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# Increasing Transparency

From Data to Communication

**Business Brief**



# Since 2015, states have had considerable autonomy in developing their accountability plans under the Every Students Succeeds Act.

States' permission to self-govern educational goals and associated data collection and analysis has led to variations in measurement, prompting debates about transparency. In response, states have passed or considered numerous laws regarding education data (Education Data Legislation Review, 2018).

These laws focus on a range of issues, including the governance of how and why data is collected as well as access and transparency. States are also "responding to public demand for more information about school quality and student success" (Growth Data, 2019, p. 1). Many parents and other stakeholders have difficulty finding and interpreting information about a school or district's finances and performance (Abamu, 2018). A parent wants to know, for instance, whether her child would experience greater success at Elementary School A or Elementary School B, all things being equal.

Despite the large amount of education data collected, problems with accessibility and transparency make basic comparisons within the same community difficult for the average citizen (Public Education Data, 2011).

Jenny Abamu (2018), former education technology writer at EdSurge explains, "Learning about and logging into data systems is only part of the struggle for parents. District data portals frequently go through iterations, changing the way indicators are calculated and the jargon used to describe them."

Although state laws work to promote transparency, different governance structures by locality result in unstandardized policies and procedures, increasing confusion (Public Education Data, 2011). For example, 48 states as well as Washington, DC, have committed to measuring student



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performance over time using longitudinal data (Growth Data, 2019). Comparing performance, however, becomes more and more elusive, as “every single participating state [measures growth] in its own way” (Schaffhauser, 2019).

Transparency is about more than comparing performance. Transparency is about clearly communicating expectations and outcomes. Transparency is about informed decision making, whether the focus is student performance, curriculum expenditures, average classroom size, or teacher pay. Transparency is primarily about better serving students. The following paragraphs offer tips for better serving students through transparency.


## **INCREASING TRANSPARENCY WITH SECURE ACCESS TO DATA**

Districts can promote transparency by ensuring that teachers can securely access, analyze, and interpret their students’ data. Specifically, teachers need access to data in an electronic format, removing the need for manual imputation, where current and historical data can be viewed on a granular (i.e., student) and aggregate level (Teachers Know Best, 2015). As the Data Quality Campaign makes clear, all this data collection is irrelevant “if those closest to the students do not have the data they need to move the needle in schools and classrooms” (Growth Data, 2019, p. 7). Teachers need access to real-time data to make informed decisions and take action, such as implementing changes to instruction or referring a student for tutoring (Teachers Know Best, 2015).


## **Increase Understanding with Context**

Districts can further develop a transparent culture by contextualizing data in relation to state accountability models and growth (Davis, 2017; Ordonez-Feliciano, 2017). Accountability models, and growth measures in particular, are notoriously complex (Growth Data, 2019; Lachlan-Hache & Castro, 2015). Yet, accountability models are the primary means of evaluating performance, and outcomes associated with these models influence decisions that impact school funding, teacher pay, curriculum choices, and programming. Students are best served when everyone, not just policymakers, are familiar with and understand accountability guidelines.

Make sure that teachers and administrators in your district are familiar with the key terms and definitions in your state’s accountability model. Educators are better equipped to improve outcomes when they understand how success is defined and measured. Moreover, teachers are more likely to have buy-in and feel a vested interest in the school or district’s outcomes when they understand how their daily work impacts those outcomes (Ordonez-Feliciano, 2017). For these reasons, encourage data- and accountability-focused discussions throughout the year, not just during state testing season. These discussions are rife with opportunity for professional development.



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## Facilitate Professional Development

The National Association of Elementary School Principals encourages the use of data to drive professional growth (Ordonez-Feliciano, 2017). Further, ESSA guidelines require that educators receive professional development opportunities and encourage the use of teacher time to review student data to improve instruction. Empower your teachers by giving them both the tools and the time to analyze and discuss data.

Data reveals strengths and weaknesses, allowing teachers the opportunity to view their colleagues as professional resources. For instance, teachers whose students perform better than average on a benchmark assessment might be invited to model a particular lesson for their subject- and grade-level peers (Ordonez-Feliciano, 2017).

Seek technology tools that enable teachers to view their students' data in an easy-to-use platform where data is current and detailed. Teachers should be able to quickly access information about their students' attendance and discipline, grades, and test performance, all in one platform. Seek technology platforms that do more than just store data; educators should be able to get their hands dirty with data and make it actionable (Davis, 2017). Transparency through access to data helps educators perform their daily work to drive student outcomes.

Teachers need access to data regarding their own performance as well. Recipients of Title funds must provide clear, timely, and useful performance feedback to educators and evaluate performance using multiple measures. Classroom visits from qualified lead teachers and administrators should be commonplace in your school, and constructive conversations about performance should happen weekly. Teachers should be able to understand and articulate how their own performance is evaluated and how the school measures teachers' success.

## ENHANCING TRANSPARENCY BY BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

One way to enhance transparency is to develop and maintain healthy relationships among students, staff, family members, and the community. Relationships require trust; transparency is a natural outcome of healthy relationships. Moreover, these relationships will directly impact your student and school-level success. Joyce Epstein, author of over 100 publications on family and community involvement, argues that relationships are critical to students' success (Epstein, 1995). Her theory of the three spheres of influence centers on the idea that healthy school, family, and community relationships facilitate students' learning in multiple contexts and help them feel supported and encouraged to work (Bilton et al., 2017; Epstein, 1995). The overall school environment improves when schools, families, and the community work together for students' success.



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## School Climate

Parents and advocates have made “aggressive efforts” to increase transparency on school climate, particularly in California (Burnette, 2016, p. 2; Burnette, 2017). School climate is another way of describing a school’s health. Advocates are seeking more information about school climate because “a growing body of research shows that school climate strongly influences students’ motivation to learn and improve academic achievement” (Positive School Climate, 2018).

A school’s climate encompasses the quality of the relationships between students, staff, and family members; the degree to which students and staff feel safe at school and in the community; and the degree of support and encouragement observed on campus (School Climate Improvement Action Guide). High quality conversations between parents, teachers, and administrators help shape a school’s climate (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Davis, 2017).

Students’ learning outcomes and their emotional well-being is heavily influenced by their own and others’ interpersonal interactions. Healthy parent-teacher relationships are critical to students’ academic success because they impact “the amount and quality of information parents and teachers receive about a student’s progress” (Miller et al., 2016, p. 40). Many parents rely on their children as the primary source of information regarding what happens in school (Epstein, 1995).



Communication  
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and teachers to  
build trust

## Parent-Teacher Communication

Districts can further promote transparency, and drive student outcomes, by facilitating parent-teacher communication. Teachers and parents are valuable resources for one another and every school member benefits when they have the opportunity to communicate (Schueler et al., 2017). Communication allows parents and teachers to build trust and collaborate on shared goals. Epstein’s theory of three spheres of influence assumes that cooperative action between parents and schools to achieve common goals is critical for meeting the needs of students. For instance, parents have demonstrated they will join forces with teachers to modify students’ study habits when they have opportunities to collaborate (Bilton et al., 2017).

Encourage teachers to engage directly and one-on-one with parents. Parents are more responsive to direct invitations from teachers and students to communicate compared to mass or broad invitations from the school (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2017; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Relationships will develop from these one-on-one conversations, which is critical for establishing trust and promoting the exchange of information that will ultimately help students and the school succeed.

Frequent parent-teacher communication is associated with outcomes such as increases in students’ scores on standardized tests, homework completion rates, and class participation rates (Kraft & Dougherty, 2012; Schueler et al., 2017). Parent communication does not require large meeting spaces or amounts of time. Text messaging is an effective communication tool. Parents are typically receptive to text messages regarding their child’s progress in school (Miller et al.,

2016). Moreover, several studies of texting campaigns to engage parents have demonstrated positive effects on students' learning (Miller et al., 2016).

Text messaging is convenient, and cost effective (Miller et al., 2016). More importantly, texting can increase transparency with parents of English language learners. Specifically, today's technology places translation services at our fingertips. With the click of a button, teachers can translate their text from one language to another, enabling instant communication between parents and teachers who speak different languages. In this regard, texting can help parents and teachers overcome language divides.

Many classrooms are becoming multilingual, and parents can serve as tremendous resources for teachers and administrators working with ELL populations (Novy, 2018). ESSA's latest update requires that states incorporate performance of English-language learners' progress in their accountability models (Davis, 2017). ESSA guidelines, under Title III, also requires recipients to provide community participation programs, family literacy, and parent and family outreach and training activities to English-language learners and their families. Seek out tools that help your team communicate with ELL families to build healthy relationships and impact student learning.

## **CONCLUSION**

Increasing transparency in your school and district improves the decision making for the betterment of students. You can increase your school and district's transparency by giving teachers access to data and by building healthy relationships through communication. Ensuring educators have secure access to data increases their understanding and buy-in, and even facilitates professional development. Access to data can help your team cultivate a data-driven environment centered around a growth mindset. Increasing transparency through communication strengthens relationships that are inherently critical to students' success, and promotes learning in multiple contexts. Communication tools like texting can even promote transparency among families with limited English proficiency.

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