

## Takeaways for School and District Leaders

School and district leaders are making decisions today that will shape students' learning and educational recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in the weeks and months ahead. Health and safety for students and staff are top of mind. But so are the large learning losses and traumas students will bring with them back to school, which will have a greater impact on younger and more vulnerable students.

School and district leaders lack the robust qualitative and quantitative data on student performance, growth, grades, graduation, or attendance they would normally rely on to shape goals and action for the school year. In the face of so much uncertainty, how should school and district leaders approach data-driven decisions and focus on equity in the near term? And how should they respond to likely changes in state accountability systems in the year ahead?

The four briefs in our series “Making Next Year Count” argue that the foundational elements of education accountability systems — standards, assessments, and other data on student performance and growth — are more important than ever. School and district leaders should embrace these to drive higher and more equitable outcomes for students and help reshape accountability systems into something better.

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This resource is part of a series examining the past, present, and future of modern school accountability systems. With the dual forces of the COVID-19 pandemic and the national call to action on racial inequity, the question of how we should measure and hold schools accountable for the impact they have on students is more urgent than ever. Please visit [bit.ly/MakingNextYearCount](https://bit.ly/MakingNextYearCount) for more on this series.

## Focus on Re-opening with Data-driven Decisions

As the school year begins, data on student engagement, prior performance, and current student knowledge and skills can help leaders target additional resources towards the students who need most support:

### Make contact

As a first step, schools should examine data on distance learning and engagement during the spring to guide outreach for the fall. **Students and families least likely to stay in touch were disproportionately those most in need of support: students experiencing homelessness, youth in foster care, students with disabilities, and families facing significant financial hardship.** Additionally, the economic impacts of the pandemic will likely create extra instability in students' housing and family contact information. School and district leaders should contact students and families by any possible means – phone, email, text, social media, or safely in-person.

### Prioritize students most likely to be behind

Districts and schools should have some strong ingoing hypotheses of who might have fallen behind over the spring and summer, so they can act quickly. This can come from a combination of fall 2019 performance data, and spring 2020 engagement information. **Students who were trending below grade level before the pandemic are unlikely to have caught up in the ensuing months, and students who were not engaged in distance learning are also at high risk.** Districts should consider immediately targeting these students for extra outreach and high-intensity interventions like one-on-one tutoring.

### Substitute and adapt data

Leaders should aim for short-turnaround data cycles, with a focus on formative assessments for instruction that could immediately inform student grouping and intervention strategies. Interim or diagnostic tests, data from online learning platforms, or new optional resources in states like Texas and Tennessee<sup>1</sup> are all possibilities. Many schools already administer interim and benchmark tests, but this year leaders might use the data in new ways, or require more consistency in reporting and responses. These can provide additional information on student learning loss once school starts again, and can provide a new baseline to track progress as the year goes on.

1 Alex Spurrier, Chad Aldeman, Jennifer O'Neal Schiess, and Andrew J. Rotherham, "Assessment and Accountability in the Wake of COVID-19," Bellwether Education Partners, 2020, [https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Bellwether\\_Accountability-COVID19\\_Final.pdf](https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Bellwether_Accountability-COVID19_Final.pdf).

## Address Learning Gaps with Deeper Action

The pandemic has worsened many pre-existing gaps in educational equity. Assessment and accountability systems at the state level can measure gaps and progress, and identify areas of concern, but it will be up to district and school leaders to take action, using multiple data sources as guides.

Promising action areas in the medium and long term include:

### Instructional tools and curricula

Curriculum decisions are largely up to schools and districts, and in some places test-driven concerns weighed too heavily on instructional choices. Teachers need more effective instructional tools, training, and support to give students with a wide range of abilities and skills rigorous, standards-aligned instruction virtually or in-person.

### Racial justice and equity in schools

Widespread protests and public discussions about systemic racial injustices, especially in public institutions, should call school and district leaders to self-reflection. This includes but is not limited to data and accountability systems. Are curricula culturally responsive and inclusive? Do educators and leaders reflect the students they serve? What biases exist within performance measures and accountability systems, and how can they be addressed? What role can schools play in dismantling racism? These are deep and complicated questions, and the answers should go beyond professional development sessions.

### Focus on family engagement

Schools and districts with pre-existing strong relationships and communication with families were likely better able to weather the crisis and engage students at a distance. And, with home-learning likely to continue for many students, parents play a more central role in learning than ever before. This should be a lesson to school and district leaders on the importance of strong family partnerships, and the investment required to build and maintain those relationships.

In the year ahead, state leaders will likely continue to make short and long term changes to accountability systems as the year progresses. Despite this uncertainty, school leaders have an opportunity to rebuild (or build for the first time) data-driven decision processes that are focused on equity and responsive to students' needs.

*For more information about Bellwether Education Partners and "Making Next Year Count: Summer 2020 Accountability Series" visit [bit.ly/MakingNextYearCount](https://bit.ly/MakingNextYearCount).*