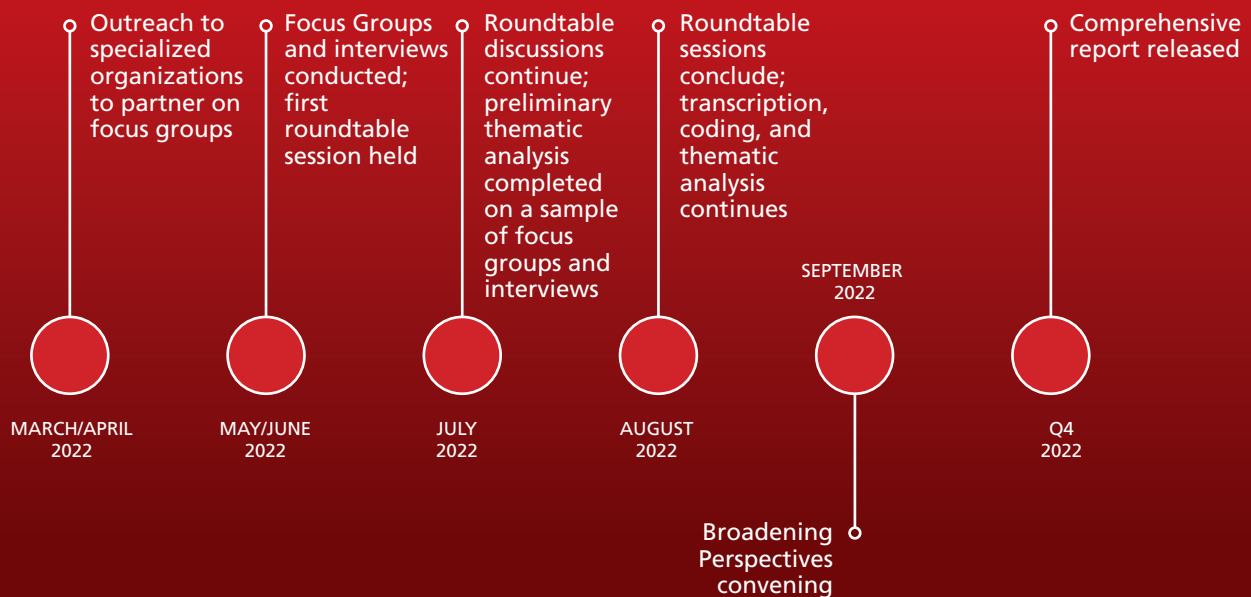
Through 16+ Hours of Working Sessions Across Four Roundtables in July and August, Several Areas of Agreement Emerged, the Findings of Which Are Distilled in This Interim Report.

While we acknowledge that a) at least some of the ideas presented here already exist, at least in principle, in pockets of our current education paradigms and b) additional questions and issues need to be explored in each of these proposed pillars, this conceptual architecture is essential.

Once refined and merged with the research findings from the listening sessions and interviews, the full report to come will provide policymakers, advocates at all levels, and education professionals with a number of ideas, priorities, and open questions for the nation as we consider the future of assessment and accountability.



Timeline



Four Roundtables—July/August 2022

SESSION

1

Focus

- To build community amongst a group of experts
- To examine the history of assessments and accountability
- To compare the current and aspirational state

Key Takeaways

- Many historical policies were intended to bring equity to students of color as a civil rights issue, but the focus on compliance—rather than resources, supports, and hearts and minds—limited equitable implementation.
- Implementation of the theory of action of accountability was intended to yield equitable results but was rooted in compliance-based policies and practices, an unwillingness to disrupt the testing and research industries, and a lack of consideration for the essential influence of race and ethnicity.
- We envision a shift toward an assessment system with accessible, usable, low-burden data, and enhanced cultural relevance (e.g., representative testing questions and methodologies that account for a variety of cultural experiences and that recognize multiple ways of knowing and being).

SESSION

2

Focus

- To align on a definition of the problem
- To envision the aspirational state
- To acknowledge the unintended consequences of policy implementation
- To review Insight Policy Research’s presentation of its initial findings from focus groups comprised of educators, caregivers, and students

Key Takeaways

- Assessment should be a tool for support, not punishment.
- Continuous improvement should focus on quality learning environments that optimize relationships, safety, belonging, and mattering. These environments would serve as a foundation for high-quality instructions leading to student engagement, skills, and competencies.
- In order to ensure reciprocal accountability, we need to shift the focus more towards conditions of learning, rather than standardized assessments.

SESSION

3

Focus

- To gain specificity in the aspirational state
- To identify levers and supports necessary to create the aspirational state
- To begin modeling the steps toward aspirational impact

Key Takeaways

- The group designed maps to advance reciprocal accountability throughout the system by using three levers for impact—high-quality educators, high-quality educational environments, and innovative student assessments—tied to accountability models that expand beyond academic indicators to include opportunity-to-learn indicators.
- Each level of the system and the actors within it should play a role in enacting the future of assessment and accountability across local, state, and federal levels.

SESSION

4

Focus

- To align definitions of assessment and accountability
- To inform dialogue and negotiation in the next phase



All this low achievement... this failure... is a collective choice by policymakers to perpetuate the system... it does not have to be this way."

— CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER



Areas Of Common Agreement

PILLAR I:

Our Education System(s) Should Consistently Implement Broadened Definitions of Success

Our definition of success needs to be broadened to include measures of success beyond academics to broader competencies, attitudes, and aptitudes that are social, emotional, and cognitive. The focus on success should be shifted to creating supportive environments at the classroom, school, community, and system levels, including learning environments outside the school that allow children and youth to thrive.

Guiding Principles

- Success is contextualized and informed by culture, community, and family. Any measure of success that takes into account all groups of students is seen as valid and relevant by students, families, and communities and acknowledges barriers or biases that may be obstacles for certain groups.
- Engagement is a precondition and an active element of learning. When the environment is right, young people will engage; when they are engaged, they will learn. Threatening environments dampen the capacity and motivation to succeed.

Actionable Items

- Educational systems turn academic principles into broader operational, whole child models rather than prescriptive policies and practices. Further context, description, examples, and opportunities to put these principles into action at the classroom, school, and system levels will support educators as they support students.
- Education systems are transparent to students and their families about the competencies

and skills required to reach a desired outcome. Acknowledging support and competency growth occurring outside of the classroom, educators, families, and students co-create student-centered learning plans with individualized learning goals that allow students to have increased awareness and ownership over their learning trajectory. Families understand what to expect of the learning environment and what to look for as evidence of student engagement, progress, and success.



The research in the science of learning confirms that student behavior is susceptible to relationships and contexts...it isn't just that our kids aren't being taught the fundamentals... it's that they may not feel safe showing what they know."

— ROUNDTABLE MEMBER

PILLAR II:

Our Education Indicators and Assessments, No Matter the Setting, Should Be Grounded in Continuous Improvement and Accountability.

- Student formative assessments (assessments that guide instruction) are culturally relevant, aligned to state academic standards, and used to continuously improve day-to-day instruction.
- Student summative assessments are culturally relevant, actively reflect what students have been taught, and are aligned to state academic standards.
- School quality measures should encompass social and emotional learning, school climate, teacher capacity and working conditions, and resource audits.

Guiding Principles

- Timely and disaggregated student performance data drives both continuous growth and proficiency.
- Assessments, curriculum, standards, preparation, ongoing training, and accountability are all aligned.

Actionable Items

- More high-quality preparation for educators across all settings is sought to enable better instruction, more robust supports, more effective use of data, and to promote better collaboration and connectedness. Such preparation includes data proficiency and instruction, as well as the creation and selection of curriculum and assessments that are standards-aligned.
- Student data is used throughout the year to provide individualized support through evidence-based interventions.



We need standards for establishing the learning experiences that get to an integrated set of student outcomes. The connection between relationships, experiences, and competencies has to be explicit.”

— ROUNDTABLE MEMBER



PILLAR III:

Our Systems of Support Should Be Strengthened to Enhance Shared Accountability That Centers Equity and Promotes Transparency and Continuous, Targeted Improvement.

- The system demonstrates a better balance between federal, state, and local accountability, with clear purpose(s), an infrastructure of support, and engagement of a broad set of outcomes and a diverse set of stakeholders.
- Local accountability builds capacity, supports educators, expands opportunity, and assures that funding is distributed so that every student has the supports they need to thrive.
- Multi-faceted state accountability centers equity and operates within federal equity guardrails.
- Develop and disseminate timely, transparent school and community data that is used to better understand root causes, track longitudinally, and utilize for multi-levelled equitable accountability.

Guiding Principles

- Accountability is a shared responsibility across all levels of the education system. The well-being and thriving of children and youth are the responsibility of an ecosystem of settings that provide a broad set of opportunities and supports.
- Accountability is transparently actualized to invest in identified student groups and education system success.
- Accountability is reframed from something punitive to multi-levelled support.
- Assessments, curriculum, standards, preparation, ongoing training, and accountability are all aligned.

Actionable Items

- Extend and deepen regional hubs of support and opportunity to student groups, schools, and states by way of targeted and tailored interventions aligned to civil rights principles.



We should use accountability to support and improve versus to punish and shame.”

— ROUNDTABLE MEMBER



PILLAR IV:

Historically Marginalized Communities, Families, and Youth Should Have a Greater Voice and Ownership in Assessment and Accountability.

- Historically marginalized groups and stakeholders are engaged and consulted when assessment and accountability processes are being created, refined, and implemented so that they agree with those processes and their intended goals.
- Historically marginalized groups are centered on decisions about school/district priorities, resource allocation, and the dissemination and use of data.
- Schools and districts make meaningful space and time for families who have less availability.
- Schools and districts make meaningful space and time, and, if necessary, allot resources for education equity advocates to provide training to families on equitable accountability and advocacy as well as support for engaging their learners at home.

Guiding Principles

- The purpose of an assessment (be it individual student, educator, school, district, or state) should be clear and known to all stakeholders. The design, implementation, and execution of assessment and accountability measures must incorporate the voices of, and be culturally relevant to, students and families.²
- The reporting of all assessments, not just district and statewide, is timely, relevant, transparent, and actionable.
 - This data is used to engage stakeholders, including community leaders, school leaders, families, and teachers in actions to improve results for all subgroups.

- This engagement takes place at times and places that are accessible for the most marginalized families.

Actionable Items

- Establish a common understanding of language around assessment and accountability with youth, family, and other community stakeholders, one that includes the community itself as an accountability partner for student success, not just an accountability holder.
- Earmark more statutorily protected resources for K-12 parent/family/community engagement, inclusion, and agency.



Parent engagement means that parents are partnered with and by schools to make meaningful contributions to the way their children are educated and to shape positive school environments...

— ROUNDTABLE MEMBER

²Strong example of culturally responsive pedagogy: <https://www.assessmentforlearningproject.org/2019/09/05/culturally-responsive-assessment-practices-through-na-hopena-a%CA%BB0-ha/>

Areas Of Divergence

Early in our roundtable discussion, we polled the group to explore its perspectives on several high-profile issues and themes that have animated the assessments and accountability debates to date. The exercise was valuable insofar as it revealed overwhelming consensus within the key areas that eventually evolved into agreement areas above. Our work thereafter was drilling down and fleshing out more details.

Interestingly, the group's only significant point of divergence was with regard to No Child Left Behind (NCLB). When asked if the NCLB was successful, the group was nearly split with 57% disagreeing and 43 percent agreeing with the statement. Further discussion on the matter revealed that some group members agreed because NCLB started a national conversation around which children were being "left behind,"

and the law catapulted future policies that have at least narrowed state standardized assessment outcomes to some degree. At the same time, there was a recognition of the harm and ineffectualness that NCLB perpetuated, including school closures, a narrow focus on standardized test outcomes that lead to a 'teach to the test' culture and prescriptive school improvement identification and intervention. This issue is important to lift up and perhaps consider in future discussions because even for group members that agreed NCLB was somewhat successful, there was a recognition of extensive unintended and negative consequences—much of which remain in our assessment and accountability culture—that we will need to be mindful of as we imagine a new future for assessment and accountability.

Questions for Deeper Exploration

Within each pillar, the group surfaced key questions that require further discussion. In some instances, these questions reflect an awareness that well-intentioned reforms tend to generate unintended consequences that require a thorough cost-benefit analysis. In other instances, these questions are tactical and require other voices and perspectives in the conversation to really understand the nuances and complexities.³

Pillar I:

1. How can we ensure a commitment over time to allow for broadened definitions of teaching, learning, education, and success to be fully utilized, implemented, and evaluated?
2. How can we build trust within communities to allow for a shift from traditional measures of success and assessment to those focused on whole child learning and opportunities to learn, while building an adaptability to change and move towards holistic evaluations of the learning environment?
3. How can we connect the various settings that make up educational experiences and the various ways in which students demonstrate ways of knowing and learning?

³It is likely that even more questions will emerge as more minds converge around this document.

Pillar II:

1. How should educator and learner assessments be effectuated to advance the quality of experiences for children and youth across settings?
2. What are the implications of an increased focus on continuous improvement in assessment for school accountability, specifically through state standardized exams?

Pillar III:

1. How can we expand accountability to shift mindsets and motivate behavior, systems, and culture change?

Pillar IV:

1. How do we ensure equity in lifting up voices across communities and families?
2. How do we shape a future in which families and communities serve as accountability partners alongside educators?
3. How do we ensure that youth voice is uplifted in these discussions without tokenizing or fetishizing young people?
4. How do education equity advocates engage with family and community groups that seek to roll back or eliminate equity measures in the name of parental and First Amendment rights?

An Approach Grounded in Civil Rights and Equity

If civil rights and equity are the primary focus of the next generation of assessment and accountability, the working group suggests that the nation's shared dialogue and deliberations should emphasize the following:

1. **LEGAL**—Develop legal principles and frameworks, legally intervening as necessary, to hold districts, state, and the federal government accountable to the shared values articulated by the civil rights community.
2. **EQUITABLE OVERSIGHT**—Advance equitable oversight through mechanisms such as elected equity boards and provision of training to school boards in educational equity principles.
3. **DATA**—Advance access to, and highlight educational equity data around, assessment and accountability, guiding disaggregation practices, and supporting community use of data.
4. **COMMUNITY**—Elevate experiences of marginalized students, families, and communities to advance equitable opportunities and propose culturally relevant ideas and strategies. Actively partner with families to advocate for the implementation of what is written into policy.
5. **COMMUNICATION**—Uplift positive changes and advance counternarratives in the face of opposition to advocate with partners at the local, state, and national levels.

Next Steps.

Following the September 13th *Broadening Perspectives* convening, our NUL and UUS teams will work with Dax-Dev to synthesize and integrate insights and feedback as well as research findings from the Insight-led listening sessions and interviews to present a vision for the future of assessment and accountability that is grounded in the voices of a diverse group of young people and adults. Once prepared, a report will then be shared in draft form with the original roundtable members for further, real-time iteration and expansion as needed. We will then generate the final comprehensive report from this phase setting forth shared principles, points of tension, open questions, and ideas for further inquiry to achieve the promise of education equity for communities of color.

The areas for further inquiry, areas of concern, and areas of opportunity that we suggest will be based on what we heard and the open questions this phase left us with. These recommendations and principles (design, equity, etc.) will be a part of the fight in the next phase when we will be looking for commonality, agreement, and deep disagreement. Some of this is here in the interim report, but larger, longer, and more complex conversations begin on September 14th. We are encouraged that so many stakeholders are open to further deliberation and dialogue, and we are inviting everyone to the table to develop shared recommendations, frames, and narratives focused on what might be possible rather than doubling down uncritically on what has been.

When the Next Phase Launches on September 14th, We Will Be Eager to Gather General Reactions to not Just the Areas of Agreement, but to the Observations, Themes, and Questions Raised in this Phase.

In what ways could the findings and approaches potentially:

- Lay a foundation for a future in which child and youth success is being redefined?
- Address the inequitable conditions that impact youth development and student learning?
- Empower families?
- Advance cultural relevance?
- Craft a foundation for accurately and equitably measuring the skills and competencies of children and youth?
- Provide supports and interventions targeted to children and young people who could most benefit from reformed strategies and deepened investments?

And, in what ways could the areas of agreement allow us to move away from current approaches to accountability and assessment to imagine and reimagine those that might be more beneficial to children, youth, and families, as well as to the communities which support them and to which they belong?



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