CIVIL RIGHTS

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Principles for Assessment & Accountability

National Urban League | UNIDOSUS

Civil Rights Principles for Assessment and Accountability

provide a road map for building an education system that serves every child, especially those who have been historically underserved. In a time of tremendous transformation, *the principles* chart a bold new course—one that embraces continuous improvement, grounding decisions in data, using assessments to measure what matters, and ensuring resources reach in-need schools so that all students graduate ready for the path they choose.

The principles were developed collaboratively by civil rights, education advocacy, and research organizations as part of the Future of Assessment and Accountability Project. They incorporate input from over 500 stakeholders collected through focus groups, roundtables, interviews, and convenings. They intentionally center voices often left out of policy discussions, including classroom teachers, students, parents, and community organizers. The civil rights community calls on decision-makers at all levels to incorporate these principles into every education policy and practice.

The Principles

Shared Responsibility for Continuous Improvement

Responsibility for continuous improvement must be reciprocal and shared across federal, state, local, tribal, community, and family levels, with the greatest responsibilities placed on those with the most power to influence change.

Data-Informed Decision-Making

Data at the state, district, and school levels must be accessible, actionable, disaggregated, locally relevant, and timely to uncover disparities, identify bright spots, and drive informed decision-making.

Opportunity to Learn

Data on both learning conditions and outcomes must be used to ensure every student has access to the resources, support, and environment they need to succeed.

Well-Rounded Education

Preparing students for the future requires assessment and accountability systems that support a well-rounded approach to education—one that upholds academic rigor while also nurturing the full range of skills, knowledge, and mindsets students need to thrive in school, work, and life.

Meaningful Assessment Systems

In order to be reliable, valid, and meaningful, assessments must be aligned with state academic standards, accessible, and developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate—all while fitting into a coherent system.

The Signatories

IEL Institute for Educational Leadership — 60+ Years Strong — COALITION FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

COLLABORATIVE FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

National Center for Learning Disabilities

DQC 20 YEARS

NPU NATIONAL PARENTS UNION — Sindicato Nacional de Padres

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

NAACP

gc GENERATION CITIZEN

National Indian Education Association

edtrust

PRINCIPLE 1

Shared Responsibility for Continuous Improvement

Responsibility for continuous improvement must be reciprocal and shared across federal, state, local, tribal, community, and family levels, with the greatest responsibilities placed on those with the most power to influence change.

THE CHALLENGE

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), our nation's primary K-12 education law, was built on a straightforward premise: set standards, measure student performance, identify struggling schools, and provide targeted support. Unfortunately, the law did not foster the culture of continuous improvement needed to ensure lasting educational progress.

In today's system, schools are too often designated as requiring improvement one year and not the next, without receiving additional resources[1] or making a lasting difference in how well students are doing. Improvement activities frequently become box-checking exercises with little oversight. In fact, a Government Accountability Office investigation found that fewer than 42% of federally required school improvement plans actually include basic elements like needs assessments, resource audits, clear timelines, or proven strategies.[2] What's more, federally, only the bottom 5% of schools are identified for improvement activities, meaning most underperforming schools still go unrecognized and unsupported (see page 7). Further, the federal government provides little in terms of additional resources for schools identified for improvement; approximately $1.3 billion is spread across thousands of schools.

Against this backdrop, it is no surprise that in focus groups and convenings conducted by the National Urban League and UnidosUS, families and students expressed concerns that negative feedback from accountability systems has led to the stigmatization of communities and a deepening lack of resources, rather than meaningful support or improvement.[3]

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THE OPPORTUNITY

An ideal education system channels most of its time, resources, and political capital into driving evidence-based improvements and cultivating a culture of shared and reciprocal responsibility for student success. Rather than burdening and stigmatizing struggling schools that lack sufficient resources, leaders bring together stakeholders at all levels, map their specific roles in driving change, and ensure those with the most power, resources, and authority bear the greatest responsibility for influencing outcomes.

Schools cannot improve without clear goals, benchmarks, expert support, proven strategies, and adequate resources. An ideal system follows the full policymaking cycle—beginning with a bold vision rooted in fairness and access, and continuing with ongoing review and strategy refinement. This process must be driven by ongoing collaboration with stakeholders, not solely by top-down decisions. All families and communities—not only those with influence—must help define success and drive improvement efforts.

Such a system shifts the primary focus away from an "only" compliance mindset to one that supports leaders and educators to address the challenges schools are facing. All stakeholders must be empowered to give and receive feedback. Only a continuous cycle of goal setting, implementation, evaluation, and adjustment embedded in the DNA of school systems at every level can deliver meaningful and sustainable change.

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What are improvement-required schools?

UNDER THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA), states have the flexibility to designate their school accountability systems, but they must identify at least the lowest performing 5% of Title I schools to receive comprehensive support. States must also identify and give targeted support to schools with one or more underperforming groups of students. The law requires that a range of stakeholders be engaged in the development and implementation of improvement plans for these schools.

- **Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI)** schools have an overall performance score in the bottom 5% of schools receiving Title I or have a graduation rate of 67% or lower.

- **Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI)** schools have consistently underperforming subgroups of students, as defined by the state.

- **Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI)** schools have subgroups performing as poorly as the lowest-performing schools.

The majority of states (37) have identification categories in addition to these ESSA requirements.[4]

PRINCIPLE 2
Data-Informed Decision-Making

Data at the state, district, and school levels must be accessible, actionable, disaggregated, locally relevant, and timely to uncover disparities, identify bright spots, and drive informed decision-making.

THE CHALLENGE

The requirement to collect and disaggregate performance data by student groups stands out as one of the most significant civil rights milestones in education. Thanks to the advocacy of the civil rights community, ESSA requires that we examine how students are doing on statewide assessments, graduation rates, and other important measures—and reveal whether students have equal access to resources. It also requires that this data be broken down by race and ethnicity, English Learner status, disability status, family income, and other important student characteristics.[5]

Despite progress in data collection and reporting, work remains. In National Urban League and UnidosUS roundtables, stakeholders at all levels—including parents and caregivers—say they still can't easily find current and useful information about their children's performance, schools, or districts.[6] Data access varies widely from state to state, district to district, and school to school. In the worst cases, stakeholders must dig through dense spreadsheets packed with numbers and acronyms, with no clear understanding of whether this information is used to improve schools. Meanwhile, the way data is broken down can hide important parts of the story, depending on which student groups are included or left out of data collection and analyses.

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THE OPPORTUNITY

Sharing data about different student groups serves a bigger purpose than solely meeting federal meeting requirements—it gives schools and communities the information they need to celebrate progress, spot problems, target resources, and join forces to help every child succeed. But this is only possible when data is current and easy for everyone to find and use. In an ideal system, data is reported on student groups that matter to local communities, and it is presented in the context of school budgets and improvement plans. This approach helps all stakeholders understand not just the outcomes but also how the data connects to real solutions and drives meaningful change (see Page 11).

States and districts must meet federal requirements while going further, including reporting data for student groups that matter locally and avoiding practices that mask disparities by lumping diverse communities together. For example, combining all American Indian and Alaska Native students overlooks the distinct needs of different tribal nations. Similarly, instead of only reporting on Asian Americans as one group (the federal

minimum), states should break down data for subgroups like Hmong and Cambodian students, who may face vastly different challenges than Korean or Chinese students. The same is true of English Learners, who can have vastly different needs depending on whether they're newcomers to the country or how long they've been identified as needing language supports.

Likewise, data must be broken down meaningfully to expose barriers that different groups face while genuinely protecting privacy—not using privacy as an excuse to obscure results. As such, states must not set n-size—the minimum number of students required in a group before schools must report that group's test scores and other performance data—so high that some students become invisible in school accountability ratings because their groups don't meet the minimum size.[7]

Importantly, disaggregated data should be presented alongside the historical and current context of discrimination and systemic barriers students face based on their race, income, language, and disability to ensure the focus remains on fixing systems, not blaming students.

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How should data be used by each stakeholder in an ideal system?

CAREGIVERS use student performance data to understand their child's needs and take action, from accessing support services to advocating for better resources at every level. District and school-level data helps parents make informed choices about where to send their child to school, when to celebrate their child or child's school, and when to push for improvements when more support is needed.

EDUCATORS use student performance data to track learning trends, see how a child progresses from year to year, identify where they need to strengthen their own teaching skills, and make better long-term plans to support their students. At the same time, educators must use data from ongoing formative assessments to inform instruction.

NONPROFITS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS use data on student performance and access to resources to effectively support students and families, whether through tutoring, mental health services, or advocacy work. They use this information to expose unfair outcomes, push for better policies, and secure more resources where they are most needed.

POLICYMAKERS AND EDUCATION LEADERS use timely data on student performance and access to resources to craft effective policies, allocate resources fairly, and track whether interventions actually improve outcomes. They also use data to identify bright spots, share best practices, and scale what works across schools and districts.

SCHOOL LEADERS use data to understand what their students and school community need, then work to improve the entire school environment. Beyond test scores, they use data on the availability of resources (e.g., distribution of advanced classes) and learning conditions (e.g., school discipline) to identify what's working, what isn't, who is being afforded opportunities and who is being left out. They make data-informed decisions about how to spend money, which programs to implement, and what training their teachers need to better serve students.

TRIBAL LEADERSHIP AND TRIBAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES use performance data to determine how to best support their youth through funding decisions, programming, integrated student services, and strategic planning for economic growth. American Indian and Alaska Native nations have access to assessment data and opportunities, such as mandated tribal consultations, to gather input on student data collection, dissemination, and utilization.

Opportunity to Learn

Data on both learning conditions and outcomes must be used to ensure every student has access to the resources, support, and environment they need to succeed.

THE CHALLENGE

Asking students to succeed without adequate resources is like expecting a plant to thrive without water or sunlight, yet this remains all too common in our education system. According to EdTrust, school districts serving the most students of color receive $2,700 less per student—a gap that amounts to $13.5 million in a district with 5,000 students.[8] This funding gap means less access to certified teachers, advanced science courses, safe school buildings, and more.[9]

Education funding in the United States overly relies on local property taxes, with wealthier areas having more resources while poor communities struggle to raise revenue, even with high tax rates. Due to long-standing residential segregation, these funding disparities often fall along racial lines, disproportionately affecting Black, Latino, and Native students who are concentrated in under-resourced districts. States have a role in correcting for these imbalances through funding formulas and targeted grants that provide additional resources for certain student groups, but few have evened the playing field.[10] The result is a fragmented system where a student's access to a well-resourced education still depends largely on their zip code—and on their race.

Making matters worse, ESSA's promise of using student achievement data to direct resources to the neediest schools remains unfulfilled. In fact, an All4Ed analysis found that a quarter of schools identified for comprehensive support, as required by ESSA, ended up spending less per student than before they were identified.[11] ESSA also requires that schools designated as needing comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) develop improvement plans that include a clear strategy for addressing resource inequities. Yet a Government Accountability Office analysis of a nationally generalizable sample of improvement plans from CSI schools reveals that less than half meet this crucial requirement.[12] Even if they did, these schools represent only a small fraction (5%) of Title I schools.

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THE OPPORTUNITY

Research consistently shows that when schools receive adequate funding and investments in infrastructure, learning materials, and supportive environments, student outcomes improve, particularly for those students furthest from opportunity.[13] For this reason, education leaders must direct the most resources to students with the greatest needs and actively resist political pressures to concentrate opportunities among a select few.

Federal funding for low-income schools and improvement activities must be robust. Additionally, state funding must provide substantially more resources to schools serving disadvantaged students. When a school is identified for improvement, it should automatically receive additional support—funding, facilities upgrades, and expert coaching—from district, state, and federal levels. In an ideal system, schools designated as needing improvement schools would become prestigious assignments where only the

most skilled teachers compete to work, drawn by better pay, smaller classes, and the resources needed to succeed.

Equal emphasis must be placed on measuring and using both "inputs" and "outputs" (see Page 15). Output data such as test scores, graduation rates, or attendance reveals the problem by showing where students are struggling. Input data such as access to qualified teachers, rigorous coursework, or safe school facilities guide us on how to solve the problem. Many key inputs are already collected through the Civil Rights Data Collection, state data report cards, and district data collection but must be more closely tied to strategic planning and district and school improvement processes.

At the same time, leaders who work on housing, health, and education must partner together to address broader challenges like food insecurity, unstable housing, and lack of healthcare, which directly impact students' ability to focus, attend school regularly, and succeed academically. Only through cross-sector collaboration can we truly ensure opportunity for all students in and out of school.

> *Education leaders must direct the most resources to students with the greatest needs and actively resist political pressures that concentrate opportunities among a select few.*
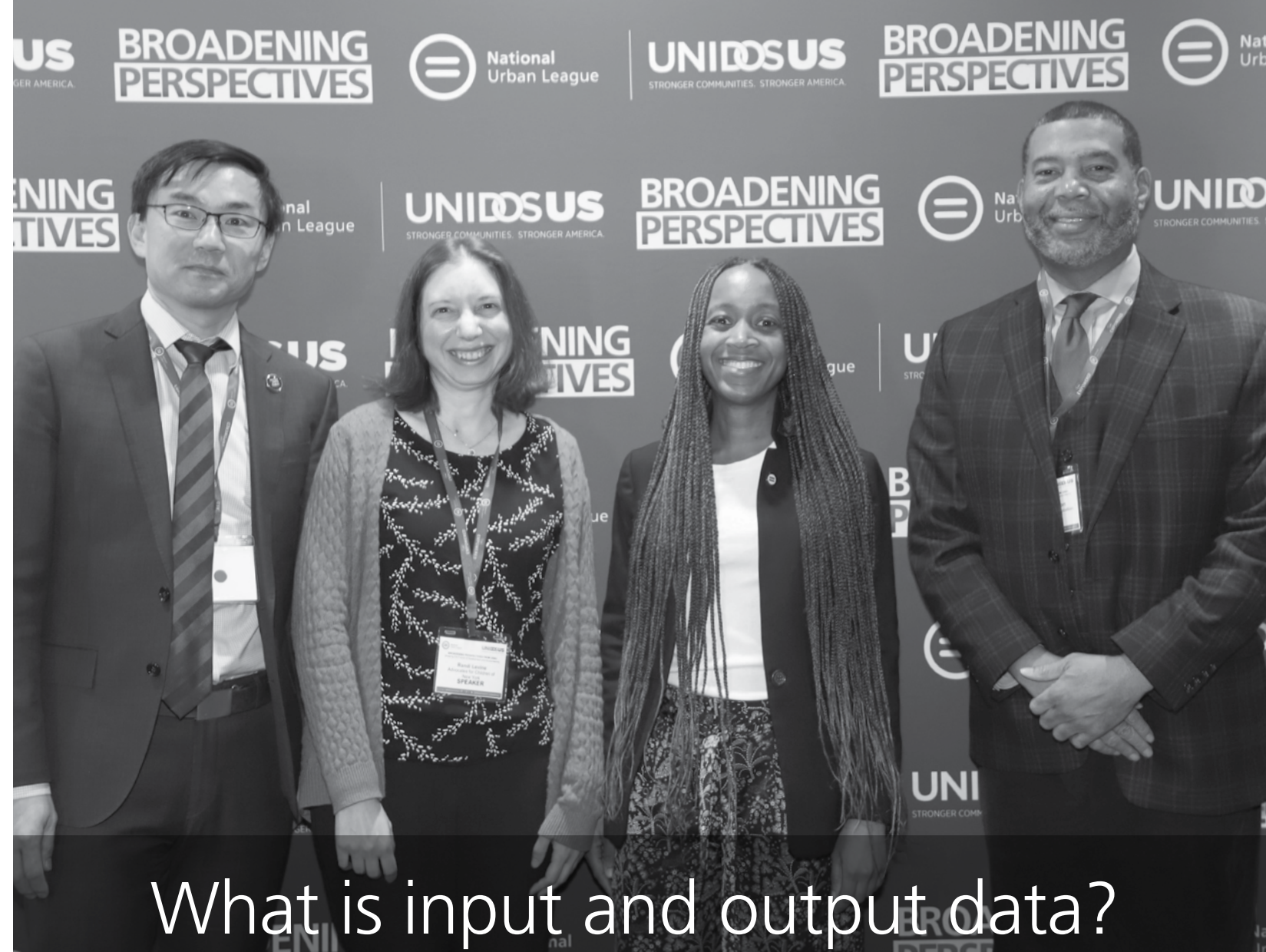
What is input and output data?

WHAT GOES INTO THE SYSTEM
Input data refers to the resources and learning conditions that shape a student's learning environment and performance. This could include per-pupil funding; class sizes; teacher qualifications, experience, and effectiveness; and curriculum quality.

WHAT COMES OUT OF THE SYSTEM
Output data refers to the results or outcomes of the educational process. These reflect the impact of instruction, resources, and policies on student performance and success. This data includes end-of-year assessment scores, graduation rates, attendance, and enrollment and completion of postsecondary education.

Well-Rounded Education

Preparing students for the future requires assessment and accountability systems that support a well-rounded approach to education—one that upholds academic rigor while also nurturing the full range of skills, knowledge, and mindsets students need to thrive in school, work, and life.

THE CHALLENGE

From a civil rights perspective, academic opportunity is key to leveling the playing field and ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have options when it comes to their futures. Yet, the National Urban League and UnidosUS find that students and caregivers have experienced increasingly narrow curricula and instruction focused primarily on a few tested academic subjects, suggesting that the pendulum may have swung too far in one direction.[14] This is especially true in low-performing schools, where insufficient resources and the pressure to improve test scores can limit exposure to a broad range of academic disciplines, practical skills, and learning experiences that align with students' backgrounds and interests.[15]

ESSA explicitly recognizes that a well-rounded education must encompass math and English, the sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts. It also provides flexibility for states to broaden the definition of student success to include measures of students' interdisciplinary skills, such as social-emotional and academic development. Regarding accountability, ESSA requires state accountability systems to include indicators of "school quality and student success" along with indicators of academic outcomes. Yet, a striking three-fourths of states have opted to include chronic absenteeism as their mandated "fifth indicator," with few having leveraged this flexibility to support interdisciplinary skills or career readiness.[16]

> In low-performing schools, insufficient resources and the pressure to improve test scores can limit exposure to a broad range of academic disciplines, practical skills, and learning experiences that align with students' backgrounds and interests.

THE OPPORTUNITY

There is broad agreement that education should offer all students diverse pathways into meaningful careers in an evolving economy and prepare them to contribute to our diverse, multiracial society. While definitions of "success" are shaped by culture, community, and family and are unique to each student, fundamentally every student should have an opportunity to become a happy, healthy, and prepared adult with access to economic mobility.

A strong academic foundation and a rich, well-rounded education must go hand in hand—it's not an either-or option. In an ideal system, students achieve proficiency in core subjects like reading and math, as well as in broader disciplines such as the arts, geography, and civics. At the same time, they develop interdisciplinary skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and media literacy. They also cultivate dispositions like open-mindedness, respect for diversity, and a strong sense of civic responsibility. A richer, more relevant curriculum reinforces academic learning.[17]

Federal and state education leaders must actively support local efforts to broaden the curriculum and definitions of student success with sustainable funding, clear guidance, and comprehensive resources. Federal and state education leaders must also elevate the role of data in understanding who has access to these well-rounded education opportunities.

There is a growing need to shift toward a more well-rounded education that is shaped by the voices of students and families and prepares them for success both personally and professionally in an ever-changing world. This approach must retain a strong bar on academic standards—firmly rejecting efforts to lower expectations or eliminate statewide assessments on core subjects—while also nurturing critical thinkers ready to pursue any path they choose, including college, career, and civic life.

A strong academic foundation and a rich, well-rounded education must go hand in hand— it's not an either-or option.

Meaningful Assessment Systems

In order to be reliable, valid, and meaningful, assessments must be aligned with state academic standards, accessible, and developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate—all while fitting into a coherent system.

THE CHALLENGE

Assessments are a critical civil rights tool. Students and their caregivers want to know if students are meeting grade-level expectations and making progress from year-to-year. Teachers need information to enhance their instruction, while policymakers rely on comparable student performance data to drive systemic improvements. For decision-makers, assessments provide a better understanding of what resources and interventions are most needed and effective. However, this cannot be achieved with a single end-of-year assessment—nor assessments that are not developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate.

In National Urban League and UnidosUS research, students of color and their families expressed a desire to better understand the purpose of end-of-year assessments and how they measure their child's progress, how the results influence decisions on educational opportunities, and how to use end-of-year assessment data to effectively advocate for their child's needs.[18] Stakeholders also expressed concerns about testing redundancies and what they perceived as the culturally biased nature of standardized tests. They emphasized that relying exclusively on end-of-year measures to show their youths' progress overlooks diverse experiences and presents a fundamentally limited view of their achievement.

Students and their caregivers want to know if students are meeting grade-level expectations and making progress from year-to-year. Teachers need information to enhance their instruction, while policymakers rely on comparable student performance data to drive systemic improvements.

THE OPPORTUNITY

In an ideal system, assessments serve as a critical component of a continuous improvement cycle. They provide students with authentic opportunities to demonstrate their strengths while generating data that triggers targeted resources, instructional adjustments, and personalized support—all while providing parents with useful, actionable information to caregivers about their child's progress.

This is why today's federal guardrail, requiring all students be assessed on the same test in grades 3-8 and once in high school, in at least math and reading/ELA, serves as a critical backstop to ensure no student falls through the cracks. Current requirements are an essential guardrail, but we must do more to ensure results reach families, educators, and decision-makers in a timely and accessible way.

At the same time, assessments must allow students to see themselves in the material (mirrors) while gaining insight into others' experiences and perspectives (windows).[19] Assessments cannot work in isolation but instead must be integrated with culturally responsive instruction and high-quality curriculum that authentically reflects students' diverse experiences, interests, and real-world realities.[20]

It is essential that education leaders at the local level collaborate to eliminate any redundant testing that takes away instructional time while providing no information to support student growth. The purpose of each test a student takes must be communicated clearly, whether the purpose is to inform student support, provide instructional improvement, or inform resource allocation and policy changes (see page 11).

> Assessments provide students with authentic opportunities to demonstrate their strengths while generating data that triggers targeted resources, instructional adjustments, and personalized support.

Types of assessments

DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENTS are pre-instruction tests that identify students' existing knowledge, skills, and learning needs.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS are ongoing checks for understanding during instruction that help teachers adjust their curriculum and support student learning in real time.

INTERIM (BENCHMARK) ASSESSMENTS are periodic assessments used to monitor progress and predict performance on year-end exams.

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS are evaluations of what students have learned at the end of a unit or school year to measure achievement against standards. End-of-year statewide tests fall into the category of summative assessments.

PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENTS are tasks that require students to apply their knowledge in real-world or complex scenarios to demonstrate deeper understanding. These assessments can be used as formative, interim, or summative checks for understanding.

The Future of Assessment and Accountability Project

brings together civil rights organizations, education advocates, and research institutions to reimagine how we measure student learning and drive meaningful improvement for all students, especially those who have been historically underserved.

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 37 states 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.

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"Assessments allow us to give schools the resources that they need."

— CAREGIVER
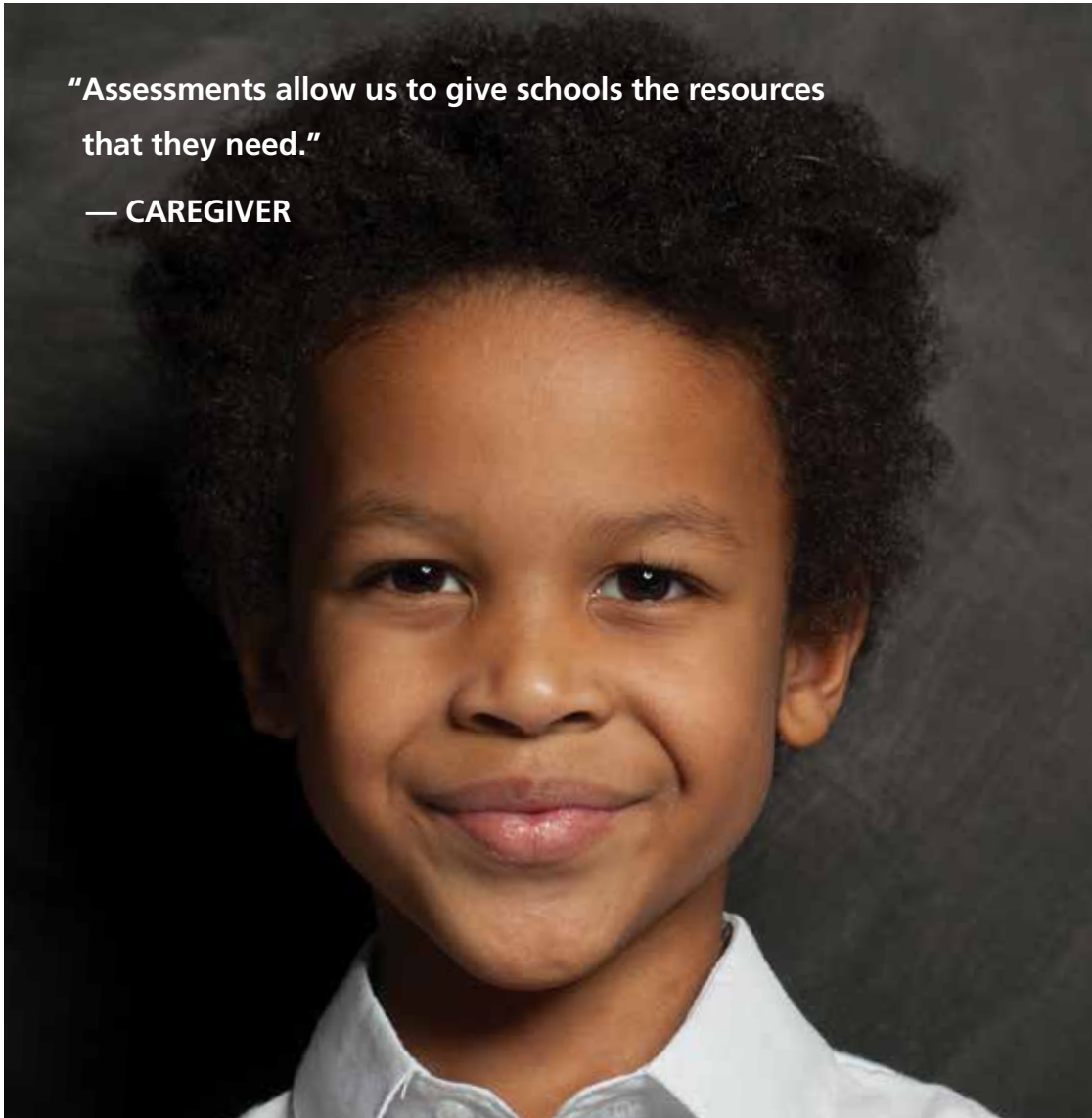
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Changing Lives.

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