

# HEALTHY SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

EVERY CHILD DESERVES TO LEARN + THRIVE

## Policy Memo: Rethinking Educational Assessments to Support the Whole Child

March 9, 2022

States and school districts have traditionally used a variety of academic assessments to demonstrate student achievement, but the arrival of COVID-19 in 2020, coupled with social protests and a racial reckoning, caused unprecedented educational challenges that forced a pause in traditional assessments for many schools.

The disruption, while challenging, presents an important opportunity to address the inadequacies of relying solely on academic assessments to characterize and represent educational outcomes.

As they rethink their approach to assessment, states and school districts should incorporate measures and indicators that reflect student and school health and wellbeing. By incorporating more integrative assessments, particularly around school climate and social-emotional wellness, education leaders can better grasp a true baseline of where students are and their ongoing progress at the individual and aggregate levels.

These types of assessments — of which there are now multiple examples — also encourage states, districts and schools to target interventions to improve equity for student populations that have suffered greater learning loss and are experiencing greater social and emotional needs.

### Educational Assessments: Background and Opportunity

Education assessments are designed to serve different purposes and audiences, including parents and students, teachers and school leaders, and districts and states.<sup>1</sup> Healthy Schools Campaign has long advocated for educational assessments to include measures that would enable states and districts to assess whether health and wellness are integrated into the fiber of the educational environment. This type of expanded assessment affirms that all students are deserving of a safe environment that supports their physical and mental wellbeing.

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<sup>1</sup> Woods, Julie Rowland. Assessments 101: A policymaker's guide to K-12 assessments. Education Commission of the States. Available at: [https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Assessments-101\\_A-policymakers-guide-to-K-12-assessments.pdf](https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Assessments-101_A-policymakers-guide-to-K-12-assessments.pdf)

In recent years, a number of agencies have made progress in identifying a broad range of indicators and assessments that address the whole child and take into account conditions of learning. What follows is a look at the historical nature of academic assessments, and recommendations for a comprehensive approach that more accurately represents student needs and successes.

## The Impact of ESSA

On Dec. 10, 2015, President Obama signed into law the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as the federal education law. While NCLB focused strongly on high-stakes academic assessments to understand student learning, ESSA requires states to balance high-stakes academic assessments with additional indicators to portray, more comprehensively, the experiences and outcomes of students, as well as the performance of district and school leadership and instruction.

In addition, as with NCLB, ESSA requires that reporting of school progress measures be broken down by subgroups of students, such as students in special education, racial and ethnic groups, those in poverty and those learning English, in order to better identify and address disparities.

Under ESSA, states are required to consider a spectrum of factors and interventions necessary for educational success, including a School Quality and Student Success (SQSS) measure to assess Whole Child approaches, as well as to report on factors such as chronic absenteeism, per-pupil expenditures, and college and career readiness.

## Providing Education During COVID-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the United States in early 2020, forcing school buildings to close, the Department of Education granted states waivers for annual springtime assessments.

As schools struggled to regain footing in the fall, states, districts and schools offered instruction using a variety of educational models, ranging from fully virtual, to hybrid with synchronous and asynchronous instruction, to fully in-person. Although 79% of schools across the country offered both hybrid and in-person learning for all or some schools, only 50% of schools offered in-person learning to all students during the 2020-2021 school year.<sup>2</sup>

There were significant challenges accounting for student attendance and understanding student experience. Though comprehensive, national data to account for student absenteeism is scarce and inconsistent, an October 2020 report estimated roughly 3 million students were unaccounted for during the spring.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education. Institute for Education Sciences. Monthly School Survey Dashboard. Available at: <https://ies.ed.gov/schoolsurvey/>.

<sup>3</sup> Korman, H., O'Keefe, B., Repka, M. (October 2020). Missing in the Margins: Estimating the Scale of the COVID-19 Attendance Crisis. Washington, DC: Bellwether Education Partners. Available at: <https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/missing-margins-estimating-scale-covid-19-attendance-crisis>.

Vulnerable students, including those with disabilities, English language learners, students in the foster care system, migrant students, and homeless students were disproportionately absent from virtual learning. In addition, many students struggled with technology-related barriers (including access to devices and high-speed internet), as well as stable housing and access to quiet and secure places to engage in virtual school.<sup>4</sup> Some students left school to work or worked more hours to support families.

Even for students who were accounted for and “present,” content delivery varied widely by districts and schools during the 2020-2021 school year. Schools documented in-class variability in student participation and engagement, such as whether or not students appeared on camera or completed and turned in assignments. Teachers often had to deliver lessons to both in-person and virtual students, sometimes simultaneously.

Pronounced racial and ethnic disparities also affected students’ educational experiences during the 2020-2021 school year. Students and communities of color suffered disproportionately from COVID illness and death, layered upon a history of health disparities, discriminatory school policies and bias in education. Not coincidentally, 45% of Black and 47% of Hispanic students remained virtual learners longer, reflecting fear of COVID and the stress of being physically in unwelcoming school environments.<sup>5</sup> Asian students were also more likely to be remote learners — 61% of students — amid an uptick in anti-Asian harassment and violence.

An April 2021 study suggests that all students lost significant learning in 2020-21, especially in math, and students of color have been particularly impacted. On average, the study estimates that students would lose five to nine months of learning by the end of the school year. Students of color could be between six and 12 months behind, and their white peers between four and eight months behind.<sup>6</sup>

## Social, Emotional and Mental Health

In addition to learning loss, school closures led to isolation and loss of social connections for many students, and many also lost the safety and food security they experienced in the school setting.

In December 2021, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued an [advisory on youth mental health](#) outlining how the pandemic added to the challenges that children, adolescents and young adults face.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Education. Institute for Educational Science. Monthly School Survey Dashboard, March Data. Available at: <https://ies.ed.gov/schoolsurvey/>.

<sup>6</sup> Dorn E, Hancock B, Sarakatsannis J, Viruleg E. COVID-19 and Learning Loss- Disparities Grow and Students Need Help. December 8, 2020. Washington, DC and Providence, RI: McKinsey & Company. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help>.

Notably, during 2020 and 2021:

- The proportion of mental health-related emergency department visits for children ages 5-11 and 12-17 years increased approximately 24% and 31%, respectively, in 2020 compared to 2019.<sup>7</sup>
- Among adolescents 12-17 years, the number of emergency room visits for suspected suicide attempts was 22% higher during summer 2020 and 39% higher during winter 2021 than during the corresponding periods in 2019. The increase was particularly pronounced for adolescent girls.<sup>8</sup>
- Nearly 80% of LGBTQ youth reported that being home during COVID-19 made their lives more stressful, with 70% reporting that their mental health was “poor” most of the time or always during the pandemic.<sup>9</sup>
- It’s estimated that more than 140,000 children had lost a parent or a grandparent caregiver to COVID-19 by the end of June 2021, while many others have struggled with parents/caregivers, family, friends and community members who have been seriously ill.<sup>10</sup>
- Others are experiencing financial stressors, including homelessness, as well as potential neglect and abuse.

At the beginning of the pandemic, students also faced significant social unrest across the country, which ignited a necessary yet painful consideration of race, justice, policing and structural inequalities. For many communities, these issues were not new and have long been a traumatizing presence. The 2020 summer of protests, while hopeful and exhilarating for some, were painful for others and exacerbated long-standing trauma and grief.

Additional social upheaval, including anti-Asian violence and harassment and a contentious national election and insurrection, further contributed to a general sense of chaos, unrest, anxiety and isolation for students, families, school staff and communities. Students were isolated as they faced complex questions and feelings, often lacking connections to qualified mental health professionals and other trusted adults at school. In some cases, school policy prohibited discussion about sensitive topics such as race, and students were unable to connect virtually with their counseling team, or teachers were unable to make one-on-one connections with their new students. (This has remained a challenge, even as students have returned to in-person learning, due to states imposing restrictions limiting instruction on race, social justice and sexuality and gender identity.)

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<sup>7</sup> Leeb RT, Bitsko RH, Radhakrishnan L, Martinez P, Njai R, Holland KM. Mental Health–Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged <18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, January 1–October 17, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69:1675–1680. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6945a3>

<sup>8</sup> Patrick SW, Henkhaus LE, Zickafoose JS, Lovell K, Halvorson A, Loch S, Letterie M, Davis MM. Well-being of Parents and Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A National Survey. *Pediatrics*. 2020 Oct;146(4):e2020016824.

<sup>9</sup> The Trevor Project. (2021). 2021 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health. West Hollywood, California: The Trevor Project. Available at: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2021/>.

<sup>10</sup> Hillis SD, Blenkinsop A, Villaveces A, et al. COVID-19–Associated Orphanhood and Caregiver Death in the United States. *Pediatrics*. 2021;148(6):e2021053760. Available at: <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/148/6/e2021053760/183446/COVID-19-Associated-Orphanhood-and-Caregiver-Death>

## Assessing Learning and Student Experience

With a variety of challenges related to teaching and learning, education advocates argued for and against requiring educational assessments during the 2020-21 school year. Some stakeholders contended that assessments would cause additional undue stress and trauma for teachers and students already facing unprecedented challenges; others maintained that assessing students is critical to understanding and quantifying the most critical needs.

In a February 2021 memo, the Biden administration set forth expectations for assessments, recognizing the need for real-time information about student performance to better align resources with needs.<sup>11</sup> Given the challenges in understanding students' learning over the last two school years, states have a valuable opportunity as they rebuild their assessment processes to consider additional measures to adequately understand the experiences of schools, teachers and students.

Because of the disruptions to school communities and a lack of social cohesion – even for those in school full-time – education leaders need refined measures and indicators to clearly understand the impacts in terms of academic outcomes and learning loss, school climate and connectedness, and social emotional wellness.

The Department of Education, in its [COVID-19 Handbook \(Volume 2\)](#), recommends that states and school districts consider prioritizing “opportunity to learn” (OTL) indicators related to student outcomes in understanding where increased investments could be made. These indicators generally refer “to inputs and processes within a school context necessary for producing student achievement of intended outcomes.”<sup>12</sup> Examples include:

- Qualified teachers
- Clean and safe facilities
- Up-to-date books and quality learning materials
- High-quality coursework
- School conditions that provide students with a fair and equal opportunity to learn and develop critical knowledge and skills

Additional assessments, described below, provide a more sensitive and nuanced picture of student challenges and capabilities beyond acquisition of content. These assessments are linked to successful outcomes for students, as well as to evidence-based, effective interventions to promote success when deficits are found. They offer critical data for decision making at the state, district, local and individual student levels.

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<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Education. Letter to Chief State School Officers. February 22, 2021. Available at: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/stateletters/dcl-assessments-and-acct-022221.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Elliott, S. N., & Bartlett, B. (2016). Opportunity to Learn. In Oxford Handbooks Online Scholarly. Research Reviews. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

## Moving Forward: Other Considerations for Assessments

Recognizing the significant needs of students, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER) includes funds specifically designated to support and implement interventions related to students' social, emotional and mental health, and academic needs, with a specific focus on groups disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including low-income youth, children with disabilities, English learners, migrant students, students experiencing homelessness, and children and youth in foster care.

Funds may be used for mental health services and supports, including evidence-based interventions and hiring of staff, and specific funds are allocated for homeless students.

In order to effectively leverage these funds, it is important for states and districts to clearly understand their specific needs and appropriate interventions. States may consider a range of assessments to guide the use and evaluation of ARP ESSER funds, as well as to understand “opportunities to learn,” illuminating areas of concern and target resources and support.<sup>13</sup>

These assessments can inform policy, practice, instruction and support at the state, district, school and individual levels by identifying trends, illuminating gaps and strengths (geographically and by student sub-population), and highlighting individual student learning and social emotional support needs. These assessments could also help understand the impact of interventions implemented with ARP ESSER funds.

## School Climate and Quality

Eight states are currently using school climate as part of their accountability system, which describes how a school operates and actively embeds policies and practices to engage its students, families, and staff, and is associated with positive outcomes for students. School climate components include safety, relationships and connections, responsive teaching and learning practices, and a welcoming, health-promoting school environment.<sup>14</sup>

These aspects of school climate correlate at the macro level to school quality and student success, and at the student level to academic, social-emotional and psychosocial outcomes. States that include school climate in their accountability systems use student surveys to track trends and identify content/programmatic areas, schools and populations in need of improvement.

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, ED COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 2: Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students' Needs Washington, DC, 2021. Available at <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/coronavirus/reopening-2.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> [National School Climate Center](#).

Sixteen additional states use school climate in broader statewide efforts, including technical assistance on implementing evidence-based programs designed to improve school climate; nine states use this indicator to design school-level improvement interventions.<sup>15</sup>

At the district and school levels, school climate surveys can provide critical information about student, faculty and family perceptions of how a school feels to them, which can help leaders understand how their community experiences teaching and learning in schools. Climate surveys can quantify essential supports that influence student’s learning and supportive environments in schools.

For example, Illinois uses its 5Essentials survey, which is administered to students, teachers, administrators and families/caregivers. Results from grades 6-12 are used for accountability, and elementary results are used for targeted intervention and improvement efforts. Components of the survey’s “five essential supports” are highly correlated with school quality and improvement and include effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environment and ambitious instruction.<sup>16</sup>

Schools can use these surveys for improvement efforts, creating goals specifically related to improving climate and connectedness. These surveys can also identify variability among groups of students or faculty, including by race or ethnicity, sexuality, religion or grade level.

## Student Engagement

Even when students are considered “present” in a class or during a school day, they might not be fully engaged with or connected to the class, teacher or school. Given the variability of students’ experiences over the past two years, and the range of interactions between students and their teachers, an engagement assessment would inform a more nuanced understanding of the depth of connection that students have to their learning and to other students and adults at school, regardless of the model.

Assessments of student engagement can include behavioral, emotional and cognitive components. Students who are engaged with and connected to their school, and to adults within the school, have significantly better outcomes than those who are not.<sup>17 18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kostyo, S., Cardichon, J., Darling-Hammond, L. (2018). Making ESSA’s Equity Promise Real: State Strategies to Close the Opportunity Gap. Building a Positive School Climate. Washington, DC: Learning Policy Institute. Available at: [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/ESSA\\_Equity\\_Promise\\_Climate\\_BRIEF.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/ESSA_Equity_Promise_Climate_BRIEF.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Hart, H., Young, C., Chen, A., Sou, A., Allensworth, E. (2020). Supporting School Improvement: Early Findings from a Reexamination of the 5Essentials Survey. Chicago, IL: UCHICAGO Consortium on School Research. Available at: <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2020-08/Supporting%20School%20Improvement%205Essentials%20Survey%20ES-Aug2020-Consortium.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments. Student Engagement. Available at: <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/engagement>.

<sup>18</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018). School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/pdf/connectedness.pdf>.

Several survey tools assess all three of these dimensions, and several others examine at least two of the three. Several states already assess student engagement, and Nevada and Illinois use participation in their surveys as part of their accountability systems. These assessments can inform district, school and classroom policy and practice, as well as help design and evaluate interventions to improve student engagement.<sup>19 20</sup>

Most available surveys analyze student experiences, which may be combined with teacher reports and observational measures to help enhance efforts to connect with students at highest risk of adverse outcomes.

## Well-Being Assessment Measure

The Well-Being Index is a short analysis of an individual's sense of their own state, ranging from suffering to struggling to thriving. Using a "Cantril's Ladder" design, this tool asks an individual to rate where they would put themselves and their wellbeing on a scale of 0 (worst) to 10 (best). At the school, district or state level, this measure can be used to monitor the well-being of the entire population surveyed and to inform improvements and interventions that address the needs and social determinants of the population at greatest risk.<sup>21</sup> This measure also can be integrated into an existing state survey of youth, such as the Delaware School Survey.

## Aggregate Indicators or Indices

Several indicators can be combined into one index to fully assess and weigh several SQSS components. For example, California's CORE Districts – a group of eight districts representing more than 1 million students testing innovative assessment, interventions and technical assistance for improvement – are using the School Quality Improvement Index (SQII), which includes metrics related to school climate, social emotional learning and academics.

The SQII includes chronic absence, academic preparation, social-emotional skills, school culture and climate, and effective instruction. An aggregate measure may help states to combine several components to allow for further refinement of measures and indices without highlighting one particular component.

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<sup>19</sup> Fredricks, J., McColskey, W., Meli, J., Mordica, J., Montrosse, B., and Mooney, K. (2011). Measuring student engagement in upper elementary through high school: a description of 21 instruments. (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2011–No. 098). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast. Available at: [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/pdf/REL\\_2011098.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/pdf/REL_2011098.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Fredricks, J., McColskey, W. (2012). The Measurement of Engagement: A Comparative Analysis of Various Methods and Student Self-report Instruments. In S.L. Christenson et al. (eds). Handbook of Research on Student Engagement. Available at: <https://www.lcsc.org/cms/lib/MN01001004/Centricity/Domain/108/The%20Measurement%20of%20Student%20Engagement-%20A%20Comparative%20Analysis%20of%20Various%20Methods.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Saha S, Cohen B, Nagy J, McPherson ME, Phillips R. Well-Being in the Nation: A Living Library of Measures to Drive Multi-Sector Population Health Improvement and Address Social Determinants. Milbank Q. 2020;98(3):641-663. Available at: <https://www.milbank.org/quarterly/articles/well-being-in-the-nation-a-living-library-of-measures-to-drive-multi-sector-population-health-improvement-and-address-social-determinants/>.

## Conclusion

Although we are still in the midst of the pandemic, it is not too soon to reflect on some of the lessons learned and the clear link between student wellbeing and positive academic outcomes. Relying exclusively on academic assessments tells only one part of a much larger picture. States, districts and schools need methods to grasp the scope and scale of collective trauma and to identify vulnerable student groups in need of interventions and support.

It is time for states to consider a new range of indicators, including culture and climate, engagement, and wellbeing assessments. These assessments would provide schools, districts and states with critical, actionable data to better identify needs and improvement strategies clearly linked to student wellbeing and to positive academic and social-emotional outcomes.

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## About Healthy Schools Campaign

HSC advocates for policies and practices that allow all students to learn and work in a positive and healthy school environment, including those related to healthy school food, physical activity, behavioral and mental health services, trauma and environmental health.

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## Sample Survey Tools

### Student Engagement for Monitoring and Accountability

- Gallup Student Poll: <https://www.gallup.com/education/233537/gallup-student-poll.aspx>
- Motivation and Engagement Scale: <https://lifelongachievement.com/pages/the-motivation-and-engagement-scale-mes>
- School Success Profile: <https://schoolsucceessprofile.net>
- Student Engagement Instrument: <http://checkandconnect.umn.edu/sei/default.html>

### School Climate and Quality

- ED School Climate Surveys: <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/edscls>
- PBIS School Climate Survey and Resource: <https://www.pbisapps.org/Resources/SWIS%20Publications/School%20Climate%20Survey%20Suite%20Manual.pdf>
- Comprehensive School Climate Inventory: <https://www.schoolclimate.org/services/measuring-school-climate-csci>
- Panorama Education School Climate Survey: <https://www.panoramaed.com/school-climate-survey>
- Iowa Conditions for Learning Survey (accountability): <https://www.educateiowa.gov/pk-12/every-student-succeeds-act/conditions-learning-cfl>
- Illinois School Climate Survey (accountability): <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/School-Climate.aspx>
- Michigan School Climate Survey (improvement): <https://mimtsstac.org/evaluation/student-assessments/school-climate-survey-suite>

### Wellbeing Index

- WIN Network: <https://winnetwork.org>