EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In April of 2018, Alabama’s results on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) were released and revealed few improvements in student performance since 2015. Over the past twenty years, Alabama’s NAEP scores have long been near the bottom of the pack - significantly below the national averages for public schools. While Alabama has made progress with NAEP results, this progress has not outpaced the rest of the country and long-term trends indicate that the state’s achievement gaps persist for students of color and students living in poverty. In order to create better schools, teachers, administrators, district leaders, and policymakers need to have access to timely and accessible data to determine what instructional methods, curriculum, and initiatives are effectively working and what’s not. Parents and families also deserve more information - understandable, accessible, transparent information - about the schools their children are attending. Increased school data transparency and accessibility in Alabama would allow stakeholders at all levels -- families, teachers, school administrators, district leaders, and policymakers -- to make better-informed decisions in our public education system.

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

What is school data and why is it so important?

- **School data** includes student demographics, academic information like course enrollment and grades, test performance including school-level and state assessments, teacher effectiveness and evaluation, culture and behavior metrics, per-pupil expenditures, and many other indicators.

- When all of these data points converge, stakeholders can engage in a process called **data-driven decision making**. Such decisions include parents deciding where to send their children to school, teachers deciding what lessons to reteach after an assessment, principals deciding what type of teacher to hire in order to best support student needs, district leaders deciding the scope and sequence of professional development, or policy-makers deciding where to designate expenditures to best meet the needs of schools.

What is data transparency and accessibility?

- Each of the stakeholders mentioned above need access to transparent and accessible school data in order to make informed and timely decisions. Without access to quality data, these individuals can only guess at what changes need to be implemented, which can result in wasted taxpayer dollars and, at worse, the expansion of the student achievement gap. Parents and families need transparent and accessible information in order to make
informed decisions for their children and to be able to advocate for stronger schools.

**What’s being done to improve data transparency and accessibility?**

- The Data Quality Campaign, one of the national non-partisan organization leading the nation in improving data-driven practices in education, recommends that states create **longitudinal data systems**, which are systems that collect, link, and maintain high-quality data on students and staff from multiple sources. Linking all of these data points across systems help to paint a robust and complete picture of academic performance and system effectiveness over time. School, district, and state leaders and policymakers are able to use this information to analyze outcomes and determine steps to improve and strengthen school quality. The Data Quality Campaign has also developed ten essential elements of a robust longitudinal data system. As of 2014, Alabama had instituted five of the ten essential elements in its data systems.
- Nationally, states have begun to include **school report cards** as a part of their accountability systems in order for schools and districts to use data to evaluate and improve their own effectiveness, as well as transparently communicate with families and stakeholders about school quality and performance.  

**Challenge #1: School data is complicated and nuanced.**

- Most educators, students, and families would agree: there is more to measuring student success than just one indicator, and it is extremely difficult - if also incomplete - to assess student success without considering a variety of factors in relationship to each other.

**Challenge #2: The way school data is presented affects stakeholders’ ability to access it.**

- It is no longer enough to simply share the data. States must ensure that 1) data is easy to find and 2) there are a variety of ways that stakeholders can access, understand, and use school data, through easy-to-navigate dashboards and thoughtfully designed school report cards. Additionally, stakeholders come to the table with varying levels of experience and expertise in data analysis and may need additional support in developing their data literacy.

**Challenge #3: Decision makers need additional capacity to move beyond using ‘data for compliance’ to making data-driven decisions.**

- Across the country, policymakers are in need of additional capacity at state education departments and partnerships with non-profit research organizations to 1) build excellent data tools like dashboards and longitudinal data systems, 2) conduct analysis on school data, 3) to identify exemplary practices to share and point challenges to solve, and 4) to develop effective next steps for policy.

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**STATE AND LOCAL CONTEXT**

Recently, Alabama has worked to improve data transparency and accessibility:

- In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced previous federal legislation guiding K-12 public education in the US. Under ESSA, the Alabama State Department of Education is required to submit its accountability plan, release a state report card, and share new data points with the federal government and the general public, including annual per-pupil expenditures at the school level on their state & school report cards.
- Several unsuccessful legislative attempts have been made to create an Alabama Longitudinal Data System Center, including the PREP bill of 2016, SB153 of 2017, and HB97 of 2017.
- In 2016, the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) releases school report cards, without A-F letter grades, on its website.
- In February 2018, ALSDE released school report cards, including A-F grades, for the 2016-
2017 school year. The entire Alabama school system received a score of a ‘C’, while Birmingham City Schools received an overall score of a D, with 22 schools earning an ‘F’.52

- In December 2018, ALSDE released school report cards for the 2017-2018 school year, with slight changes to the grading formula including more opportunities to earn points for student growth.52 The AL state system received a ‘B’ score, while Birmingham City Schools received an overall score of ‘D’, with only 5 schools earning an ‘F’.52

**ALTERNATIVE POLICY**

**Exemplar #1: Arkansas**

Arkansas has been nationally recognized for its innovative data practices for over a decade after creating a state education data center with several portals for use by different stakeholder groups.3,23,26

- **Arkansas Department of Education Data Center:** As the primary entry point, the ADE Data Center is the intersection of several data systems that provide access to information about academics, human capital and licensure, student supports, district operations and fiscal governance, facilities and transportation, accountability, and the ADE directory.39 This one-stop shop provides a search bar for overwhelmed guests to find exactly what they need.39

- **Arkansas studentGPS Dashboards:** Through these dashboards, educators have password protected access to historical student data, including attendance, state assessment data, previous academic course grades, school assessment grades, and discipline. With access to this level of data, teachers are able to make data-driven decisions for their students in a timely and informed manner.40

- **My School Info through ADE Data Center:** For parents and families seeking to understand the quality of their child’s school, ADE created My School Info. This easy-to-navigate website allows any stakeholder to analyze and compare schools using a report that presents basic school information, program availability, per-pupil expenditure, years of teaching experience of school staff, and school ratings; with access to pertinent school documents like the ESSA report card and aggregate disciplinary reports.41

Arkansas Department of Education has gone beyond collecting school data for accountability and compliance purposes and is striving to ensure that all stakeholders have the data necessary to continuously improve performance and outcomes for the students.3

**Benefits**

- The ADE Data Center provides easy access to any information needed about Arkansas’s public education system.3
- Educators have password protected access to historical student data.3
- ADE has prioritized data accessibility for students and families by creating My School Info, which is a model for how this work should be done.

**Exemplar #2: Tulsa Office of Data Strategy & Analytics**

Under the direction of Tulsa Superintendent Dr. Deborah Gist, the Tulsa Public School District has prioritized data-driven decision making through the creation of the Tulsa Office of Data Strategy and Analytics, which uses student data as the driving force to continuously improve student learning.48 Created in 2015, the **Office of Data Strategy and Analytics** provides teachers and school...
facilitators with the technical resources to help better serve their students. The office created a high functioning real-time data strategy to better help teachers, school leaders, and support staff serve students and their families. The data team supports schools by providing analytic reports, data tools, dashboards, data requests, and research and evaluation. The central element of the office’s work is creating “dashboards,” which brings various data points that schools already collect but often store in multiple places, including attendance, state and MAP assessment scores over time, grades, and student transcripts. In addition to the data dashboards, the office has created a tool that allows teachers to prepare a report with all data necessary for a parent-teacher conference in a few clicks. Having all of the data accessible through one main portal helps teachers and principals save a lot of time and streamlines the data collection and analysis process. The Office of Data Strategy and Analytics is also using its local, longitudinal data set to generate research used to create targeted, individualized solutions for the Tulsa Public Schools system.

Benefits

- Teachers have access to timely and actionable data through dashboards, which allows them to adjust curriculum, instruction, and intervention in order to close learning gaps quickly for their students.
- Like CCSR, Tulsa’s Office of Data Strategy & Analytics is able to generate research that is driving the data-informed strategy and improvement efforts for the district.

Considerations

The following considerations apply for all of the exemplars mentioned above:

- **Ensuring student and teacher privacy is critical.** Due to privacy concerns, Alabamians have long been skeptical of longitudinal data systems. All data systems need to ensure student privacy and security - striking a balance between data transparency and student confidentiality and keeping within the boundaries set by the federal Family and Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA).
- **Data systems can be seen as a “punitive” and “tools to monitor and punish staff members,” therefore, building educator investment is crucial.** These concerns have also been a reason for pushback in Alabama, but an effective data system is critical to empowering educators and administrators to make decisions that are best for students and to identify the curriculums, programs, and initiatives that are working. Leaders at all levels must establish trust and communicate clearly about how data will be used in order to build and cultivate a data-driven culture.
- **Data systems must provide actionable, timely, and user-friendly data.** Some educators “harbor negative perceptions of data” because of previous experiences of overwhelming or obtrusive data collection that did not feel useful or applicable to their daily experiences. In order to build educator investment in data systems, state and local systems must ensure that these systems provide actionable, timely, user-friendly data to teachers and school leaders to ease the burden of data-analysis.
Implement the remaining essential elements recommended by the Data Quality Campaign

Create an easier-to-navigate website for ALSDE’s Data Center and ensure that all data reports are released to the general public in useable formats.

Create a user-friendly website for parents and families.

Create an Office of Data Strategy and Analytics at the district level.

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26. Data Quality Campaign, “Paving the Path to Success: Data for Action 2014,”


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The Policy Project

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