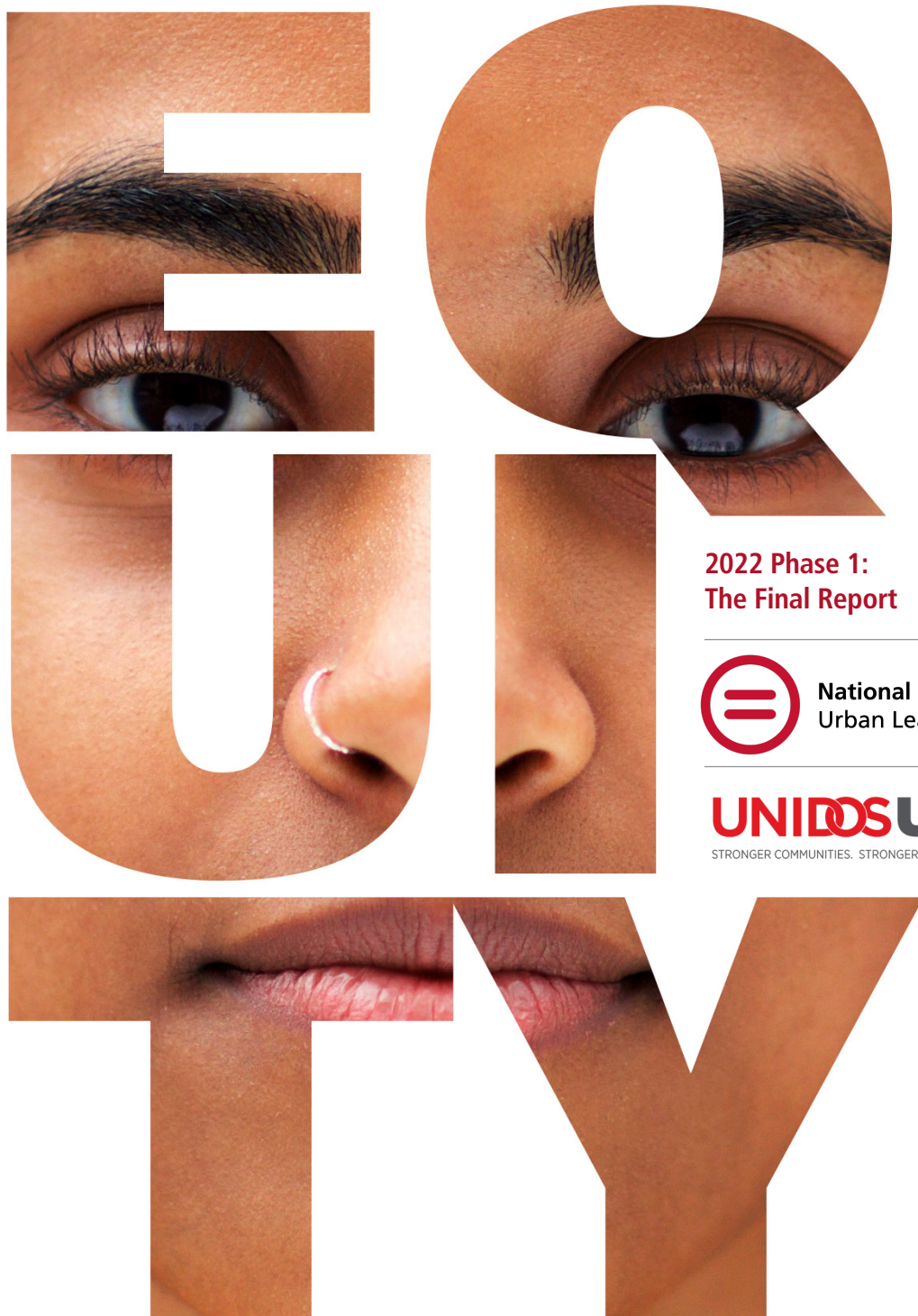


# EDUCATION ASSESSMENT, ACCOUNTABILITY &



2022 Phase 1:  
The Final Report



National  
Urban League

**UNIDOS**US

STRONGER COMMUNITIES. STRONGER AMERICA.

# The Future of Assessment and Accountability (FOAA) Project.

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**The National Urban League** is one of the nation's most prominent civil rights organizations focused on empowering the African American community and other underserved communities. The National Urban League 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, the National Urban League has engaged in this work alongside our 90+ regional affiliates, serving over 300 communities in 36 states and Washington, D.C. in an effort to realize a more equitable society whereby one's circumstances at birth do not predict their life outcomes.

**UnidosUS**, 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, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers at the national and local levels. For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration and a desire to make our country stronger.

# 2022 Phase 1: The Final Report

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**Are you serving  
the politicians when  
students of color are  
subject to inequitable  
performance practices?  
Because you're not  
serving the community,  
the students, or  
the teachers.”**

**—TEACHER**

**We need to see the  
student as an individual,  
not just a test score.”**

**—ADMISSIONS COUNSELOR**

”

## PROLOGUE

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# The Pandemic Widened The Opportunity Gap and We Aim to Close It.

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**While communities worked to recover from the pandemic,** data and stories continued to emerge showing troubling signs of widening opportunity gaps—as a result, the National Urban League and UnidosUS together launched THE FUTURE OF ASSESSMENT & ACCOUNTABILITY (FOAA) PROJECT to reimagine how best to measure student learning and development.

Throughout 2022, the first phase of this project aimed to uplift and center the voices of stakeholders who are too often left out of national policy conversations that impact their lives and experiences with the education system—particularly young people, their families and communities, educators, and youth development workers from historically excluded groups.

To honor an authentic process that intentionally engages these critical voices, the National Urban League and UnidosUS, in collaboration with partner organizations representing these constituencies, hosted a series of listening sessions with a wide range of stakeholders to shed light on the experiences, knowledge, and visions they have for a system of assessment and accountability that will contribute to

improving educational experiences and outcomes for our youth.

While the role of statewide summative assessments in measuring what students know and how testing is used for accountability purposes has been historically debated, the issue became a flashpoint in the education field over the past couple of years, focusing on whether assessments were necessary during the pandemic and beyond. The organizations recognized that the subject of assessment was much more nuanced and complex and deserved meaningful deliberation.

From a civil rights perspective, annual standardized assessments can help to reveal longstanding and continuing disparities in academic opportunity for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and



English learners; and can also serve as an important tool for holding the education system accountable for these outcomes. The National Urban League and UnidosUS, however, also believe that the current system of standardized assessments and accountability measures has not resulted in the closing of opportunity gaps between our most privileged and most marginalized students. If we are to positively and effectively impact the conditions under which our youth are supported in their learning and development, we must be proactive in grappling with these tensions and present a clear vision for the future of assessments and accountability that bring additional coherence and alignment amongst stakeholders from the broader youth development field and across the civil rights and equity policy and advocacy community.

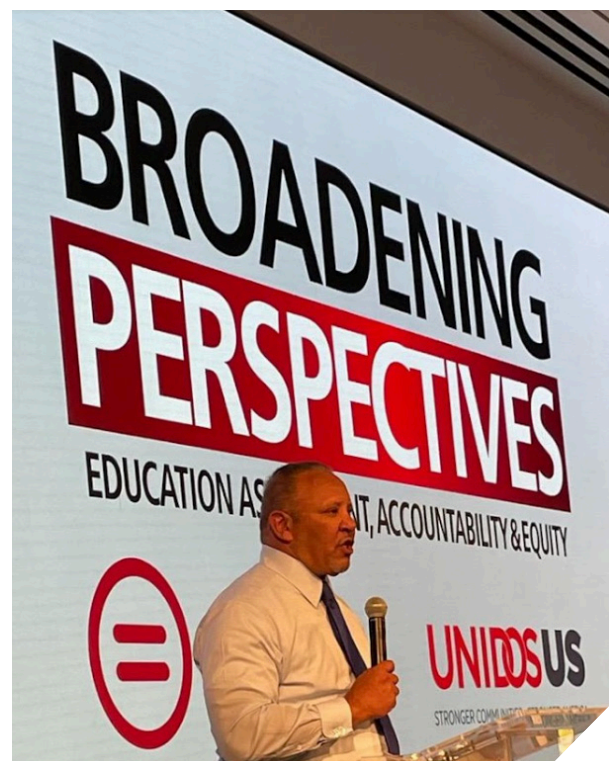
### **This Phase of the Project Sought to Unpack and Help Address Questions Such As:**

- **What should be the features of an improved system of assessment and accountability that centers equity and leads to improved learning experiences and outcomes for underserved students?**
- **How can assessment data be better utilized to drive continuous improvement?**
- **What changes are necessary at a systems level to ensure support and interventions are directed to students who could most benefit from targeted strategies and deepened investments?**

As part of the first phase of this work, the National Urban League and UnidosUS collaborated with partners to conduct focus groups and interviews with Black and brown students, parents and guardians, teachers, youth development staff and leaders, high school and college admissions counselors, assessment directors, state board of education members,

African-American researchers, education equity leaders, and civil rights leaders regarding their experiences and views about assessments and accountability and their vision for what the future of these systems (and practices) should look like. We engaged Insight Policy Research to transcribe and analyze the recordings from these sessions and capture key themes. *Part Two of this report presents the full findings of the focus groups and interviews.*

The National Urban League and UnidosUS also engaged Dax-Dev, a social-impact consulting agency, to facilitate a series of closed-door roundtables in July and August 2022 with a group of experts and leaders with diverse backgrounds and perspectives representing the civil rights and education equity community. The goal of these roundtable conversations was to generate candid dialogue that would yield points of alignment, divergence, and unresolved questions for future consideration. *Key findings from these roundtables, including emerging areas of agreement, can be found in Part Two of this report.*

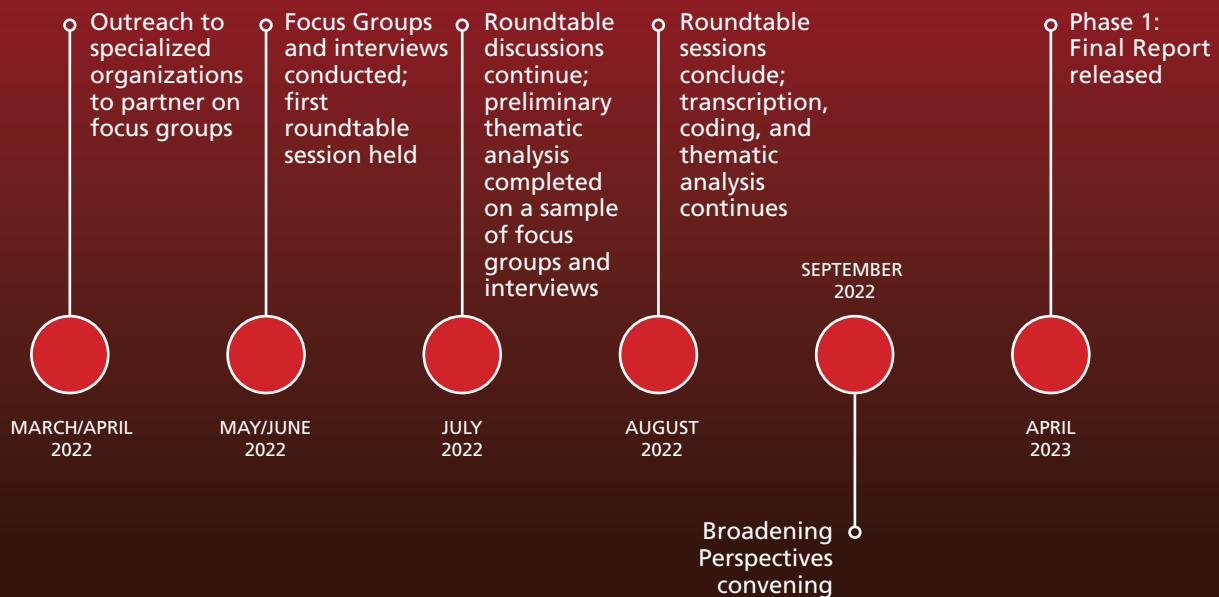


While the findings from the focus groups, interviews, and roundtables are not intended to represent the organizational policy positions of the National Urban League and UnidosUS, they will certainly help guide our civil rights perspectives on the next generation of assessment and accountability to be grounded in the voices of a diverse group of young people and adults, the science of learning and development, and the needs of students as 21st century learners. This project not only served

to bring some of the key problems commonly identified by stakeholders with assessments and accountability to light, but it also provided a space for stakeholders to share what they found to be working within the current system, as well as their aspirations and ideas in finding a better way forward for educational opportunity. To the many partners who have been an integral part of this project and have joined us on this journey of shared learning and discovery—we thank you.

**We owe it to the nation’s children and youth to shift the narrative and center their experiences, needs, and dreams to transform the education system to one that is nurturing, responsive, and supportive. Therefore, we invite you to read the following phase one final report, reflect on the information shared, challenge yourself to broaden your own perspectives, and join the conversation on the future of assessments and accountability to forge an equitable path forward for student success.**

### Timeline



## PART ONE

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# Broadening Perspectives Through Stakeholder Listening Sessions.

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**From May through July 2022**, we organized listening sessions with a wide range of stakeholders in assessment and accountability systems. We heard directly from students, parents, superintendents, advocates, teachers, out-of-school-time staff, civil rights activists, National Urban League leaders, state-level policy and accountability experts, state board of education members, assessment coordinators, psychometricians and researchers, and college admissions counselors and administrators—for a total of 258 people who each participated in a listening session.

All 63 listening sessions were guided by a discussion protocol with questions about assessments and accountability systems. The assessment topics included the use of these systems, their validity and reliability, impacts, and future applications. The accountability systems' topics focused on accountability, the importance of equity, definitions and measures of effectiveness, and strategies to support students.

Our research partner, Insight Policy Research (Insight), analyzed the listening session transcripts to establish common perspectives. Insight used four research questions to guide the project:

- 1. What were the common themes about assessments across stakeholder groups?**
- 2. What were the common themes about accountability systems across stakeholder groups?**

- 3. What were the unique themes about assessments and accountability systems within each stakeholder group?**
- 4. What were the particularly substantive perspectives in each stakeholder group, even if they were expressed by only one or two people?**

The analysis consisted of two stages. In the first stage, Insight collapsed 14 types of stakeholders into 10 stakeholder groups (see Table 1 next page). Collapsing stakeholders into groups with larger numbers of participants facilitated the identification of common themes. In the second stage, Insight conducted a thematic analysis of the transcripts to identify prevalent themes for each stakeholder group and determine which were reoccurring in at least three stakeholder groups.

**The Complexity of the Issues and the Varied Perspectives (even inconsistency) is a Hallmark of the Approach That We Chose, the Framing of the Issues and Opportunities, and the Analysis.**

The thematic analysis used in part one of this final report is ideal for identifying common perspectives across and within community groups. However, some limitations should be considered in interpreting results. Several participants moved in and out of the various identities they held when discussing topics and issues. For example, a researcher spoke explicitly as a parent, and a policymaker spoke on an issue based on previous experience as a teacher. Some inconsistencies also arose in the administration of the listening sessions.

**Table 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LISTENING SESSIONS BY STAKEHOLDER GROUP**

<b>Stakeholder group</b>	<b>Component stakeholder types</b>	<b>Total # of focus groups</b>	<b>Total # of interviews</b>	<b>Total # of participants</b>
Students	Students	9	2	53
Parents and guardians	Parents and guardians	5	4	40
Teachers	Teachers	3	0	16
Out-of-school-time staff	Out-of-school-time staff	3	3	19
Civil Rights activists	Civil Rights activists	1	2	6
Urban League Movement	Urban League Affiliate leaders	2	0	14
Policymakers	Administrators, assessment coordinators, state board of education members, state-level policy and accountability experts	9	0	40
Psychometricians and researchers	Psychometricians and researchers	4	10	30
Counselors	College admissions and high school counselors	2	0	10
Other	Other	4	0	30
<b>All stakeholders</b>		<b>42</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>258</b>

Participants raised and discussed a variety of issues around statewide standardized tests (SSTs) and other forms of assessments used in schools; the use of SSTs and other measures for ensuring accountability in school systems; and the participants' ideas and visions of and hopes for an equitable system of education which ensures that all students thrive. Reoccurring topics from these discussions have been organized loosely into themes of assessment or accountability, including problems and solutions, and unique alternative perspectives are highlighted in callout boxes (see Table 2 below).<sup>1</sup>



**Table 2. SUMMARY OF REOCCURRING THEMES**

<p><b>Assessment Problems &amp; Concerns</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bias in SSTs</li> <li>• Potential unfair impact of narrow or biased SSTs on student opportunity</li> <li>• Psychological impact of assessments and SSTs on students</li> <li>• Weak and uneven understanding of the role and use of SSTs</li> </ul>
<p><b>Assessment Visions of the Future &amp; Solutions</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of alternative types of assessments can better capture student learning</li> <li>• Valuation and consideration of the whole child is needed</li> </ul>
<p><b>Accountability System Problems &amp; Concerns</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overreliance on SST results as the driver of change</li> <li>• Negative effects of inadequate accountability measures on teachers and instruction</li> <li>• Resources not directed where they are most needed</li> </ul>
<p><b>Accountability System Visions of the Future &amp; Solutions</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote equity by valuing student subgroup performance</li> <li>• Ensure multifaceted and shared accountability</li> <li>• Adopt additional measures of school performance</li> <li>• Allocate resources to those who need them most</li> </ul>

Note: Some topics had more themes than others based on the listening session protocols and the participant discussions.

<sup>1</sup> While considerable topical overlap and interdependence occur between issues and solutions, the emerging theme was categorized under assessments when the focus of discussions and perspectives was on the tests or assessments as a method of measuring student knowledge. When the perspectives focused more broadly on the education system, teachers, schools, and communities, the theme was aligned to accountability.



# Reoccurring Themes About Assessments

## PROBLEMS & CONCERNS

### Across Stakeholders Groups

Participants in all groups noted that SSTs are a problematic tool because they are biased. For example, teachers, out-of-school-time staff, policymakers, psychometricians, and researchers, and Urban League Affiliate leaders raised concerns about the cultural bias and the lack of cultural representation in tests, noting that these **tests measure knowledge related to White-American culture** rather than measuring the knowledge of only whom they are supposed to be measuring.

“Let’s be clear, those tests are made for White kids. . . . And so, I think hearing someone who I wouldn’t expect to say that say that, shows that there’s a recognition from a lot of practitioners that there’s something wrong here that exists and that they’re not adequately designed to measure what all kids know and can do.”

—PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND RESEARCHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT

The tests’ failure to reflect the experiences of all students runs the risk of reducing internal validity and alienating students by fostering perceptions of the tests’ lack of relevance.

“The reading on the standardized tests is just subpar to say the least. It’s not inclusive, it’s not reflective of diversity. It’s just most of the time it’s an excerpt from . . . some old White person that these kids can’t connect to.”

—TEACHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Another subtheme related to bias in testing is that **SST scores reflect a student’s ability to effectively take those tests and not a student’s mastery of the material or concepts**. Listening session participants reported that some students have more practice taking long, timed assessments and

### Figure 1. PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED BY STAKEHOLDERS

#### Bias in SSTs

Students, parents, teachers, out-of-school-time staff, civil rights activists, counselors, policymakers, researchers, and National Urban League Affiliate leaders

#### Potential unfair impact of narrow or biased SSTs on student opportunity

Parents, teachers, out-of-school-time staff, civil rights activists, counselors, and researchers

#### Psychological impact of assessments and SSTs on students

Students, parents, teachers, out-of-school-time staff, and civil rights activists

#### Weak and uneven understanding of the role and use of SSTs

Students, parents, out-of-school-time staff, and policymakers

Note: SSTs = statewide standardized tests



receive coaching, which impacts their scores in ways that do not reflect their knowledge or skills in the assessment domain.

**“Some of our brightest students are really bright and get the everyday application of education, but when they sit down for 2 to 3 hours, 4 hours sometimes, they’re taking multiple sections of the test throughout an 8-hour day. What we tell them is that your intellect boils down to whether you’re a good test taker or not, right?”**

—URBAN LEAGUE AFFILIATE LEADERS

Participants also spoke to the concern that **standardized tests do not adequately account for learning differences or accommodate students with disabilities.** While participants acknowledged the existence of accommodations for students with disabilities and learning differences, these accommodations were perceived as insufficient. One student participant shared an example of receiving inappropriate or ineffective accommodation, suggesting room for further improvement and enhancement in this area.

**“I remember not feeling like I was learning much because one of the accommodations they had for the test was like, one square piece of note paper you could use for the math section and stuff to, like, take notes and be able to put down your thoughts. But because I have dysgraphia, I couldn’t use that at all because I can only type. So, I felt like I really couldn’t plan out my thoughts or properly do the test how I’d want to.”**

—STUDENTS GROUP PARTICIPANT

A second but strongly related theme that emerged from listening sessions is **the belief that SST scores should not be used to identify students for educational opportunities because they provide a limited measure of knowledge.** Listening

## Spotlight Perspective:

### WEAPONIZATION OF SST RESULTS

Participants in the listening sessions described the historical use of standardized tests as a weapon against communities of color. They noted that test results have historically been used to punish Black and brown students and exacerbate inequities within schools and communities. Several argued that continued use of these assessments despite their acknowledged origins is an act of continuously adopting racist systems to penalize students of color because they do not meet White-centered standards.

**“How do you prevent that information from being weaponized against the communities where it has effectively and historically reproduced racial and class inequalities? And so how, how do you do that? So standardized testing has become a tool where we decide who to gift opportunities to, and it should never be that way.”**

—PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND RESEARCHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT

**“Because we’ve just done so much damage and we’ve shown how much damage, and so this question I’ve asked in the past is, can we really rely on psychometrics and assessment to correct racist policies given its history and enabling racist policies and just the dark history of assessment?”**

—OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME STAFF GROUP PARTICIPANT

session participants expressed the concern that SSTs provide too narrow and limited a lens on student knowledge because they do not measure other assets. As a result, SSTs were viewed as a problematic tool for assessing academic progress of individual students. For example, an out-of-school-time staff member emphasized that SSTs do not highlight the full range of student skills and knowledge.

**“Current testing is a narrow snapshot of a limited quantity of what students know and can do in terms of the narrow measures that exist on current standardized tests. It’s evidence of a sort, but not very comprehensive evidence.”**

—OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME STAFF  
GROUP PARTICIPANT

Participants in the students, parents and guardians, teachers, out-of-school-time staff, and civil rights activists listening sessions also expressed **concern about the negative psychological effects of assessments and SSTs on students.** When asked about the effects of standardized testing, participants reported that SSTs decreased a student’s well-being, particularly in the form of stress and anxiety. Specifically, participants believed assessments should only be administered to older students who are better able to manage the stress associated with SSTs.

**“I don’t think students should be tested until they get into middle school because that gives them time to understand what testing looks like. So, they just automatically test these babies, and they get anxiety and stress and all, you know, dealing with so many issues when it comes down to that.”**

—PARENTS AND GUARDIANS  
GROUP PARTICIPANT

## Alternative Perspective:

**TESTS AS “MOTIVATING”  
INFLUENCE**

**“The kids, they take it seriously . . . They’re like, you know, we’re trying to do well in our exams. We want to get into college . . . Or some of them just want to do well in their exams because they want it to look good on their resume when they go out for employment.”**

—OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME STAFF  
GROUP PARTICIPANT



**“We’ve actually had kids, like, in the middle of a test pass out going to a nosebleed because they’re so nervous because . . . you’re being told you’re not going to go to fourth grade if you don’t pass this test.”**

—URBAN LEAGUE AFFILIATE LEADERS

Listening session participants also raised concerns about **inadequate and uneven levels of understanding among community members, parents, and teachers about how SST scores are used or should be used.** Some participants directly expressed confusion, and others related experiences in which they encountered mixed levels of understanding of how SST results were used at the student, classroom, and school levels.

**“I think when I was teaching, I didn’t realize why we spent so much time working on assessments. I worked in [redacted], I guess, for a while, where my ability to get a bonus was tied to how well my students did, but I didn’t understand that the results of the assessments were helping direct support to my schools or the schools that I worked at. And I think we just need to do a better job of doing some teacher educating around it.”**

—PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND RESEARCHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT

**“I think it’s important that we separate out formative assessment and summative assessment. Formative assessment is designed to help improve instruction. . . . Summative assessment is to make decisions, larger decisions. What we often end up doing is, because it’s so expensive to do both, trying to use summative assessment for formative purposes. They don’t work for that, they’re not quick enough, they’re not granular enough, they don’t really provide instructional support, and teachers either can’t or don’t use them.”**

—POLICYMAKERS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Some participants specifically pointed to what they saw as a reason for the mixed understanding, **noting limited communication and lack of clarity from schools and districts about the purpose and use of SST results.**

For example, one student complained about receiving little to no information from the teachers and the school about the purpose of tests. Similarly, a parent noted not receiving information on interpretation of results. While these experiences are not universal and many districts do have communication strategies in play, they underscore the importance of efforts to level set and educate on the role, uses, and interpretation of results.

**“When I first did a test, whenever we did a state test, I think the teachers never really explained what it was for. It was always like, ‘Oh, you have to do it,’ but I didn’t really know what it was for, I just took it anyway.”**

—STUDENTS GROUP PARTICIPANT

**“As far as talking to the teacher about the assessment test, I don’t even know when they get the scores back. So, it’s not like they send anything to parents. I know, for me, I never received information about assessment tests or what the scoring is.”**

—PARENTS AND GUARDIANS GROUP PARTICIPANT



## VISIONS OF THE FUTURE AND SOLUTIONS

Listening session participants highlighted a wide array of alternatives and preferred ways of assessing students' knowledge, performance, and capabilities. The approaches discussed varied in form, but most emphasized student engagement in learning, real-world application, and the ability to tap into different skillsets as tools for students to demonstrate their knowledge. One alternative type of assessment noted more frequently than others was **the use of performance assessments to elicit an authentic demonstration of knowledge or skill.**

**"Anything that gives students the opportunity to create something and implement their knowledge and demonstrate that within the final product is going to be something that I feel is more beneficial and serves a better purpose for assessing student learning.**

—TEACHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Similarly, **project-based and portfolio learning assessments may be effective tools to measure student knowledge and learning.** Project-based assessments allow for capitalizing on student self-directed learning, while portfolio assessments enable the use of a body of work in assessing performance. Both were suggested as options to examine in consideration of accountability measures.

**"My ideal education experience would be project-based learning with a lot of student voice, and not just voice, but, like, student empowerment to be right at the table, decision making, and then I'd like to see like portfolio-type assessments."**

—PARENT AND GUARDIAN GROUP PARTICIPANT

Participants in different groups also acknowledged that these alternative methods, while great for assessing individual student knowledge, do not provide the same comparable data across schools and districts. In fact, the same parent highlighted above went on to point this out:

Figure 2. POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS AND VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

### **Use of alternative types of assessments can better capture student learning**

Students, parents, teachers, out-of-school-time staff, researchers, and National Urban League Affiliate leaders

### **Valuation and consideration of the whole child is needed**

Students, parents, teachers, out-of-school-time staff, civil rights activists, counselors, and National Urban League Affiliate leaders





**“You know, if there still is a need for a standardized test in some way to tell policymakers something, I would like it to just really be what it originally was, which was like a temperature taking not attached to each kid, not attached to each school and teacher, and used for ranking and, you know, all these other things that it’s been perverted into, from what it was originally intended.”**

**—PARENTS AND GUARDIANS  
GROUP PARTICIPANT**

Participants in almost every group highlighted **the value of nonacademic knowledge and skills and the need to consider the whole child both in learning and in assessments of performance and progress.** Participants emphasized the importance of cultivating and assessing socioemotional development and skills and mental and physical health. Participants also discussed the value of fostering student interest and engagement and student ability to integrate and apply real-world knowledge and skills. Some participants directly referenced the “whole child approach,” which categorizes these skills as mental health, physical health, cognitive development, identity development, and socioemotional development. (see Figure 3 on the next page).

**“There’s definitely a trend focusing toward social-emotional learning, measuring social-emotional learning, potentially pointing that out as a data indicator for accreditation, like they do in [suppressed]. There continues to be focus on that . . . even beyond social-emotional learning, which is creating positive engagement for students every day, self-efficacy. So, it’s all about individualized learning, student focus, student support, student growth.”**

**—POLICYMAKERS GROUP PARTICIPANT**

## Alternative Perspective:

### NEED FOR COMPARABLE DATA

**“I am a big fan of the idea behind performance assessments. I think that in many ways they can be a lot more rigorous than traditional assessments. But you also lose—you can lose important qualities like comparability. . . . So, it goes back to, like, what is the purpose of the assessment, and how was it used?”**

**—PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND  
RESEARCHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT**



**“It’s not just academics. Young people need to learn to become responsible citizens, co-workers, human beings in a rapidly evolving 21st century society.”**

**—OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME STAFF  
GROUP PARTICIPANT**

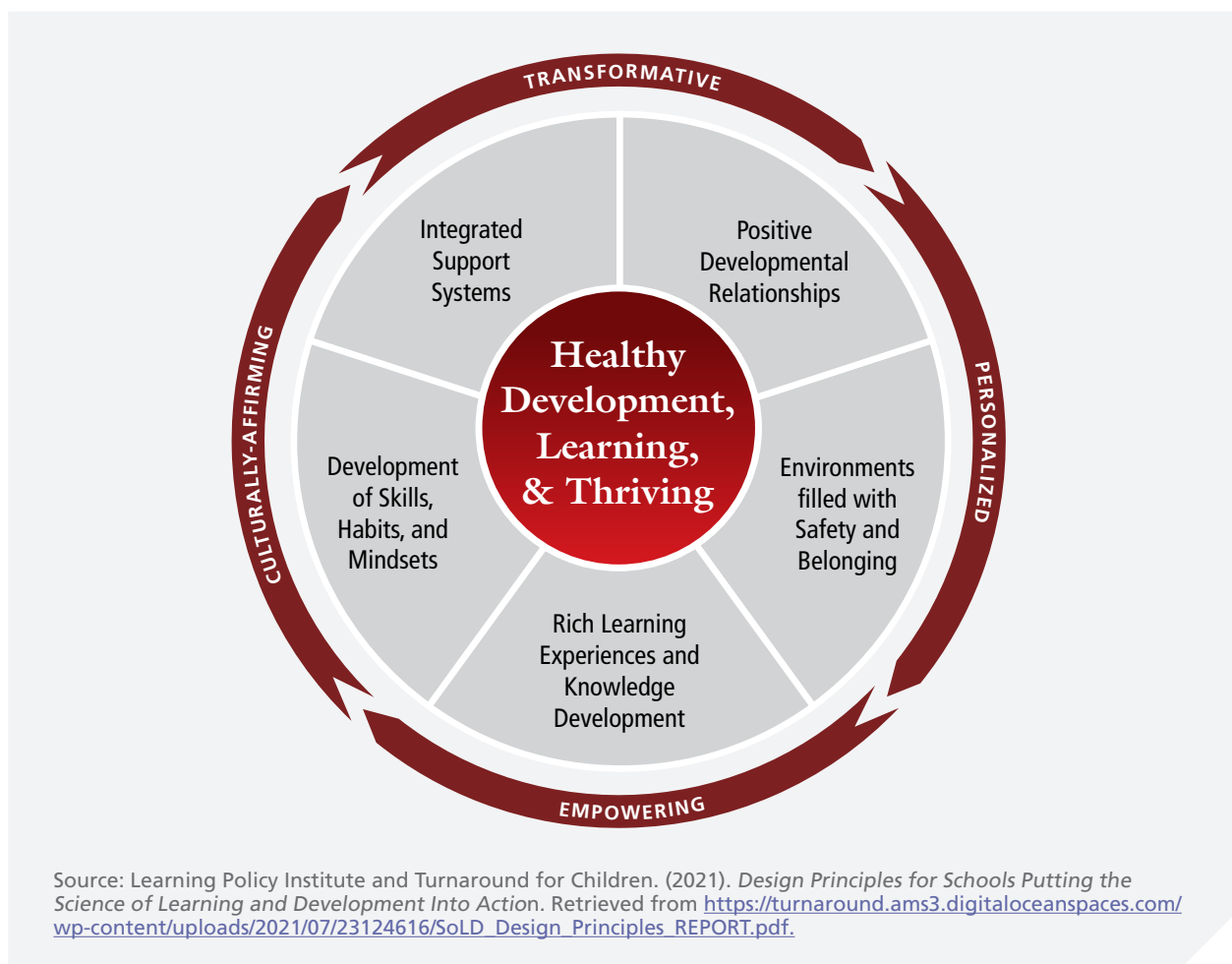
An out-of-school-time provider also noted the success of existing efforts to help students identify these nonacademic skills and put them to use, highlighting the impact of small-scale, low-cost interventions.

**“The one thing they did was they talked with each of the young people about how to**

**identify the skills that they had developed, how to name them, how to be in other settings—was it taken care of, stuff like seven younger siblings, was it the job they had on the weekends, whatever. It was part of being able to name, it was being able to know it, it was being able to demonstrate it. And just by being able to . . . it wasn’t that they had some intensive keep-to-the-test training or that they had some intensive skill development that made them much more likely to land the job.**

**—OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME STAFF  
GROUP PARTICIPANT**

**Figure 3. GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR EQUITABLE WHOLE-CHILD DESIGN**





# Reoccurring Themes About Accountability Systems

## PROBLEMS & CONCERNS

### Across Stakeholders Groups

A reoccurring theme in discussing the uses of SSTs and assessments was the perspective that an overreliance or singular focus on assessments and SST results in evaluating educator, school, and district performance is problematic. This theme is closely related to the concerns noted previously about the incomplete picture SSTs provide that limits their effective use for students. While federal law requires several measures to be used in state accountability systems, constituencies on the ground are not experiencing or seeing the influence of this requirement. **Participants emphasized the need for additional assessments and measures to determine what works in a school or district.** Others noted the need for a more general discussion on the use of assessments.

“The statewide assessment alone isn’t going to tell us the story of what’s working and what’s not. It’s a starting point for discussions at higher levels for policymakers. But they really need to have access to high-quality assessment results from the classroom level, school level, just other measures throughout the school year in real time so that they can make better decisions about what’s working and what’s not.

—POLICYMAKERS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Relatedly, participants noted that the use of inadequate accountability measures has an array of negative effects on teachers and instruction. Parents, counselors, and teachers discussed the **pressure on teachers to raise SST scores as one of these effects.**

“I have looked at places like [redacted], where the institutional pressure forced teachers to cheat on the test. . . . The district that I teach [in] forced the teachers and pressured the teachers to get the scores up so much that teachers were filling in those bubbles years ago because the pressure was so much.”

—TEACHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Figure 4. PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED BY STAKEHOLDERS



“So, if you know this and those teachers are handcuffed from the beginning, standardized tests increased students’ anxiety, as well as the teachers.’ Because for some of them, whether or not they’re offered a contract to come back and teach the next year is based on what the test scores are gonna look like.”

—OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME STAFF  
GROUP PARTICIPANT

When teachers are pressured to teach to the test, it can result in spending more time on English Language Arts and math and less time on other important curriculum components. Some participants (students, parents, teachers, out-of-school-time staff, policymakers, and civil rights activists) stressed this impact on classroom instruction and noted their concerns, impressions, and experiences of **testing pressures leading to teachers’ inability to be as creative, not teaching other topics, or not effectively addressing other student needs.**

“We’ve seen narrowing of the curriculum, right? Only focusing on reading and math, or doubling up on periods of reading and math, so that you don’t have time for art, and music, and physical education, and movement. We’ve seen the curriculum get pushed down to where they’re, you know, asking developmentally inappropriate things of kindergartners and pre-K students, right, that actually results in their learning suffering, as we saw through the Tennessee study recently.”

—OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME STAFF  
GROUP PARTICIPANT

“They’re engaging in those practices in their classrooms and then the assessment that their students take don’t match that. And so, they’re in this quandary, they have this tension between how much time can I spend doing this wonderful pedagogy that I know

## What’s Working Perspective:

### USE OF SST RESULTS FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

“I visited th[is] district, which has an incredible partnership with [a university], and they . . . figured out a way to use those test scores to develop professional development for their own teachers. Like, they all sat around the table, looked at the results as a group. Like, the math department would look at the math results of, like, 9th through 12th grade, and they would do it every year, and they would look for trends, and they would say, ‘Hey, it looks like we’re kind of weak in geometry. Let’s beef up our professional development there.’ I mean, that kind of blew my mind. What an amazing thing to do. That takes capacity, that takes skill, that takes innovation.”

—CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS GROUP



is beneficial to my students when we have this assessment that's going to be White-centric that gets placed in front of them in 3 months."

—PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND RESEARCHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Other participants spoke more generally and often in conflicting ways about ineffective alignment of classroom curriculum with SST objectives and standards. While a few parents noted concerns that teachers do not always adequately and effectively prepare students—suggesting an ineffective alignment—others pointed to a lack of understanding of how curriculum and testing should or should not be connected.

"The other big thing that I think is a really deep misunderstanding is that participating in state summative assessments is not an appropriate use of instructional time. There's this concept, that uses up valuable instructional time. . . . I know how much time your kids spend testing, we measure that. I look at it every year. It's not that much, it's less than 1 percent, that's 0.5 percent of your instructional time. They don't want to hear that, because it doesn't

of course include all the time they spent trying to prep for or game the assessment. Those are, I think, two really foundational misunderstandings that we deal with."

—POLICYMAKERS GROUP PARTICIPANT

"Another one would be if assessments can be classroom embedded; if they can be a part of what educators are doing on a regular basis to try to assess if their students are learning the taught curriculum, then we lose less time to testing as a result. We get more actionable information for educators. We have assessments that are tied more closely to the taught curriculum than to a set of standards that may be peripheral to what educators are actually trying to do inside their classrooms."

—RESEARCHER GROUP PARTICIPANT

Participants from the parents, teachers, and Urban League Affiliate leaders groups also expressed concerns about the **impact of ineffective accountability measures that rely on SST results driving teachers from the profession.** Teachers are reporting that their peers are leaving the profession because of the amount of time spent on assessments and the pressure they receive about them, resulting in not enough time connecting with students.



**“You see, we’re seeing teachers leaving in droves, and no one is replacing them. . . . They don’t want to do it, and I have to think that this quote-unquote “accountability” has something to do with it. I have to think that the time that we spend on testing, pretesting, preparing for the test, talking about the test, remember to go over these questions, remember that the test questions were just released from last year, go over it with your students... I got into education to be a teacher that’s going to connect with my students in the community. I chose to go to the community that I’m in. I don’t want to spend my almost half the year or more talking about tests or getting ready for the test or doing practice questions.”**

**—TEACHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT**

Participants raised concerns about existing accountability efforts failing to ensure that resources are directed where they are most needed in order to address inequities in education. Students in lower income schools are penalized twice—once when their performance on SSTs are lower due to barriers to success and again when their school is judged as less effective due to accountability system results.

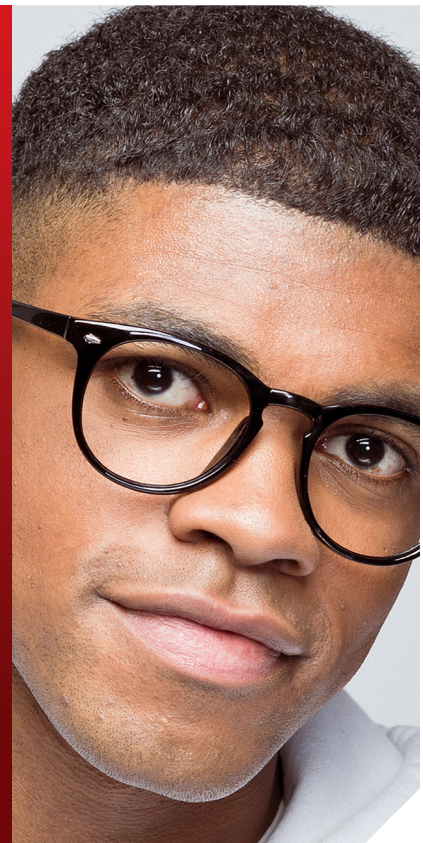
**“The factors, I think, here in [suppressed] affect, that really impact the quality of the education that the students are getting, has to do with money. Because here, our schools are funded through property taxes . . . [I]t’s a school district for poor children, and most of our students are low-income. So, you don’t see the resources in those communities because, if it’s based on property taxes, not as much is invested into the schools.”**

**—OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME STAFF GROUP PARTICIPANT**

**“**

**It’s not like you needed data to tell you that there was a negative effect on extracting resources from these communities. You took out their science lab 30 years ago. What did you expect? You’re a logical person, you know what happens when you take away a science lab. Then nobody gets to learn science.”**

**—CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS GROUP PARTICIPANT**





An additional concern closely related to resourcing that emerged in several discussions was that **negative feedback from accountability systems often harm communities** because of the resulting loss of funding for schools with lower scores and the “grading” or labeling of them. Participants also discussed how current accountability systems often have far-reaching effects outside the classroom, how SSTs can affect the way resources are funneled into districts and communities, subsequently shaping the neighborhoods in which students live, and how poor student performance on SSTs can ultimately lead to resources being removed from neighborhoods or districts.

“I would say that here in [redacted], people definitely use those scores to decide where they’re gonna live. And also, just the reputation of the school. So, we have one school district in our county that was taken over by the state. I think it was 2016. And

it’s still kind of going through that process. And so, for example, like, nobody’s really wanting to move to that city.”

—URBAN LEAGUE AFFILIATE LEADERS

“The accountability system as designed isn’t actually designed to help schools improve because it’s not being matched with resources, or what’s needed to actually make a difference, right? And what it does is it pulls people out of school because they’re like, ‘Oh, that school only has one star on account, so I’m not going to go there,’ right? And so, then you disinvest in schools in that way, and then you end up with lower enrollments, and it’s like this whole cycle, right? And we know small schools are harder because, like, they have less, they get less, you know—it’s just like this whole cycle that you end up in.”

—PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND RESEARCHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT



## VISIONS OF THE FUTURE AND SOLUTIONS

According to listening session participants, **one way to improve accountability systems and promote equity is by valuing student subgroup performance to a greater degree than is typically done.** Participants spoke to the importance of holding the education system accountable for ensuring that the performance of all students is valued and measured.

“What I would argue is that what is more needed right now is a centering of racial and disability justice as the purpose of our educational system and then the argument being that the system is not achieving racial and disability justice.”

—CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS  
GROUP PARTICIPANT

“It’s about kind of recalibrating that assessment system to make sure that it’s serving all kids regardless of whether students with disabilities or an English learner or wherever they are in the country.”

—PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND  
RESEARCHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT

In addition to considering subgroup performance and measuring the progress made, many participants discussed evaluating and incorporating additional measures of a school’s effectiveness as a critical way to improve accountability efforts. Participants also raised **the importance of measuring student, parent, and staff engagement when assessing school effectiveness.**

The engagement of all members of the school community was viewed as a key component of school climate and culture and as an indicator of how well the school is meeting the needs of students, staff, and parents.

Figure 5. POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS OFFERED BY STAKEHOLDERS

### Promote equity by valuing student subgroup performance

Students, parents, civil rights activists, and researchers

### Ensure multifaceted and shared accountability

Parents, out-of-school-time staff, civil rights activists, researchers, policymakers, and National Urban League Affiliate leaders

### Adopt additional measures of school performance

Students, parents, out-of-school-time staff, civil rights activists, counselors, policymakers, and researchers

### Allocate resources to those who need them most

Parents, out-of-school-time staff, civil rights activists, policymakers, and researchers



“Where would that attitude come from in the case of the student? Because I know that our students, they go to different schools, and they’ve said, you know, if you’re in a school where it’s clear, and I’ve seen it, where the teachers are burned out and you are in a facility that is not maintained, the students—and they look and see, they’re aware that they’re not being valued. And so much, especially with youth, with all of us, our self-esteem and value is growing, and it’s nurtured by how we are treated and if you feel that, you know, you’re not being given the consideration and the resources. I’ve seen; I’ve talked to students. They don’t care, so why should I care?”

—OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME STAFF  
GROUP PARTICIPANT

Out-of-school-time staff and civil rights activists emphasized **the importance of racial and ethnic representation among school staff**. These participants believe having a diverse staff or a staff representative of the student population is essential to ensure that instruction is culturally representative, and the education system is equitable.

“I was a substitute teacher. I’ve made it a point to purposefully go out to the White schools where we had some of our African American students at. And when I went out there, they’re like, ‘Oh, are you the cafeteria lady?’ I think that more African American teachers being represented in the classroom is something that’s needed in no matter what community you’re in.”

—OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME STAFF  
GROUP PARTICIPANT

“

Maybe looking at transfer rates or retention rates and graduation rates and also asking students if they feel prepared in areas other than academics and if they feel like they’re learning and if they feel supported, and if they feel like they’re gaining soft skills that will help them in life.”

—STUDENTS GROUP PARTICIPANT



Other indicators of school success and effectiveness which participants raised as **useful measures for accountability included attendance rates, suspensions, high school graduation rates, faculty retention, school leadership quality, and the diversity of curriculum and extracurricular offerings.** For example, a student group participant suggested examining schoolwide measures of student performance such as retention and graduation rates.

A psychometricians and researchers group participant emphasized various measures that neither require nor place demands on students and parents: the number of certified teachers, class sizes, the number of students receiving free and reduced-price lunches, and the available extracurricular activities.

**“We cannot waste students’ time trying to inform policy, particularly because assessments—we don’t need to do that. We can look at other indicators to shape our policy decisions. We can look at the number of teachers in the school who are certified in the area in which they are teaching. We can look at class size; we can look at the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch; we can look at the number of extracurricular activities offered by the school. All of those indicators we can look at without bothering the children and their parents at all to see if those students are receiving a fair and equitable education.”**

**—PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND RESEARCHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT**





Participants identified the need to broaden the concept of what the education system should be accountable for, to develop various measures other than SST results that can assess school performance, and to determine who to hold accountable. They also argued that **accountability should be multifaceted and shared across entities** and discussed the importance of broadening accountability efforts by examining how different parts of the education system such as state-level policymakers, school boards, and school administrations are held accountable for student performance and success.

**“We know that there are so many other systems that interact with and deeply affect our young people’s opportunity to achieve their potential and to meet state learning standards. So, we can talk about health care, right? If they don’t have access to decent health care, as we know, it’s harder for young people to focus on school. . . . We can talk about the economic system, the employment system, right? And whether or not we are providing enough training and education and job openings—good-paying jobs. So, that’s all to say that I think there’s any number of systems that need to be held accountable and where we need to focus our energies, in addition to education, in order to make sure young people meet state standards and ultimately reach their full potential.”**

**—OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME STAFF  
GROUP PARTICIPANT**

**“In my ideal world, an accountability system that has that broad set of indicators would be tiered. So there would be a state level accountability, so what is the federal government holding states accountable for? And then there would be, what are states holding districts accountable for? And what**

## What’s Working Perspective:

”

### SCHOOL-TO-SCHOOL MENTORING

**“ . . . [W]e just passed a bill that will be . . . a school-to-school support model where a succeeding school in the area is going to help the school that’s struggling in that area. . . . So that’s just one where the school that’s struggling has options for if they want to take that support or how they want to look at it as well.”**

**—POLICYMAKERS GROUP PARTICIPANT**



are districts holding schools accountable for? If we're thinking of like formal accountability or like big A accountability. And right now, federal policy is really driven at individual schools, but districts control a lot of the resources and opportunities."

—PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND RESEARCHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Some participants emphasized that **communities should also be held accountable for supporting students and providing needed support and services.** Recognizing that broader social services play a critical role in child outcomes and that school is a key part of the broader community, participants saw communities as an important partner in education and, as a result, accountability systems.

"It's not that schools have communities, but communities have schools and that the learning and development is a responsibility across those places. So how does any conversation about assessment and accountability think about the range of actors, places, spaces, and systems that are supporting young people on their path to next?"

—OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME STAFF GROUP PARTICIPANT

Participants also emphasized the critical importance of **ensuring that resources are allocated to those who need them most** within the education system. Others stressed redressing funding, the provision of quality education, and a more effective management of resources to redress inequities.

"Let's take time to fix what we've got before we create additional inequities in a system that already needs a greater consistency of where the finances go, so that a low-income community on one side of the street gets



the same resources as the high-income community on the other side of the street in the same city."

—PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND RESEARCHERS GROUP PARTICIPANT

"Who on earth would receive data about areas of greatest need and then not allocate resources? Why wouldn't you look at low math scores and say, 'What this school really needs is some high-quality math intervention. So, let's make sure our strongest math instructors are in that school.'"

—CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Finally, participants discussed the importance of **addressing the broader underlying factors and resources needed to ensure students can learn when they are in school.** For example, participants spoke to the importance of coordinating services and ensuring that needs (mental health, healthcare, access to technology) that underpin academic performance are also met, whether through community partnerships or additional resourcing to the schools.

"I personally love the community school's model, which is like a wraparound service model where the school becomes like a hub. I feel like schools used to be like this more often, and I'd like to kind of come back to that...you find out from the community what the needs are."

—PARENTS GROUP PARTICIPANT

"For families that are on public assistance in the DOE data system, there is an automatic match for free and reduced-price lunch, right? So that's an example of two systems sort of working together.... So I think that there are ways that we can imagine and think about how the systems that currently

exist that we often hear about in the postmortem if something happens, and it's like, oh well, there was an active case with social services, or, how might all of these systems that are already in place, right, how might we restructure them so that they are working more to our benefit, working more to the benefit of students and families, not necessarily when they're in crisis but to ensure that the resources are brought to bear so that there's a recognition of some of the challenges that are happening and how these systems are really coming in to ensure that it's being addressed appropriately."

—OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME STAFF  
GROUP PARTICIPANT

## Concluding Thoughts

**While the listening sessions documented widespread concerns** about assessments and accountability systems, the participants were more optimistic that future policies would be able to support students more equitably. Current concerns stem in part from the perception that SSTs are biased, which has negative downstream implications on student opportunity and the perceived performance of teachers, schools, and districts based on those assessments. However, the stakeholders suggested promising ideas for improving assessments and accountability systems, some of which exist in current policy, including adding assessments that measure a wider range of student skills, employing better measures for assessing teacher, school, district, and community performance, and supporting students by delivering resources to those who need them the most.

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**In part two of this final report, we build on these ideas by discussing the findings from our roundtables with experts and leaders within the civil rights and education equity community.**

## PART TWO

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

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**As part of the National Urban League and UnidosUS's multi-pronged effort**, Dax-Dev was engaged to facilitate a series of closed-door sense-making roundtables with a group of 20 experts and leaders within the civil rights and education equity community.

This group was chosen for its diverse professional expertise and lived experiences. Participants included leaders of organizations in policy, advocacy, and education, as well as those representing Black, Latino, Native American communities, people with disabilities, the youth development field, and parent empowerment groups.

The aim of these roundtables was to generate authentic dialogue that would yield points of alignment, divergence, and unresolved questions for future consideration. Ultimately, the interaction of these experts and thought leaders resulted in valuable, wide-ranging perspectives that will support the necessary work ahead that the National Urban League and UnidosUS envision and desire this group to continue 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 Below:**

While Dax-Dev acknowledges that at least some of the ideas presented here already exist, at least in principle, in pockets of our current education paradigms and that additional questions and issues need to be explored more deeply in each of these proposed pillars, this conceptual architecture is essential.

The goal of this final report is to reflect what was heard during the roundtable discussions as root issues and lift up possible recommendations to build on the areas of agreement developed. This is meant to be a steppingstone along an ongoing journey as the civil rights community considers what the future of assessment and accountability can look like to best serve children and youth.



# Four Roundtables—July/August 2022

## SESSION

# 1

We can't deny that the policies, even NCLB which was punitive . . . did bring visibility to students of color that we knew were not being properly served, but we didn't have the data. So as much as these policies did not meet the expectation of bringing equity to students of color, it was the product of advocacy, and a civil rights issue. And it did move the needle in the direction of holding people accountable, even if it was just for compliance issues."

—SESSION 1 PARTICIPANT

## Overview

- The group participating, leaders from the education and civil rights arena, had not previously convened on the complex topic of the future of assessment and accountability, and the roundtables had the express purpose of serving as closed-door sessions in which the leaders could feel free to share their uncensored perspectives that reflected their own knowledge, expertise, and vision, not necessarily the position of their organizations. It was important to devote time, within the first session and throughout the four sessions, to build community and share their knowledge and lived experiences.
- To begin to reimagine the future of assessment and accountability, the group grounded the discussions on a review of the history of assessment and accountability in the U.S. from the 1950s to present day. A particularly salient point of discussion was the impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), both in making student performance data more transparent and accessible and the punitive aspects felt by “underperforming” schools and districts.
- Participants were given space to outline their current understanding and perceptions of the existing and aspirational states of assessment and accountability and then reviewed everyone’s responses in a gallery-walk format. This was beneficial because of the diverse expertise in the room, allowing for the amplification of various perspectives around both current and aspirational states.

## Key takeaways

Many historical policies were intended to bring equity to students of color as a civil rights issue, but the heavy focus on compliance implemented through NCLB—rather than resources, supports, and hearts and minds—limited equitable implementation and cultural relevance.<sup>2</sup> Though the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) brought about additional autonomy to states with the intention of bringing necessary supports to schools deemed “low-performing,” much of the focus still seems to be on compliance: hence, little transformational change has occurred. In part, this is evidenced by the lack of focus on cultural relevance in assessment, and the continued reliance on historically valued and inequitable topic areas over others.

There is a complicated history of racism and bias in the design and use of standardized tests, and while there have been improvements in acknowledging and addressing these issues, there are still significant advances that need to be made. This is an area in which the testing

<sup>2</sup> “NCLB was a shift towards increased accountability and assessment by codifying accountability standards for all schools and requiring that all students perform at academic proficiency levels by 2014.” Reference EduDream: [How and in what ways did standards-based reform address structural inequities in education?](#)

and research industries can do more to engage with the civil rights community.

Implementing the theory of action of holding schools and districts accountable for students' test score results was intended to yield equitable outcomes. This theory of action, however, was rooted in compliance-based policies and practices, lacked meaningful connection to continuous improvement, and demonstrated a lack of consideration for the essential influence of race, ethnicity, language, and disability. This is another area that the testing and research industries can do more to engage with the civil rights community and key constituencies.

The roundtable members envision a shift toward an assessment system with accessible, usable data and enhanced cultural relevance (e.g., representative testing questions and methodologies that account for a variety of cultural experiences that acknowledge multiple ways of knowing and being). Assessments that have historically valued certain topic areas and ways of demonstrating knowledge over others has led to a narrow and inadequate view of aptitude.



**Our system of assessment and accountability has not paid off in the way that we all wanted it to and thought that it could. It has made a meaningful difference for middle class White children with disabilities, and that's not insignificant, but it is such a limited community of children when the intent was much broader than that."**

**—SESSION 1 PARTICIPANT**



**We need to come to an understanding about what the role is that we want [assessments] to play, make sure that they're meeting the needs of students and families, and communicating very clearly to families, to educators about that role to make sure that they're not misused in ways that I think they are currently misused and used to punish students, families, and teachers."**

**—SESSION 2 PARTICIPANT**

### Overview

- The roundtable session opened with a summary of Insight Policy Research's early focus group findings. The group was able to ask questions and offer considerations for data collection and distillation for the IPR's next round of analysis.
- To test some assumptions that emerged in the first roundtable, Dax-Dev polled the group to gauge individual perceptions with respect to a set of hot-button questions regarding the current state of the assessments and accountability. The poll results were then used to lead a discussion about the points of alignment and disagreement.
- Based on the initial sense-making process, three cross-cutting systemic issues bubbled to the surface: the absence of an orientation toward continuous improvement; a predisposition for a top-down, unilateral approach to accountability; and the general misuse of statewide assessments. In breakouts, the group sought to better define these shortcomings and illustrate their impact on learning and communities.
- Having grounded themselves in common definitions for each of the problem areas, the breakout groups began articulating aspirational states, the challenge being to push beyond the constraints and barriers that typically inhibit unfettered exploration.

### Key takeaways

To both stem the anxiety that accompanies testing and infuse empathy into the culture of assessment, the "why" behind assessments should be clear and transparent. All constituencies—including young people and their caregivers—should know why they are being assessed, how the data will be used to advance their learning and development, and be provided with strategic, context-specific, and high-quality supports to make the data actionable in real time.

Continuous improvement presents a mindset shift. It challenges us to rethink what kids need to be able to know and do. Were our systems to embrace such a shift, education would center on quality-learning environments that optimize relationships, safety, belonging, and mattering, all of which would be measured over time. These environments would serve as a foundation for high-quality instruction leading to student engagement and competency development and, ultimately, to mastery that, in turn, fuels students with a sense of accomplishment. These environments would also feature dynamic data systems that allow for disaggregation that supports differentiated student-learning needs and caregiver engagement and utilization.

A shift toward a culture of reciprocal accountability would fairly and equitably distribute responsibility for improvement and performance across the system (federal, state, local, community, family) and to those constituencies best positioned to influence change rather than to put all the pressure to perform on local, often under-resourced, communities.

Such a shift would relieve pressure for school districts to meet a standard when the resources required by the state and federal government are not made available and would also invite greater attention to be paid to areas within the control of each constituency. For example, teacher turnover might remain most appropriately at the district (rather than school) level because districts have decision-making authority about licensure and compensation, but meeting school climate and attendance standards are best at the school/community level.

## SESSION

# 3

We use student assessment and performance as the basis for everything. It determines how the classroom, teacher, school, district, and perhaps the state falls, but what about building in something that assesses all the other players that are responsible? How do we assess the district administrators, curriculum people, and superintendents? We're only assessing them by association with students. Is there a way to assess these other players that can be built in."

—SESSION 3  
PARTICIPANT

## Overview

- The group designed impact maps advancing reciprocal accountability throughout the system using three key levers for impact: high-quality educators, high-quality educational environments, and innovative student assessments (those that expand assessment beyond more traditional forms of standardized testing).
- The goal was to gain specificity in the aspirational state, to identify levers and supports needed, and to begin to model the steps toward aspirational impact.
- Through the mapping process, the roundtable participants aimed to identify key areas that each level of the educational system was uniquely positioned to advance and to be accountable for.

## Key takeaways

Each level of the system, and the actors within it had a role they should play in enacting the future of assessment and accountability across local, state, and federal levels. For example, the federal government is influential in setting a broad vision, lifting up and resourcing effective state models, and setting and enforcing equity guardrails. In the case of innovative student assessments, this could mean the federal government would play an enhanced role in aggregating research across states who are engaging in innovative student assessment to guide state and federal policy. The aim would be to scale effective practices for—and remove barriers to—scaffold assessments, standards, and frameworks that lift up culturally relevant teaching and learning.

While accountability traditionally flows from the federal government to the state government and downward to the local level, the group's mapping reflected a reciprocal accountability model in which accountability is multi-directional and shared. For example, both the state and local levels are responsible for recruiting a diverse, high-quality educator workforce; this stands in contrast to current accountability models which do not account for the state role in these efforts.



Additionally, if localities need support in advancing student success, these supports are identified in partnership with communities rather than through an imposition of top-down interventions. In conjunction with this reciprocal model of accountability is a commitment toward equitable funding with the state and federal government working in conjunction with local jurisdictions to meet any local funding gaps.

## SESSION

# 4

### Overview

- Between roundtable session 3 and session 4, the Dax-Dev team met with the National Urban League-UnidosUS team to review the discussion themes from the previous sessions, consolidate connected threads, and distill a proposed set of agreement areas.

### **The Proposed Agreement Areas were Designed to Project Forward into an Aspirational State Regarding the Future of Assessment and Accountability.**

- Session 4 was then used to present to the group a slate of proposed themes (pillars) to generate consensus and to dig deeper into each with two specific objectives: 1) to identify core sentiments that should guide implementation and 2) to provide clear steps that policymakers should take to action.
- In keeping with the vision-building orientation that guided the earlier sessions, the pillars that follow articulate deeply felt moral convictions while the core sentiments and actionable items reflect the realities that need to be in place for the pillars to be enacted in this aspirational state.



**In most places, what local control meant was trampling on the rights of Black children . . . and the federal government intervened to overcome the barriers created by the local power structure.”**

**—SESSION 3 PARTICIPANT**



# 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.

#### Core sentiments

- 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.<sup>3</sup>

#### Actionable items

- Educational systems turn academic principles into broader operational, whole child models rather than narrowly focused and 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**

<sup>3</sup> Reference Science of Learning and Development Alliance: <https://soldalliance.org/work/>



## PILLAR II:

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

Each type of assessment needs to be grounded in continuous improvement and accountability, as befits the goals of the assessment. Specifically, student formative assessments (assessments that guide instruction) should be culturally relevant, accessible, aligned to state academic standards, and used to continuously improve day-to-day instruction. Student summative assessments need to be culturally relevant, accessible, actively reflect what students have been taught, and aligned to state academic standards. School quality measures should encompass social and emotional learning, school climate, teacher capacity and working conditions, and resource audits<sup>4</sup> and be used to improve these school-level factors.

#### Core sentiments

- Timely and disaggregated student performance data drives both continuous growth and proficiency.
- Assessments, curriculum, standards, preparation, ongoing training, and accountability are all aligned.
- Comprehensive school quality measures are a focal point of improvement that serve as leading indicators of systems change.

#### 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 available and 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**

<sup>4</sup> Consider this [toolkit](#) on school quality measures from The Beyond Test Scores Project, along with examples in practice

## PILLAR III:

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

Accountability systems need to demonstrate a better balance between federal, state, and local accountability with clear purpose(s), an infrastructure of support, engagement of a broad set of outcomes, and a diverse set of constituencies. Local accountability should build capacity, support educators, expand opportunity, and assure that funding is distributed so that every student has the supports they need to thrive. Multi-faceted state accountability should center equity and operate within federal equity guardrails.

#### Core sentiments

- Accountability is a shared responsibility<sup>5</sup> 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-leveled support.
- Assessments, curriculum, standards, preparation, ongoing training, and accountability are all demonstrably 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.

- Develop and disseminate timely, transparent school and community data that is used to better understand root causes, track longitudinally, and utilize for multi-leveled equitable accountability.

“

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

—ROUNDTABLE MEMBER



<sup>5</sup> See more on accountability, distributed leadership, and continuous improvement in Richard Elmore's [Accountable Leadership](#)

## PILLAR IV:

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

Historically marginalized groups and constituencies need to be engaged and consulted when assessment and accountability processes are being created, refined, and implemented. To facilitate more rigorous participation, schools and districts should make meaningful and accessible 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.

#### Core sentiments

- The purpose of an assessment (be it individual student, educator, school, district, or state) should be clear and known to all constituencies. The design, implementation, and execution of assessment and accountability measures must incorporate the voices of, and be culturally relevant and linguistically accessible to, students and families.<sup>6</sup>
- The reporting of all assessments, not just district and statewide, is accessible, timely, relevant, transparent, and actionable.
- This data is used to engage constituencies, including community leaders, school leaders, families, and educators 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 constituencies, 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

<sup>6</sup> Strong 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, the group took a poll** 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% 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 the civil rights community will need to be mindful of as we imagine a new future for assessment and accountability.


Another area of divergence that bubbled up in breakout spaces but did not find broad traction in the large group discussions was the tension between local control as an equity lever and local control that perpetuates oppression and marginalization. Many of the solutions proposed to address the current issues with the system feature centering community voice and power; therefore, it stands to reason that future conversations should more thoroughly explore how the civil rights and education equity community’s vision for more local empowerment differs from or can engage with other movements that also act in the name of local control through a different lens.



While additional areas of divergence did not emerge, this does not necessarily indicate agreement or consensus across areas. Due to the structure of roundtable meetings, the facilitators did not ask if there had been consensus or counterpoints for every idea raised in generative discussions. Accordingly, the themes that emerged from the roundtables are reflective of the voices (written and spoken) which addressed specific issues; it is possible that certain individuals may have held divergent views which were not explicitly asked about or expressed. As discussions continue, it is possible that there could be more divergence in the nuances of the recommendations or proposed solutions.

## Questions for Deeper Exploration

**Within each pillar, the group raised 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.<sup>7</sup>



**Accountability got pushed so far down to people who were not equipped to deal with it at all . . . I would like to see people from the top have more accountability for what's happening."**

**—SESSION 2  
PARTICIPANT**

### PILLAR I:

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

1. How can a commitment be built over time to allow for broadened definitions of teaching, learning, education, and success to be fully utilized, implemented, and evaluated?
2. How can trust be built to develop a community's willingness to shift from traditional measures of success to one focused on whole child learning and the opportunity to learn?
3. How can the various settings that make up educational and developmental experiences relate to the various ways in which students learn and demonstrate ways of knowing?

<sup>7</sup> It is likely that even more questions will emerge as more minds converge around this document.



## PILLAR II:

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

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1. How should educator and student 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:

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

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

## PILLAR IV:

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

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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 instead of tokenizing or fetishizing our young people?
4. How do education equity advocates respond to family and community groups that seek to roll back or eliminate equity measures in the name of parental and First Amendment rights?

## Concluding Thoughts

**Taken as a whole, the four roundtables provided a potent complement to the focus groups**, further reinforcing the belief among many of those across the civil rights and education equity landscape that transformative change is not only possible but essential. We were inspired by the group's willingness to challenge education orthodoxies with courage and nuance, to dream out loud with virtual strangers, and to trust us. We also readily acknowledge the limitations of any one approach and the need for further discussions with even more constituencies that drill deeper into the complexities of mobilization and implementation.

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**In that spirit, the National Urban League and UnidosUS presented this research phase of this project to speak to the continuation of this work, particularly, in imagining and reimagining approaches to assessment and accountability that will be more beneficial to children, youth, families, and their communities.**



## SUMMARY

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# Insights, Observations, Next Steps, and Looking Ahead.

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**The listening sessions and roundtable discussions each had different charges as part of the research phase of this project.** The listening sessions were conducted to shed light on the experiences, knowledge, and visions that key constituencies have for a system of assessment and accountability that will improve educational experiences and outcomes for our youth. The roundtable discussions functioned to elevate perspectives, experiences, and expertise of civil rights and education equity leaders with the goal of identifying emerging areas of agreement, divergence, and open questions that the field must continue to grapple with. The work of the roundtable was informed, in part, by the listening sessions.

Together, the outcomes from the listening sessions and roundtables provide a rich, nuanced, and multi-faceted set of data and information that we hope will serve to inform productive conversations and ongoing deliberations regarding assessments and accountability. In this report the National Urban League and UnidosUS have presented what we heard through focus groups, individual interviews, and roundtable group discussions and offer this information to the education field more broadly. We caution that the feedback captured in the research phase and information presented in this report should not be interpreted to indicate or

represent either organization's current or future policy positions on this topic.

Our intent was to ensure inclusivity of constituent voices who often lack the opportunity to engage in topics of this magnitude and to facilitate candid discussions, not to steer a process that would lead to a particular result. From the onset of this project, the National Urban League and UnidosUS sought to provide a space for these voices to be heard, free from outside influences and any preconceived notions as to where these conversations would lead. We also made a commitment to ensure a safe space for



participants to engage fully and candidly: their anonymity was important to protect the integrity of what they shared without attributing feedback to a particular individual or organization.

We acknowledge that we did not speak with everyone who has a stake in this topic, as our focus was on making sure we heard directly from groups who are impacted but not typically included in education-reform discussions. However, as the National Urban League and UnidosUS continue this work, there will be opportunities to expand the tent of stakeholders we engage going forward.

### **National Urban League and UnidosUS Insights and Observations of Research Findings**

Following a thorough review and examination of the information that we gathered in the research phase, we offer a few key takeaways on where we see points of convergence from the listening sessions and roundtable discussions. However, the considerations below are not meant to serve as an exhaustive list of potential areas of intersection:



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#### ***Desire to improve understanding about the purpose and use of summative assessments***

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A consistent theme across most groups (e.g., students, caregivers, teachers) who participated in the listening sessions and in the roundtable was the lack of clarity about the purpose of various types of assessments (including summative and formative) and how they are used to inform decisions concerning individual students versus more systematic interventions. Limited communication from schools and districts was cited as a contributor to the uneven understanding of assessments. If there's anything we learned throughout the pandemic, it is that family engagement and communication between parents and schools play a crucial role in a student's education. This does not mean placing the onus on parents and caregivers to make sense of the various assessments their children take in school. Schools have a responsibility to engage families meaningfully and intentionally on this topic. Districts also have a responsibility to communicate with educators; states, with districts; and the federal government, with states. All education entities share a responsibility to distill clear information about assessments, make test results accessible, and be transparent about what the data will be used for.

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### ***Interest in expansion and application of how student success is defined and measured***

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Another point of convergence that emerged from the focus groups and roundtable discussions was the concern that SSTs may provide a limited lens on student knowledge and that there ought to be alternative ways to demonstrate other assets and skills beyond academics. Many emphasized the whole child approach to social and emotional learning and its value in developing different skill sets and tools for students to transition successfully into the ever-evolving 21st century global society and workforce. Other methods that were proposed to measure student aptitude included project-based and portfolio assessments that can foster student interest and engagement to integrate and apply real-world knowledge and skills.

At the same time, participants in various groups also acknowledged that these alternative tools, while helpful for assessing individual student knowledge and informing individualized learning goals, may not provide comparable, disaggregated data across schools and districts to inform more system-wide decision-making. As referenced above, there is a recognition that different tests can serve different roles and it may well be that there is value in considering and applying a more comprehensive and holistic way for students to demonstrate their full range of assets and aptitudes and to hold systems accountable for serving and supporting students to develop proficiency in academic and non-academic areas. Although the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides for multiple indicators of success in state accountability systems, inconsistent understanding or application of this flexibility embedded in federal law seems to persist.

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### ***Acknowledgment of lack of cultural representation and bias in assessments***

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A number of constituent groups also recognized that cultural relevance is important. Many felt that for any measure of success to be valid, it must be connected to the histories and lived experiences of the young people being assessed.



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

**—STUDENT**



Acknowledgment of and discontent with barriers and biases negatively impacting Black and brown students was a central theme in several discussions. As such, an area for deeper exploration that several focus groups and roundtable participants identified was the complicated history of racism and bias in standardized tests and how current assessments may continue to lean towards a White-centric bias. Stakeholders did not shy away from engaging in courageous conversations on this potentially charged topic. They strongly believe that the design and administration of assessments should be more reflective of today's racially and ethnically diverse student population so that the tests are more relatable and relevant to the experiences of all students. This also includes ensuring accommodations for students' learning differences and home languages other than English.

Authentic engagement and consultation of historically marginalized groups in the assessment process can be a viable step to addressing this issue.

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***Advance the concept of reciprocal accountability across entities in the education ecosystem***

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The research phase elevated the notion of shared accountability across federal, state, and local systems as an alternative to a top-down approach that does not take into account the respective roles that each level of the system and the decision makers within it have in ensuring student success. The concentration of pressure too often felt by often under-resourced schools to perform or else suffer consequences such as closure or school restructuring was

raised as part of this discussion. An evolution to a more supportive and less punitive approach to accountability was referenced by many participants. However, this should not be equated with lowering expectations or standards. Instead, participants emphasized the importance of both directing resources where they are needed most to help address inequities in education and the state and federal government committing to working with local jurisdictions to eliminate any funding gaps.



**Where's the assessment equity when a statewide standardized test asks a question referencing something our students have never done or have ever been exposed to?"**

**—TEACHER**

**If you want to know how the students are doing, why not talk to them!"**

**—STUDENT**

# Looking Ahead

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**As we focus on what's next for the future of assessments and accountability**, the National Urban League and UnidosUS are more committed than ever to continue grounding our work in a manner that is informed and inspired by the voices of the constituents which the civil rights community represents. We also intend to continue to expand the tent of stakeholders with whom we will engage in the upcoming policy development phase. In the next stage, we will build on the emerging areas of agreement identified in the research phase, provide space for new ideas, and hone the questions that were outlined by the roundtables for deeper exploration.

Our overarching goal is to develop a coherent set of civil rights principles and policy recommendations for the next generation of assessments and accountability. Clarity on a shared vision will inform federal policy, including the next Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization and administrative action and advance the notion of educational accountability beyond the federal role into more actionable concepts of community and statewide accountability for improving student outcomes. The National Urban League and UnidosUS believe in the power of education to transform people's lives and that every child should have the opportunity to demonstrate their excellence while acquiring the skills they need to be successful. Therefore, it is vitally important that we equitably address the way that we assess our children and hold our systems accountable or else we risk maintaining an inequitable system of public education that fails to adequately prepare Black and brown children to thrive as adults in the 21st Century.





National  
Urban League

*Empowering Communities.  
Changing Lives.*

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