Looking Back to Accelerate Forward:

Toward a Policy Paradigm that Advances Equity and Improvement

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
EDUCATION & SOCIETY PROGRAM

Carnegie Foundation
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Overview

This paper describes progress, challenges and opportunities of using policy to advance educational equity and excellence at scale in the United States. It begins with a look back that examines the evolution of standards-based accountability and assessment policy against backdrop of student-performance over 30 years, we note the shift from a *coherence framework* to an *accountability framework* during this time period and the implications of this shift.

The paper then explores trends in student learning outcomes by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status over 30 years. This examination suggests that along a variety of national and international measures, U.S. educational outcomes have improved far more for affluent students than for low-income students.

The paper then provides a **landscape analysis** of key stakeholders that are actively engaged in shaping, guiding, developing and implementing educational improvement efforts. The landscape analysis also identifies those who have not been adequately involved but should be going forward, such as grassroots and community leaders, parents, teachers and students, particularly from people of color.

This landscape analysis reveals and illustrates complex views of standards-based education (SBE) among influential actors in educator associations, intermediary- and advocacy-organizations, civil rights groups, parent- and community-groups, as well as views from national policy experts and practitioners. While these views defy discrete characterization at the individual level, collectively they described SBE as a necessary but not sufficient framework for U.S. Education. For example, some describe the current state of SBE as an *insufficient vision* that narrowly focuses on math and English language arts performance. Others suggest that *insufficient resources* have failed to deliver on SBE's equity aspirations. Finally, some critique SBE's *insufficient local engagement* as the Achilles' heel of top-down policymaking. Indeed, the primary consensus is that SBE was effective at revealing the depth of our education challenges, but ineffective at fully addressing them. Based on the look-back and landscape analysis, the paper suggests the need to assemble key stakeholders to position **equity** and **disciplined processes for improvement** at the center of U.S. educational policy. By **equity,** we mean

ensuring that all students and families have agency to prioritize and receive high-quality, culturally responsive academic experiences and other important youth development opportunities. These opportunities include, for example, social, emotional and physical development; post-secondary and career exploration to cultivate strengths and match them with economic opportunity; and civic awareness and engagement to support a healthy and vibrant democracy.

By **disciplined processes for improvement,** we mean integrating new approaches for research, data-use, and implementation in educational settings. Continuous improvement—which has been used to advance equity-outcomes in healthcare and education— is among the most prominent and popular of these approaches. Disciplined processes for improvement can critically fill the "implementation-gap" that has prevented public-policy aspirations from becoming lived experiences and on-the-ground realities for low-income and high-needs communities.

As the U.S. begins to build back better from the twin crises of the global pandemic and systemic racism, now is the time to bring together diverse and inclusive stakeholders to better understand where, how, and why local communities are putting equity and disciplined processes for improvement at the center of their educational work. With equity as the goal and continuous improvement as the lever, school networks and school systems are engaging students, families and other experts to improve culture, climate and classroom instruction, increase high-school graduation rates and strengthen pathways into post-secondary and careers. Learning from these examples—and identifying the national, state and local research and practice infrastructure needed to accelerate progress for students from low income communities and students of color—can provide a new blueprint for U.S. education policy.

Specifically, we recommend organizing a national listening and learning collaborative on the future of education policy to convene over the next three-to-five years. This collaborative would bring together a diverse cross-section of education stakeholders—such as policymakers, community leaders and organizers, practitioners and researchers, parents and students, particularly from communities of color – to engage in a series

of collaborative learning experiences. These convenings would allow stakeholders to deeply engage with, inform and learn from efforts that place equity and improvement at the center of school reform initiatives.

The listening and learning collaborative would develop principles for leveraging local leadership for broader impact, including strategies to broaden the vision youth development, build supports for equity, and bolster community engagement in

education. Building an understanding of the best-in-class work in the field looks like for equity and improvement—and envisioning the human capital-, research- and data-infrastructure needed to support these efforts at scale—is a critical next phase of work for the field. Building trust, engaging diverse perspectives, reviewing research, and developing shared principles will take a significant amount of time. The window of opportunity for this dialogue, call for engagement, and action is open. The need is pressing and the time to act is now.

Introduction

America is at a serious inflection point. The COVID-19 pandemic, unrest in response to police brutality and racial injustice, and the politicization of nearly every decision facing civil society provide an opportunity for disruptive change and innovation. Throughout our history, Americans have navigated change-related tensions, from the rise of the steam engine, mass production and space exploration, into digital technology. The events of 2020 likely will act as accelerant of disruptive change in the economy and society at-large that are inevitable over the coming months, years and decades.

As Americans' most significant shared investment in preparing young people for this future, public education has a major role in determining whether young people thrive and are equipped to harness this change for shared prosperity and the future of American democracy. For students who are in school today and looking for their foothold in uncertain, rapidly shifting times, this future is now. And yet the dominant frame for education policy was developed for an earlier era. The standards-based education (SBE) framework, developed in the 1990s and early 2000s, continues to guide and shape the purposes of schooling, the measures of school and student success, and the parameters for meting out rewards and sanctions across state and local systems. We revisit the SBE framework by examining key policy shifts and student performance trends since its inception.

For the purpose of this analysis SBE refers to state K-12 academic state standards, large-scale standardized tests aligned to those standards, and accountability, or attempts by federal, state, or local policy makers to use that assessment data to ensure that schools and teachers are meeting the educational needs of students—especially students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities and English learners. This includes public reporting on student assessment data and the identification of schools in need of improvement. **More detail on specific policies related to this framework are described in detail within this paper.**

Looking Back at 30 Years of Standards-Based Education

This look-back examines two key elements of the standards-based education (SBE) era: First, it traces policy shifts and implementation challenges of the SBE era. Second, it examines student achievement trends over 30 years, with particular attention to learning outcomes for Black, Hispanic, and students from low-income backgrounds.

Policy Shifts from Coherence to Accountability

The SBE framework resulted from both state- and federally led bipartisan education policy efforts during the late 1980s through early 2000s. At the federal level, the 1981 Education Consolidation and Improvement Act reduced federal regulations of Title I, shifting resource allocation decisions to states. In states, the SBE framework was promoted by both Democrat and Republican chairs of the National Governors Association during this time period.[1] State policy support for SBE was coupled with and influenced by new thinking in academia about the need for systemic reforms that would better align disparate elements of the educational ecosystem, mostly notably by Smith and O'Day, who suggested that a school-by-school approach to education reform suffered from high variability and was subject to capacity constraints across a dramatically uneven educational landscape.[2] A systemic approach, by contrast, would be grounded in clear, challenging standards for student learning. Academic standards would be complemented and reinforced by aligned instructional supports such as teacher preparation, curricula, assessments and professional development.[3]

The focus on alignment and complementarity among myriad elements of the educational system —anchored by academic standards—ushered in SBE *as a coherence framework* for U.S. education. The policy vehicle for promoting SBE's coherence framework was the 1994 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization, entitled the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA). A summary of IASA's key features illustrates its commitment to creating a more coherent educational system in the United States:

The IASA replaces the piecemeal structure of the old ESEA. ESEA programs will now be integrated into a state's overall school improvement efforts, focused around a core of challenging state standards. ESEA programs now promote the alignment of all education components—curriculum and instruction, professional development, school leadership, accountability, and school improvement—so that every aspect of the education system works together to ensure that all children can attain challenging standards.[4]

Although a coherence framework was at the center of IASA's reform approach, its centrality was relatively short-lived. By the early 2000s, most states had adopted academic standards, although there was a wide variability in rigor and use. Around that same time, the policy landscape started to shift from a *coherence framework to an accountability framework.* While the former prioritized alignment between standards, instructional supports and assessments, the latter prioritized student performance on state tests and accountability for improvement. (Due, in part, to pressure from civil rights and disability advocates, who felt the system was not doing right by their students.) The amount and frequency of student testing blossomed under the 2002 ESEA reauthorization, No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). For example, NCLB required

annual standardized testing in mathematics and literacy for all students grades 3-8 and established sanctions for schools based on students' performance.

Under NCLB, Congress authorized specific five-year funding levels for five of the 45 authorized programs, while the other 40 programs were authorized at specific amounts for the initial year of funding and at "such sums as may be necessary" for following years through 2007. While it is a common practice to not appropriate the full authorized amount, Congress never appropriated the maximum authorized funding level for NCLB, instead **appropriations ranged from 76% of the authorized level in Fiscal Year 2002 to 56% of the authorized level in fiscal year 2008,** the last year for which an authorization level was provided by the law. [5]

Unintended Consequences and New Policy Opportunities

With increased attention to testing and accountability under NCLB, student standardized tests became a high-stakes proxy for the standards themselves. The shift in emphasis from standards to testing altered the educational landscape and ushered in myriad unintended consequences. For example, while the 1994 IASA legislation called for standardized assessments in three grades across K-12, the number of required tests grew dramatically under NCLB requiring testing of all students in math and reading in 3rd-8th grades and at least once in high school. Increasing the number of tests and the stakes associated with them led to a proliferation of additional tests (e.g., (local formative, interim, and summative

assessments) and additional stakes (grade promotion, graduation requirements, teacher evaluation) as school systems and states oriented toward meeting accountability goals: A 2015 study by the Council of Great City Schools found that urban districts administered on average 112 standardized assessments across pre-K-12.[6] Reflecting on the profusion of K-12 testing under NCLB, Harvard Researcher Daniel Koretz said: "Walk into almost any school, and you will enter a world that revolves around testing and test scores, day after day and month after month."[7]

The Obama administration waived some NCLB requirements starting in 2011, providing more flexibility in exchange for adopting college- and career-readiness standards and creating teacher evaluation systems based in part on student performance. As a result, by 2013, 28 states had moved to require teachers to be evaluated annually, up from 15 in 2009, and 41 states required consideration of student-achievement data, up from 15 in 2009.[8] The shift from a coherence framework to test-centric accountability framework fomented numerous controversies. For example, researchers and educators were sharply divided over the validity and value of student testing for the purposes of school accountability and teacher evaluation. The implementation of new teacher evaluation systems alongside implementation of new rigorous standards contributed to opposition against the Common Core State standards specifically, and standard, assessment and accountability generally. Other indicators of student success and other important purposes of schooling were de-emphasized, including social-emotional learning and the civic mission of schools. Many teachers who embraced the promise of standards grew disenchanted as accountability was not accompanied with commensurate capacity building or other needed supports and resources. Some parents dissatisfied with state standardized testing joined "opt-out" movements to signal their opposition to elected officials, growing to a fever pitch from 2012-2015. These challenges contributed to the December 2015 ESEA reauthorization, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reduced the test-based accountability requirements of NCLB and shifted key responsibilities back to states.[9]

While the standards and accountability movement offered clearly articulated (and often test-based) outcomes, it was far more ambiguous about the means to achieve these goals. Across highly diverse, locally-controlled and loosely-coupled school systems, the infrastructure for collective action and

knowledge development is highly limited. Increased attention to and support for how schools and systems improve is a necessary policy complement to the nation's aspirational educational goals and mandates for improvement. Continuous improvement, which has a long-history of dramatically transforming manufacturing and health care systems, is increasingly being used to strengthen systems-process and drive equity outcomes in U.S. education.[10]

Continuous improvement approaches have been used to dramatically improve high school graduation rates and accelerate student achievement in the Chicago Public Schools, the nation's third largest school system.[11] Internationally, these approaches have been used by the Queensland (AU) Department of Education to virtually eliminate differential rates of graduation between indigenous and non-indigenous students.[12] The use of continuous improvement approaches with and through school networks has been accelerated by the Networks For School Improvement grant portfolio being supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.[13] By orienting systems to examine the root causes of problems, adaptively integrating evidence-based approaches to solving these problems, and engaging in iterative disciplined-inquiry, continuous improvement provides a coherent policy implementation strategy that has been missing in U.S. education. The prospect for a new policy paradigm, grounded in continuous improvement, would bridge SBE's coherence framework with a new vision for accountability focused on

learning. Consider for example, Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit and Pittenger's suggestion that: *The emerging paradigm for accountability must be anchored in this new vision for learning and should be coherently aligned to systemic changes implied by that goal. It should foster a culture of inquiry and continuous improvement at all levels of the system.*[14]

Continuous improvement could help shift the current policy frame from "accountability for results" to "accountability for learning and improvement that delivers results."

Student Achievement Trends

While overall levels of achievement have fluctuated over the past thirty plus years, three trends are particularly salient:

First, high school graduation rates have increased steadily over time and gaps between groups have narrowed significantly. However, graduation rates for Black, Hispanic and Native American students lag those for White and Asian students.

The chart below reveals the reduction and narrowing of high school dropout rates between Black, White and Hispanic students since 1990.[15]
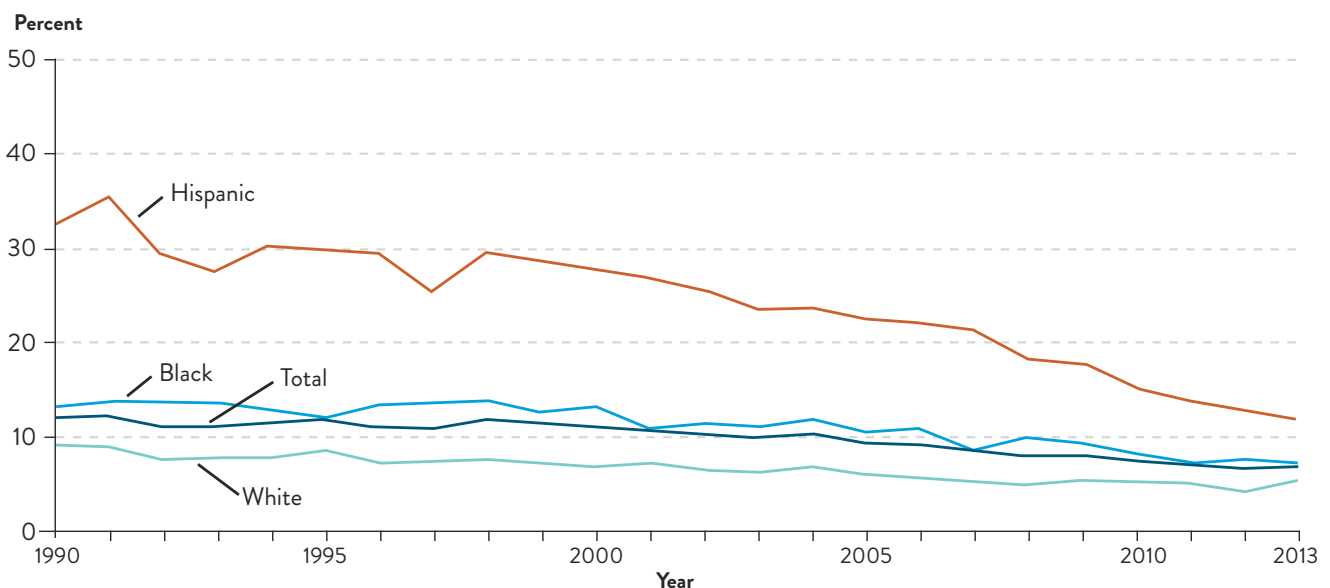
NOTE: The status dropout rate is the percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a GED certificate). Data for total include other racial/ethnic categories not separately shown. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Data are based on sample surveys of the civilian noninstitutionalized population.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October 1990 through 2013. *See Digest of Education Statistics* 2014 table 219.70.

In 2017-18, subgroup graduation rates were as follows[16]:

Adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for public high school students by race/ethnicity: 2017-18

Percent
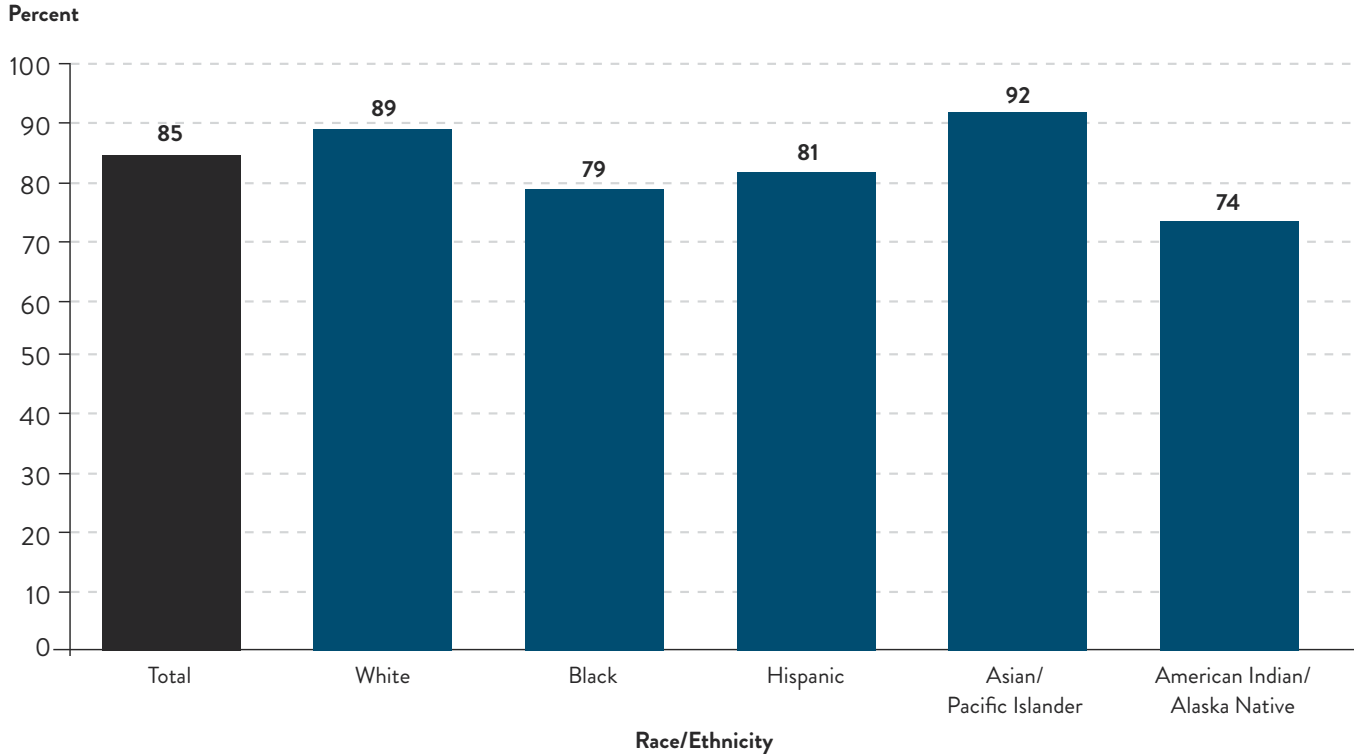
1 Includes other race/ethnicity categories not separately shown.

2 Reporting practices for data on Asian and Pacific Islander students vary by state. Asian/Pacific Islander data in this indicator represent either the value reported by the state for the "Asian/Pacific Islander" group or an aggregation of separate values reported by the state for "Asian" and "Pacific Islander." "Asian/Pacific Islander" includes the "Filipino" group, which only California and Hawaii report separately.

3 Estimated assuming a count of zero American Indian/Alaska Native students for Hawaii.

NOTE: The ACGR is the percentage of public high school freshmen who graduate with a regular diploma within 4 years of starting ninth grade. The Bureau of Indian Education and Puerto Rico are not included in the U.S. average ACGR. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Consolidated State Performance Report, 2017–18. See Digest of Education Statistics 2019, table 219.46.

The following two figures reveal state-level "graduation gaps" for Black and Hispanic students compared to White students.

Adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR of White and Black public high school students by state: 2017-2018

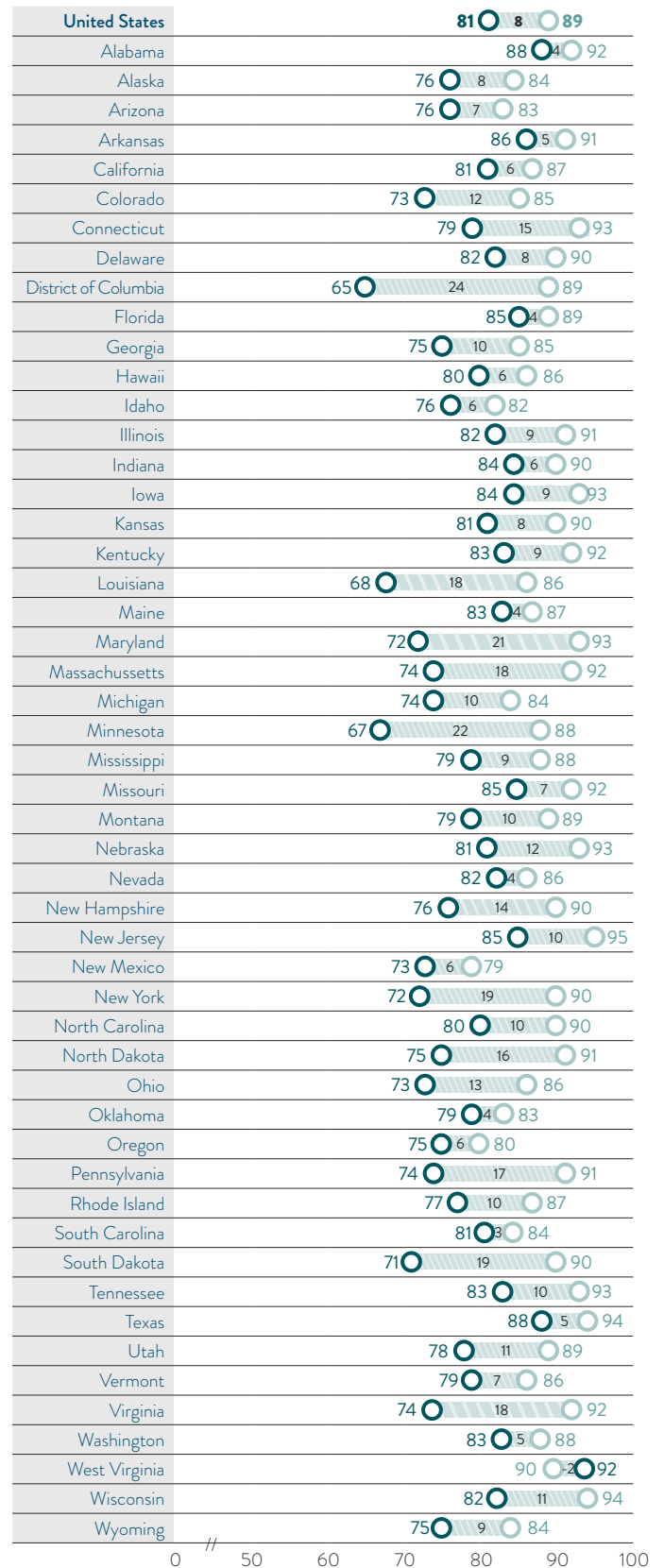| State	Black	Gap	White
United States	79	10	89
Alabama	88	4	92
Alaska	73	11	84
Arizona	74	10	83
Arkansas	86	6	91
California	73	14	87
Colorado	74	11	85
Connecticut	81	13	93
Delaware	83	7	90
District of Columbia	67	22	89
Florida	81	8	89
Georgia	79	6	85
Hawaii	82	4	86
Idaho	71	11	82
Illinois	78	14	91
Indiana	79	11	90
Iowa	81	12	93
Kansas	79	11	90
Kentucky	82	10	92
Louisiana	77	8	86
Maine	78	9	87
Maryland	85	8	93
Massachussetts	80	12	92
Michigan	70	14	84
Minnesota	67	21	88
Mississippi	81	7	88
Missouri	80	12	92
Montana	80	9	89
Nebraska	78	15	93
Nevada	72	15	86
New Hampshire	81	9	90
New Jersey	84	11	95
New Mexico	69	10	79
New York	73	17	90
North Carolina	83	6	90
North Dakota	76	15	91
Ohio	69	17	86
Oklahoma	77	6	83
Oregon	68	12	80
Pennsylvania	72	18	91
Rhode Island	83	4	87
South Carolina	77	7	84
South Dakota	75	15	90
Tennessee	84	9	93
Texas	87	7	94
Utah	76	13	89
Vermont	70	16	86
Virginia	84	8	92
Washington	80	8	88
West Virginia	86	4	90
Wisconsin	70	24	94
Wyoming	77	7	84

Adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR of White and Hispanic public high school students by state: 2017-2018

State	Hispanic	Gap	White
United States	81	8	89
Alabama	88	4	92
Alaska	76	8	84
Arizona	76	7	83
Arkansas	86	5	91
California	81	6	87
Colorado	73	12	85
Connecticut	79	15	93
Delaware	82	8	90
District of Columbia	65	24	89
Florida	85	4	89
Georgia	75	10	85
Hawaii	80	6	86
Idaho	76	6	82
Illinois	82	9	91
Indiana	84	6	90
Iowa	84	9	93
Kansas	81	8	90
Kentucky	83	9	92
Louisiana	68	18	86
Maine	83	4	87
Maryland	72	21	93
Massachussetts	74	18	92
Michigan	74	10	84
Minnesota	67	22	88
Mississippi	79	9	88
Missouri	85	7	92
Montana	79	10	89
Nebraska	81	12	93
Nevada	82	4	86
New Hampshire	76	14	90
New Jersey	85	10	95
New Mexico	73	6	79
New York	72	19	90
North Carolina	80	10	90
North Dakota	75	16	91
Ohio	73	13	86
Oklahoma	79	4	83
Oregon	75	6	80
Pennsylvania	74	17	91
Rhode Island	77	10	87
South Carolina	81	3	84
South Dakota	71	19	90
Tennessee	83	10	93
Texas	88	5	94
Utah	78	11	89
Vermont	79	7	86
Virginia	74	18	92
Washington	83	5	88
West Virginia	90	2	92
Wisconsin	82	11	94
Wyoming	75	9	84

Second, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) benchmark: Black students have made large performance gains and racial achievement gaps have narrowed modestly. Gains by White students over time mean that performance differences by race and ethnicity remain significant. For all students, performance gains have stalled since 2013.

Black students have made significant progress on the NAEP—gaining about a full standard deviation on long-term portion of NAEP between the 1970s to 2012 and about two-thirds of a standard deviation (SD) on the (revised) Main NAEP from the early 1990s to 2011. Commenting on the rate of improvement among Black students, Richard Rothstein noted that the "The full standard deviation gain in a single generation represents an improvement rate rarely encountered in any area of human performance."[17]

One area of notable improvement has been the growing number of students meeting at least the "basic" level of performance on NAEP. From 1994 until 2019, the percentage of fourth and eighth graders performing "below basic" in math and reading on NAEP declined. For fourth grade reading the percentage of students scoring at below basic levels decreased from 40% to 34% of all students, with Hispanic and Black students seeing the greatest decreases (21 points and 18 points drops, respectively). In fourth grade mathematics, decreases in below basic were even more pronounced with an overall 31-point decrease in students scoring below basic between 1990 and 2019, with Black and Hispanic students seeing the biggest reductions in the below basic scores.[18] A similar pattern exists with the rate of eighth graders reading and math at a below-basic level between the early 1990's and 2019[19] in effect, raising the floor across the board.

Another area of progress on the NAEP has been Black and Hispanic students narrowing achievement gaps with white students over time. For example, using 8th grade NAEP mathematics as a metric, the black-white gap reduced from 1.09 standard deviations (SD) in 1996 to .83 SD in 2017. The White-Hispanic gap has narrowed from .79 SD to .61SD over the same time period.[20] The charts below demonstrate these changes over time.

NAEP test score gaps—math, grade 8
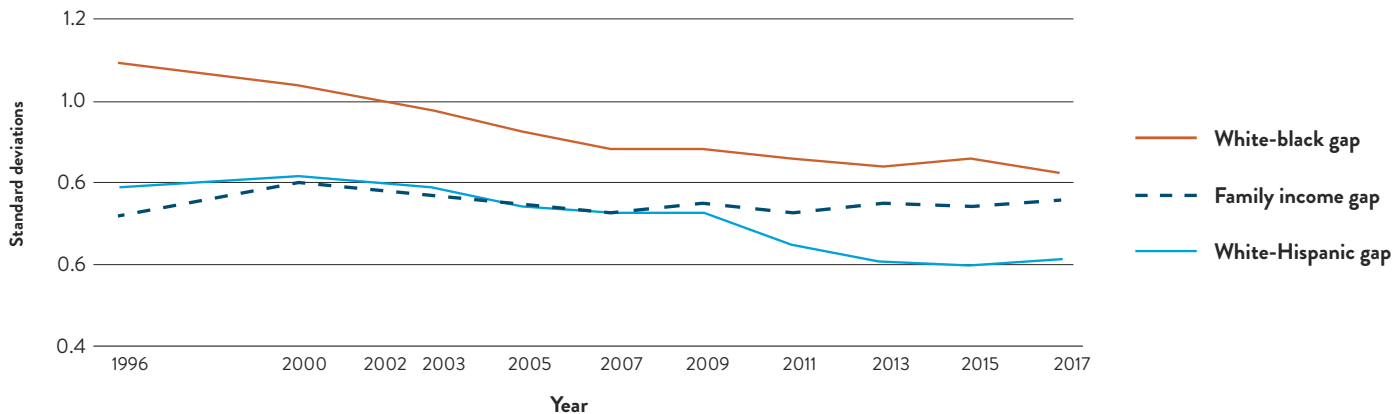
NAEP test score gaps—reading, grade 8
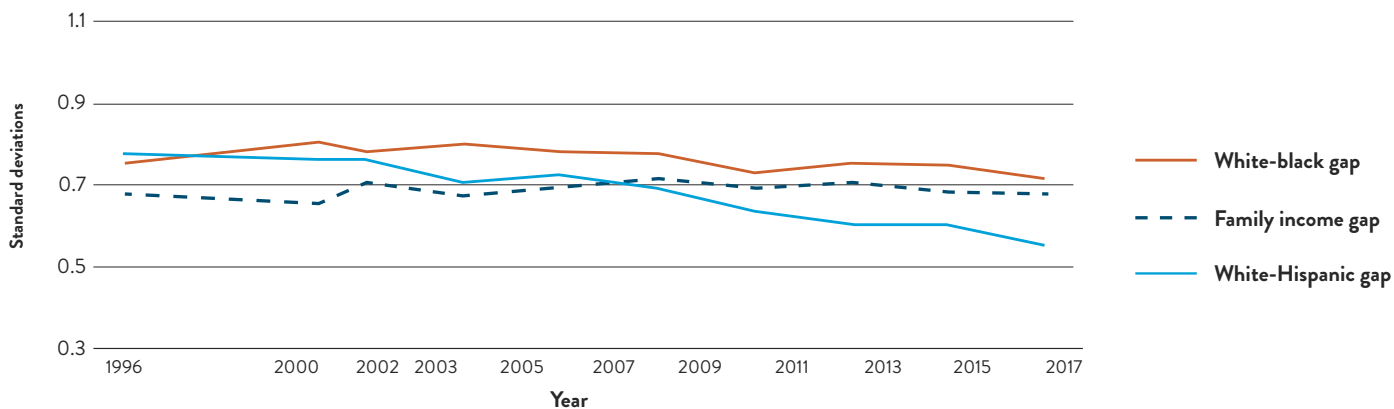
SOURCE: The Brookings Institute, 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: Trends in NAEP math, reading, and civics scores

The modest narrowing of achievement gaps between white, Black and Hispanic students reflects the fact that white students are also improving their performance on the NAEP. For example, the following table compares students' mathematics performance on the 1992 NAEP versus the 2013 NAEP.

	NAEP Math Scores (1992)	NAEP Math Scores (2013)
White	276	293
Black	236	263
Hispanic	247	271

Between 1992 and 2013, Math NAEP scores for Black students improved from 236 to 263. Because the scores for White students were rising during the same time period, the gap between Blacks and Whites is 30 points rather than 13 points. Similarly, the gap between White and Hispanic students between these two time periods is 22 points rather than 5 points had White scores remained at the 1992 level. Because all groups have been making progress on the NAEP, absolute achievement differences by race and ethnicity remain both substantial and significant. Most recently, on the 2017 8th grade NAEP mathematics assessment, the average white student scored 33 points higher than the average black student and 24 points higher than the average Hispanic student.[21]

Overall NAEP scores in reading and math largely have declined or stayed flat between 2013-2019.[22] Reflecting on the 2019 NAEP results, Peggy Carr, an Associate Commissioner in the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) remarked that "Over the past decade, there has been no progress in either mathematics or reading performance."[23]

Third: In addition to flat-lining progress on racial achievement gaps, an important trend has been the increasing salience of social economic status (SES) on student achievement. While race and social class can be interconnected and overlapping, SES variables have become the more prominent predictor of student performance. For example, research on comparing affluent students (i.e., 90th percentile of the family income distribution) and low-income students (those at the 10th percentile) has revealed that the "income achievement gap" to be nearly twice as large as the black-white achievement gap.[24] Research at the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University indicates that the black-white achievement gaps represent growing "opportunity gaps" between affluent and low-income students. The center's research suggests that almost all achievement differences between Black and White students reflect opportunity gaps

rooted in socioeconomic status and segregation.[25] While some scholars have questioned the growth of the "income achievement gap" over the last two decades, they acknowledge that large achievement gaps between affluent and low-income students have remained persistent and consistent over time.[26]

Recent research from the international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test underscore the marked differences in educational performance between affluent and low-income students. These learners show up in very different places in the PISA rankings of 40 industrialized nations. For example, affluent students in the US are performing as well on PISA's math and science as students in Singapore, the world's highest performing nation. By contrast, low income students perform at levels that approximate the countries that fall between 31st and 34th on the PISA rankings. The PISA results underscore that affluent students in the U.S. are among the top performing students in the world, with low-income students trailing significantly behind.[27]

Compounding the dramatic educational inequality by income in the U.S. is the fact that low-income students are a growing proportion of the overall public education population. For example, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the percentage of public school students that are eligible for free and reduced lunches (FRL) have grown from 38.3% of students in 2000-01 to 52.2% in 2016-17.[28,29] These trends may be further exacerbated by economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most recent data on student performance during the COVID-19 pandemic provides additional evidence of a widening opportunity gap between affluent and low-income students. A recent study by California-based PACE compared 2019 and 2020 test scores for 50,000 students. Compared to typical year-to-year learning gains, low-income 4th- and 8th-grade students declined 7% in the usual rate of learning, while wealthy students made an additional 5% increase in growth. These diverging achievement trends represent a 12% learning gap between affluent and low-income students.[30]

Next, we offer a landscape analysis that captures current perceptions and beliefs about the strengths and challenges of SBE. The analysis also identifies opportunities to engage stakeholders at all levels around opportunities to revision SBE in ways that may better address and attain the equity goals that spurred its development.

Table 3. PISA reading, science, and math scores, age 15, by OECDPlus countries, * U.S. students' PISA Economic, Social, and Cultural Index, and race/ethnicity: 2015

READING

Education System Rank	Education System	Score
	OECD Average	487
	U.S. Asian	556
1	Singapore	549
	U.S. FRPL Advantaged Students[1]	543
	U.S. ESC Advantaged Students[2]	539
	U.S. White	531
2	Hong Kong (China)	524
3	Estonia	523
4	Canada	520
5	Finland	520
6	Ireland	518
7	Korea, Rep.	514
8	Poland	512
9	Sweden	506
10	New Zealand	506
11	United States	505
12	United Kingdom	504
13	Japan	504
14	Australia	503
15	Chinese Taipei	503
16	Denmark	501
17	Norway	499
18	Germany	498
19	Slovenia	495
20	Belgium	493
21	France	493
22	Portugal	492
23	Czech Republic	490
24	Netherlands	485
25	Austria	484
26	Switzerland	484
	U.S. Hispanic	481
27	Latvia	479
28	Russian Federation	479
29	Italy	476
30	Hungary	476
31	Lithuania	476
	U.S. ESC Disadvantaged Students[2]	474
32	Iceland	474
	U.S. FRPL Disadvantaged Students[1]	473
33	Israel	470
34	Luxemourg	470
35	Turkey	466
36	Slovak Republic	458
37	Greece	457
38	Chile	452
	U.S. Black	448
39	Mexico	420

SCIENCE

Education System Rank	Education System	Score
	OECD Average	489
	U.S. Asian	551
1	Singapore	551
	U.S. FRPL Advantaged Students[1]	539
	U.S. ESC Advantaged Students[2]	533
2	Estonia	530
	U.S. White	529
3	Japan	529
4	Finland	522
5	Korea, Rep	519
6	Canada	518
7	Hong Kong (China)	517
8	Chinese Taipei	516
9	Poland	511
19	New Zealand	508
11	Slovenia	507
12	United Kingdom	505
13	Netherlands	503
14	Germany	503
15	Australia	503
16	United States	502
17	Sweden	499
18	Belgium	499
19	Czech Republic	497
20	Ireland	496
21	Switzerland	495
22	France	493
23	Denmark	493
24	Portugal	492
25	Norway	490
26	Austria	490
27	Latvia	487
28	Spain	483
29	Lithuania	482
30	Hungary	481
	U.S. Hispanic	478
31	Russian Federation	478
32	Luxembourg	477
33	Iceland	475
	U.S. ESC Disadvantaged Students[2]	473
	U.S. FRPL Disadvantaged Students[1]	471
34	Turkey	468
35	Italy	468
36	Slovak Republic	464
37	Israel	462
38	Greece	452
39	Chile	444
	U.S. Black	440
40	Mexico	419

MATH

Education System Rank	Education System	Score
	OECD Average	489
1	Singapore	569
2	Hong Kong (China)	551
	U.S. Asian	539
3	Chinese Taipei	531
4	Japan	527
5	Korea, Rep.	526
6	Estonia	523
7	Netherlands	519
8	Poland	516
	U.S. FRPL Advantaged Students[1]	515
9	Switzerland	515
10	Canada	512
	U.S. ESC Advantaged Students[2]	511
11	Denmark	509
12	Slovenia	509
13	Belgium	508
14	Finland	507
	U.S. White	503
15	Sweden	502
16	United Kingdom	502
17	Norway	501
18	Germany	500
19	Ireland	500
20	Czech Republic	499
21	Austria	499
22	Latvia	496
23	France	495
24	Iceland	495
25	New Zealand	494
26	Portugal	492
27	Australia	491
28	Russian Federation	488
29	Italy	487
30	Slovak Republic	486
31	Luxembourg	483
32	Spain	481
33	Lithuania	481
34	Hungary	481
35	United States	478
36	Israel	463
37	Turkey	454
	U.S. Hispanic	452
38	Greece	451
	U.S. ESC Disadvantaged Students[2]	447
	U.S. FRPL Disadvantaged Students[1]	446
	U.S. Black	419
38	Chile	417
39	Mexico	409

*OECDPlus countries include OECD countries plus industrialized countries of Chinese Taipei, Hong Kong, Russia, and Singapore

Source: NCES PISA Data Explorer

Landscape Analysis: Reflections on 30 Years of Standards-Based Reform

Assessing what worked and what didn't over thirty plus years of education improvement efforts is a contentious and complex endeavor. Indeed, Americans—and education experts, in particular—hold a lot of dissonance when it comes to these issues.

Polling finds that, generally, Americans value the *concept* of standards and aligned assessments, but have reservations with them as currently enacted. While 57% of Americans think that standardized testing is very/somewhat important to measuring school effectiveness[31], 46% of Americans say that standardized testing has gotten worse in the last ten years, and 49% say that standardized tests have done more harm than good in the last ten years.[32] Within the education community, there are strong opinions and a lot of nuance. Not only is it a policy issue, but it is a political issue, an identity issue and an equity issue.

To determine where people stand after 30 plus years of policy and implementation of SBE we convened a diverse group of education leaders in an off-the-record roundtable, requested written statements, conducted phone interviews, and reviewed public statements, blogs, speeches, and news coverage. This qualitative analysis included the perspectives of students, teachers, parents, district leaders, state education agency leaders, state legislators, governors, education advocates, union leaders, researchers, higher education leaders, test developers, professional development providers, current and former Congressional Staff and U.S. Department of Education staff, charter leaders, funders, education technology and innovation leaders, out-of-school-time and youth development leaders, education support organization leaders, and leaders of civil rights organizations and social/racial justice advocates and organizers.[33] We also analyzed public opinion research, including polling and focus group reports from both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Across all of this research and analysis, we use the term "stakeholders" to be inclusive of the groups identified above and present below a summary of their responses. While this collection of individuals cannot fully represent entire categories of people, there are notable themes.

The Upshot of 30 Years of a Standards-Based Assessment and Accountability Agenda

There was significant—but not universal—agreement that SBE policies:

- **Provide a clear and consistent foundation for what all students should know and be able to do.** Academic standards help provide a shared language for the work of educators and, in some instances, helps foster more coherence in instructional practice (pedagogy, materials, professional development).

- **Draw attention to existing inequities at a much more precise level.** Assessment data and explicit expectations for all students encourages educators to pay more attention to students with disabilities and students of color in particular. The disaggregation of test data specifically is seen as one of the most important outcomes of the standards era, providing a better understanding among policymakers, practitioners and parents of regarding the extent and depth of gaps in achievement. Policy shifted the definition of a good school to focus attention on how well each group of students is being served, rather than overall averages that mask inequities. Additionally, disaggregated data helped make the case that educational outcomes are not about individual students, but that real patterns exist across groups. For example, one parent-advocate noted that "With data, we can intervene when students have problems, if there are teachers that are not teaching, schools that are not educating. Before standards-based testing …their [parents] concerns were dismissed."

- **Enable additional policies and improvement strategies,** such as school choice, high-quality instructional materials, education technology and innovation, and better targeting of interventions and supports. When schools and districts share the same foundation for what students should know and be able to do, textbook and technology developers can align to those standards and scale. Similarly, when families know they can compare apples to apples in making school choice decisions, they are better positioned to make informed decisions.

Some shared a sentiment that higher standards actually led to more rigorous instruction—but that conclusion was not universally shared. One teacher said standards "gave us an opportunity to level-set for what proficiency looks like in academics," and a parent acknowledged "I did get the sense that year-to-year things got more rigorous for my kids. The bar got raised." But this theory of action must contend with the sobering reality that implementation of Common Core State Standards coincides with a decade of stagnant or declining achievement nationally. As one higher education leader noted, "a rising tide CAN lift all boats, but it does NOT close equity gaps," which was the goal of the whole endeavor.

As with the positive outcomes associated with SBE strategies, there were themes—but not universal agreement—about the flip-side of standard-based education strategies. While respondents praised the intention and aspiration of SBE, they also identified negative outcomes, unintended consequences, mis-steps, lessons-learned or flaws. In their critique, respondents generally framed SBE as being "insufficient" with respect to vision, support, and local engagement. Each of these themes are described below.

> *Some shared a sentiment that higher standards actually led to more rigorous instruction*—but that conclusion was not universally shared. One teacher said standards *"gave us an opportunity to level-set for what proficiency looks like in academics,"* and a parent acknowledged *"I did get the sense that year-to-year things got more rigorous for my kids. The bar got raised."*

SBE's Insufficient Vision for Youth Development

Respondents described a range of ways that the SBE framework has not been broad enough to advance equity goals. For example:

Many leaders articulated a belief that the overall theory of change was flawed. While there is some difference of opinion about what the "original" theory of change was, many stakeholders noted that having standards and aligned tests, along with some sort of accountability, could not automatically lead to improvement. Additionally, statewide summative tests are by design too removed and too delayed to be of significant use for instructional improvement at the classroom level or for parents to push for timely change at the student level.

The narrow focus on academic success especially in math and language arts was reductive and too narrow to meet college-and-career ready aspirations. And while tests may have been intended to be just a measure, test scores became the goal, the primary purpose of education rather than one important proxy. This narrowed definition of success or purpose contributed to:

- a focus on test preparation,

- a narrowing of the curriculum to prioritize academics over social-emotional and character development or school climate/culture,

- narrowing of curriculum that prioritized tested subjects (math and reading) over other subjects such as social studies and the arts,

- narrowing within the curriculum to emphasize knowledge and skills that were easily assessed on standardized tests;

- tracking students based on their test scores,

- decreased student engagement and critical thinking ability;

- a deficit framing that increased students' test anxiety.

- One student said "One of my first tests was in 3rd grade. I was so stressed about taking the test and its impact on making it to 4th grade. I attached so much of my self-worth to it."

Academic standards in reading and math, even good ones, are too incomplete a vision for education success on which to base an accountability system.

- Stakeholders indicated that current academic standards—including the Common Core State Standards—are too disconnected from the science of learning and development and haven't kept pace with advances in neuro-science, which show that students learn best when they feel a sense of belonging and safety and when they engage with meaningful work; absent these conditions, our brains are distracted and cannot optimize for learning. Despite the claim to be evidence-based, the narrow focus on academic achievement endures despite research documenting that social-emotional and non-academic skills are more correlated with life success than test scores, and that schools have an even bigger impact on these outcomes.[34]

- There was a disconnect between the democratic purpose of education, preparation for citizenship, and education priorities in this era. A pluralistic, democratic society requires having a public education system that envisions as its purpose inducting people with a sense of belonging and full ownership in society. There was instead, perhaps a too implicit assumption that if you prepared people for college and careers then preparation for citizenship would be taken care of.

Once academic achievement gaps were identified, the focus shifted quickly to **accountability, consequences or stakes**—such as using transparency perceived as public shaming (of students, student groups, and schools), closing schools or directing funding and resources toward charters and choice models, graduation or promotion requirements, and teacher evaluation.

> "
> *The bargain in standards-based education policy was supposed to be:*
>
> *1) Get clear on goals*
>
> *2) Measure progress*
>
> *3) Align resources with needs*
>
> *4) Drive decisions to those closest to the work*
>
> *We did the first two steps but never got close to accomplishing the 3rd or 4th steps."*
>
> **—Former policy advisor and education researcher**

Assessment was an important element of the standards-based coherence framework. And yet there were both pre-existing weaknesses with tests and ways in which policy incentives contributed lower quality, cheaper tests. Maryland and Kentucky, for example, had performance assessments prior to NCLB and did away with them because they couldn't fit the tighter definitions. **There was a push for measures that were cheap and reliable, comprising the richness and of what could be tested.**

For some, it is easy to look back at what could have been done differently. For others—especially those directly involved in policy and advocacy associated with the standards-based improvement strategies—they see no flaws in the overall framework; rather, they shared a sense that **the goals and strategies were correct but there were merely implementation and communication challenges,** which, if addressed, would lead to improvement in student outcomes.

SBE's Insufficient Supports for Equity

Respondents described a range of ways that the SBE framework has been insufficiently resourced to advance equity goals. For example:

Once learning gaps were identified, **they were not sufficiently addressed with support, training, intervention, and resources especially in under-resourced schools.** Some stakeholders noted that what was considered "interventions" may have been even more harmful, in terms of poor reading strategies, drill and kill approaches, or focusing on below-grade-level content. One teacher noted how demoralizing it was "Over time, it broke my heart to realize where my students were and how far they had to go. I wasn't nearly what they needed." Several stakeholders noted there was insufficient attention paid to supporting teachers—both preservice and in-service—to teach to the standards, to provide social and emotional supports and to narrow gaps.

Policy loaded too much accountability on schools without taking commensurate responsibility for the broader, social determinants of education (i.e. housing, health, criminal justice policy and labor markets) that held some students back from achieving to their potential. Education alone cannot improve mobility and life outcomes. While it is possible to graduate from high school with high achievement scores on standardized tests, go to college and find a job that pays a living wage, recent research[35] finds that other factors play a greater role in determining economic and social mobility than education.

While standards provided a technical fix and clarity around what should be taught, at least in reading and math, there was **little to no focus on addressing teacher bias or systemic bias.** Additionally, the focus on achievement gaps was identified by some as contributing to the deficit orientation that some students can't learn at high levels.

While the standards were inclusive of early grades, having assessment and accountability start at third-grade both drove a focus in school buildings and policy **away from the importance of early childhood development in grades pre-k through second,** and did not recognize the gaps that already existed when students arrived at kindergarten.

SBE's Insufficient Community Engagement

Respondents described a range of ways that the SBE framework was developed with insufficient engagement of local communities to support equity goals. For example:

The development, roll-out, and implementation approach was too top-down and not inclusive of families, students, local communities or contexts. One educator noted it "hasn't been done with the community and is at odds with the value of self-determination. Kids and families should have a say."

From an equity perspective, many stakeholders called out that the standards are written from and focused on a white dominant perspective or culture and **ignore the experiences, stories and culture of Black, indigenous and people of color.**

Distrust and lack of confidence in the system of education was a clear consequence of the accountability driven approach to education. Whether it was attributed to poor communication, lack of engagement and listening, school closures, a top-down approach to developing solutions, teacher evaluation or not effectively teaching critical thinking and social studies, many stakeholders acknowledge that trust has been lost and needs to be rebuilt.

While a primary goal of standards-based education improvement strategies was to advance equity and improve outcomes for students of color, students with disabilities, and students from low-income backgrounds in particular, **there is notable dissonance around issues of equity.** This relates, in part, to how equity was and is defined. Equity defined as closing achievement gaps is important, but too narrow and limited. Equity also needs to be about identity development and building students' agency, as well as measuring inputs and opportunity to learn; all of that was left out of the dominant SBE framework. Even as education policy aimed to reduce gaps by race, the proposed solutions (tests, curriculum, tracking) were either race neutral, biased, or white dominant in the development and application. **As such the equity outcomes of SBE improvement strategies are mixed at best.**

Why is there not more agreement on the upshot of standards-based education?

As noted above, there is a belief among some that SBE strategies did lead to improved achievement and outcomes across the board, while others believe that the very modest gains do not justify the negative consequences. While it is challenging to identify direct correlations between policy and test scores, and there are significant issues with implementation fidelity, there are also other confounding factors at play. Education is a human endeavor, everyone has gone through it and is influenced by their own experiences—

positive, negative and mixed—and the field of education policy has become increasingly politicized during this same period.

In the world of education policy, a whole generation of "education reformers" came of age working directly on these initiatives. The framework of SBE influenced the careers and the leadership journeys of tens of thousands of people and millions of students, families and teachers. An entire industry of education organizations sprang up—and was funded

by significant philanthropic efforts—to support the SBE framework for education improvement.

Coming of age during the SBE era can make it challenging for educators and policymakers to objectively assess what worked and to admit what did not. Education policy is often described in terms of pendulum swings and there is a fear among education leaders that an honest assessment of the outcomes of the standards agenda may lead to a swing in the opposite direction: the abolishment of standards, tests, or explicit policy focus on equity; a return to the dark ages of low expectations and no data.

From the late 1980s into early 2000s, there was ostensibly a political consensus on SBE policy. There was not just bipartisan support at the state and national/federal level, there were also alliances across civil rights organizations and the business community. In 2021, our nation is more polarized, across a variety of issues, not just education. There are also distinctions within groups. For example, while many of the civil rights organizations that advocated for the standards agenda though the 1990s and 2000s continue to hold to the promise of this framework for improving equity, there are many education justice, social justice, and racial justice organizations and organizers who are opposed to the existing framework because of enduring equity challenges related to educational opportunity and outcomes.[36]

Low expectations, lack of efficacy or investment commensurate with the aspiration, and lack of trust led to high-stakes accountability—breeding further mistrust, which now represents its own negatively reinforcing cycle. Even as there is general consensus that those most proximate to the issue (families, students, educators and community leaders) were not engaged in designing the standards-based improvement agenda or solutions in the last 30 years, and that they're now demanding more agency, there is still concern among people we interviewed that local stakeholders don't know enough or can't be trusted to maintain or deliver upon high expectations. The lack of trust and confidence in the American education system is a challenge that needs attention, above and beyond any particular policy solutions.

Because fragmentation and polarization make it difficult to work across lines of difference, continuous improvement is a critically important bridge that can help span diverse communities. For example, continuous improvement approaches embrace a user-centric orientation that is responsive to stakeholders who have felt marginalized in the policymaking process. These approaches also embrace research and data—hallmarks of the scientific community—to make empirical claims about when changes are actually improvements. Continuous improvement also prioritizes and empowers those closest to problems—such as educators, students and families—to meaningfully engage in solving those problems. Such an approach can help promote transparency and increase trust in systems as they remake themselves to reduce the gap between equity-aspirations and equity-outcomes.

Recommendations

The stakes are high: The policy roadmap for the previous three decades has established infrastructure of high academic standards and some quality improvements regarding aligned instructional supports and assessments. However, the roadmap of the past offers an inadequate foundation for a more promising future.

In an examination of how the world's best school systems continuously improved, McKinsey & Company found the manner in which school systems pursue improvement strategies changes as their efforts and procedures become more fully developed.[37] When leaders are moving a system from poor to fair and from fair to good (as has arguably been the case for the states and cities in the U.S that progressed the most under the SBE framework), policies often require more focus on fidelity to models, fewer options for local discretion, and tighter oversight by the state or district. As reforms progress and systems need to advance from good to great and from great to exemplary, more discretion must be afforded to professional judgment and local decision-making. One could argue the SBE framework has established a strong educational foundation in the U.S. that needs to be updated and adapted to build on the progress made and to account for more robust conceptions of educational and social equity.

While the last 30 years of education policy was designed to promote educational equity and excellence at scale, highly variable academic performance over time—with results that continue to be highly correlated to race, income, and home language—raise questions about how to strengthen its efficacy and reliability for strengthening equity outcomes. Compelling cross-disciplinary research creates new knowledge about the social-emotional dimensions of learning and about the developmental experiences that support thriving in school and in adulthood; this knowledge must be incorporated in richer definitions of student and school success. Developing a new framework for education in America will require strong leadership, political will and technical expertise from a broad coalition of stakeholders across policy, practice and research. It will also require listening to and trusting the intelligence of the diverse communities to ensure that policies for improvement are co-developed and attentively enacted with the students, educators, families and communities who stand to be their greatest beneficiaries.

Specifically, **we suggest bringing together a cross-section of diverse stakeholders from key educational sectors—such as policymakers, community-organizers, practitioners and researchers, students and families—to form a multi-year listening and learning community that engages in a series of field-based learning experiences.** Agendas would focus on districts and schools efforts that place equity and continuous improvement at the center. These convenings would allow stakeholders to deeply engage with and learn from efforts to ensure, equitable educational opportunities, supports and resources for all students. For example, the learning engagements would allow stakeholders to consider strategies to:

Broaden the Vision of Youth Development.
Our interview data indicate the need for, and opportunity to expand, the purview of the dominant education policy framework to include academics along with a wider range of developmental goals for youth. For example:

- How can we consider accountability systems that focus not only on education's academic purposes, but also its civic purpose in a democratic society, its relationship to the future of work, and its attention to social-emotional and character development?

- What should a more nuanced approach to assessment and accountability look like to better align process goals such as continuous improvement and learning with outcome goals such as student achievement, civic engagement and youth development?

Build Supports for Equity. Persistent and potentially widening opportunity gaps between upper- and lower-income students suggest the need for additional supports to make good on SBE's equity goals. Key questions include, for example:

- With a public school population that is now more diverse than ever before, how do we design a system that is more culturally- and linguistically responsive?

- How do we build and enable better infrastructure and capacity for continuous improvement—not just at the school level, but up and down the system, from growth mindset at the student level, to better use of data and evidence at the district, state and federal levels?

- How do we better integrate lessons-learned over the last 30 years about economic and social mobility—such as the role of early childhood development and out-of-school learning opportunities to develop more robust conceptions of equity?

Bolster Community Engagement. Increased diversity and democratic pluralism all press for policy solutions that engage local communities in their development and implementation. This is crucial to genuinely achieving equity. Key questions include, for example:

- How do we develop policy and measurement solutions in ways that are not just inclusive of those most directly impacted, but created and owned by them?

- How can we school systems and communities respond to the trauma of the past year in ways that provide healing and explore how education prepares students for dynamic, disruptive change in a future being accelerated by the pandemic?.

- How do local communities contribute to our understanding of equity in ways that consider cultural

and linguistic relevance and sustainability, identity development and agency, non-school external factors (such as income, race, and geography)?

Any shift in U.S. educational policy risks being labeled a "silver bullet" solution. Implicit in this moniker is the fraught history of multiple large-scale policy reforms that can sometimes become compliance exercises (e.g., school improvement planning, school accountability report cards) or suffer short shelf-lives (e.g., small schools and learning communities, teacher evaluation reforms) rather than long-term improvement initiatives.

Avoiding the policy missteps of the past requires a call to action in the present. The call to action must engage key actors from research, practice and policy communities alongside parents, students and community members. By collectively addressing the above questions (and others as they arise), this group could promote a richer and vision for education by placing equity and improvement at the center. Building an understanding of the best-in-class work in the field looks like for equity and improvement—and envisioning the human capital-, research- and data- infrastructure needed to support these efforts at scale—is a critical next phase of work for the field. Building trust, engaging diverse perspectives, reviewing research, and developing shared principles will take a significant amount of time. The window of opportunity for this dialogue, engagement and call to action is open, the need is pressing and the time to act is now.

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The six strategies described in the report include strengthening the technical skills of new and experienced teachers and principals; assessing students; using data to inform improvement; revising standards and curricula; introducing differentiated compensation models; and articulating the vision for improving the education system in laws and policies