MEASURE EVERYTHING

EMERGENCY DATA COLLECTION IN A NATIONAL CRISIS

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Introduction

The global pandemic has disrupted so many aspects of our education system, it would be easy to overlook the implications for measuring student progress. But losing our measurement tools would mean giving up on any understanding of what is working and not working in our response to this crisis. Instead, we need to bring an emergency mindset to data collection. By investing in a variety of measurement tools—and the connections between them—we can ensure that we gain the insight we need to direct our emergency funding to its greatest use for kids across every area in which we are working to serve them.

The first step in any discussion of measurement is to acknowledge the ways in which data collection in K–12 education has often led to a zero-sum mindset where schools were pitted against schools, teachers against teachers and students against students. Rather than collecting data with a view of a good education as something all could enjoy, this approach reinforced a scarcity mindset where some people had to lose so others could win, which discouraged risk-taking, experimentation and a holistic approach to student learning.

This crisis requires us to rethink our approach to education data. With students now learning across a much wider variety of settings (in-person schools, online schools, microschools, pods and home-school), we need a measurement system that is adaptable to all these modes of education. At the same time, the role of parents in directing their children's education has become much more central, so we need a measurement system focused on serving the needs of parents, not institutions. That means a new focus on the things parents care about, including success after school and broader life outcomes. Finally, in this moment of crisis, our measurement system must help us understand which emergency responses work, and which don't, so we can make the best possible policy choices for America's students.

We believe a "measure everything" approach will play a crucial role in our emergency response to this national education crisis. By investing in new data collection across all of the different modes of education, ensuring that the best elements of the existing assessment systems continue during this crisis, and providing resources for high-quality research that can produce actionable information for policymakers, we can ensure we have the information we need to maximize our nationwide response in this critical moment.

In this brief, we outline the most important measurement tools and programs needed for this approach to work and suggest concrete ways in which local, state and federal policies can help ensure we have the

information we need to make smart choices. Our goal should be to support the emergency collection of data while paving the way for a new approach to educational information that is family-centered, focused on success rather than failure and supportive of an approach to education where all children can thrive.

As 2019 Nobel Prize winning economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo write in their most recent book, *Good Economics for Hard Times*:

"... be hard headed about the facts, skeptical of slick answers and magic bullets, modest and honest about what we know and understand, and perhaps most importantly, willing to try ideas and solutions and be wrong, as long as it takes us toward the ultimate goal of building a more humane world."

Principles of measurement

While we must move quickly to bring new educational support to students, it is important to be clear about the principles that should guide these investments.

1. *Collect information wherever learning is happening.* While in the past we could organize our data collection around the assumption of in-person learning within a traditional school building, that is no longer possible. Instead, as learning is dispersed across a whole variety of settings, we need a measurement system that can collect meaningful information in all these environments.

2. *Make data useful to families.* The disruption of our K–12 education system has reorganized learning much more directly around parents, while changing the place and time of learning to anywhere and anytime. That means we need to reimagine not only the way we collect information, but also how we connect it together to make it more personal, relevant and meaningful to families and students.

3. *Provide answers for policymakers.* Even in the best of times, education data wasn't always much use in making education policy decisions. In this crisis, it will be even more important to experiment with different approaches and find out what works for a wide range of students and families. That means investing in research alongside our emergency funding response.

These three principles should be applied across the three likely modes of data collection.

1. ***State assessment systems.*** These summative tests are perhaps the most prominent element of our education data collection effort. They help ensure that our public school districts aren't black boxes by providing the public with annual information on student performance in core subjects.

2. ***Online learning tools.*** As learning becomes more dispersed across a variety of non-school settings, the information we collect through various learning tools—online curriculum, apps and programs—will take on increased importance, as will our ability to connect the data into holistic measures of progress.

3. ***Experimental research studies.*** In a lot of education information collection, high-quality research is an afterthought. That makes it hard to actually determine what works—and what doesn't—in the K–12 world. By including research within our emergency funding initiatives, we can dramatically expand the information we have to make better decisions for our kids.

Ushering in this new era for measurement won't be easy, but if we fail to make this shift, we will be left without the information we need to guide our way through this emergency moment.

State assessment systems: measuring what matters

When Covid-19 forced the emergency shutdown of America's school buildings, the US Department of Education waived all state testing requirements for the 2019–2020 academic year. This decision brought to a swift end nearly two decades of federally mandated annual testing in reading and in math, which began when No Child Left Behind was signed into law in January 2002.

The mandatory summative tests—and the corresponding accountability provisions for districts, schools and teachers—have been a source of constant debate since their inception. Supporters argue they

are essential for holding everyone in the education system to a high bar and protecting students who have been historically underserved by our schools. Critics argue that they have failed to actually raise achievement while narrowing the focus of schools and promoting a contentious and punitive zero-sum environment of winners and losers.

Despite these controversies, end-of-the-year assessments remain broadly popular with families. According to a June 2020 survey by the Data Quality Campaign, 77 percent of parents want states to resume end-of-year summative assessments to help shed light on how well schools and students are meeting academic standards. Our grassroots work with students and families in communities across the 50CAN network has provided ample confirmation of this support, even while students and families have also argued for more personalization and innovation from their schools.

Our focus during this crisis should be to ensure that districts aren't black boxes by continuing to collect data on student performance and maintaining the fundamental goals of transparency for results and the protection of vulnerable students. At the same time, we should rethink the broader kinds of information that families want. That means moving beyond a narrow focus on test score snapshots to connect schools to real-world outcomes for students including career readiness, college completion, employment, civic engagement, income and life satisfaction.

Policy recommendations:

- Protect the 2020–21 state assessments by ensuring that they are administered on-time in the upcoming school year. If in-person testing in the spring is not possible, adapt these summative tests into a shorter version that can be given at home. These assessments provide an important check of comparability in an environment where learning happens in many places and at many times. While there may be differences of opinion on how to use this data to improve schooling, there is no question that this data is needed during a time of major academic disruption.

- Provide fall diagnostic assessments and release the results directly to parents. Give parents definitive say in the promotion or retention decisions for their children during the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years.

- Uphold the civil rights protections under federal law, with publication of data disaggregated by subgroup in each community to ensure that historically vulnerable communities are not left behind during this crisis.

- Invest in new approaches to state data collection that focus on long-term life outcomes and to develop richer, more holistic measures of success.

Online learning tools: providing real-time feedback

The growth in alternatives to traditional schools during this pandemic has created both challenges and opportunities for data collection. As more families adapt to the closure of school buildings by shifting their children into online schools, microschools, pods and homeschooling environments, some traditional accountability mechanisms will no longer apply. This is not necessarily bad and we should resist the temptation to fit this new world of learning into the old framework with which we are familiar. For example, the simple act of taking attendance proved challenging in this more dispersed world. At the same time, the increasing use of technology provides new data that can be used to understand, in real-time, how well students master content, not simply whether they showed up for class.

This new source of data can help fill in gaps from more traditional sources. While the canceling of state assessments made it difficult to understand the loss of learning in the spring, online platforms, such as the math program Zearn, were able to track how 800,000 students were performing in communities across the country. With the help of researchers at Brown and Harvard, the Zearn data revealed that student progress in low-income areas of the country decreased by about half after schools were closed, compared to no loss in progress in high-income areas of the country.

Beyond traditional academic subjects like math that are covered by state assessments, these tools also provide an opportunity to see what students have mastered in other subjects and activities. If students can develop skills in everything from foreign languages to music to com-

puter programing, and there are apps or platforms that allow them to track their progress, we should count that and make that progress visible. That means rethinking how we assign credit and how their mastery can count for both career and college tracks. This approach may also assist in tracking other information, such as students' study habits and social-emotional well-being.

Policy recommendations:

- Provide federal and state funding for the research and development of new learning tools and advanced assessment systems across a variety of subjects and skills.

- Provide federal grants to existing organizations that produce learning tools to connect student data to student portals that can hold all their educational data safely and securely while helping students and their families monitor their progress.

- Create data sharing agreements that allow information to be shared between apps and platforms and support the use of this data in assigning credit to students.

- Provide quarterly report cards for students and parents based on data from these online learning tools and online assessment platforms.

- Create a federal warehouse of data from these tools for use by academic researchers.

Experimental research studies: better data for better policy

A constant challenge when making policy decisions in the best interest of students is the limited nature of the findings from education research. Far too often, the best answer existing research can provide is "it depends." The two key roadblocks to better research are data collection and the additional resources needed for high-quality experimental

research studies. In order to make smart policy decisions, we need to tackle these roadblocks head on.

To do so, we must bring researchers into the center of the conversation about success in this new educational reality. That means including their design requests in how emergency programs are organized, rolled out and supported to maximize the usefulness of the data collected. Every new program across all modes of schooling should contain a research component with dedicated funding for the collection, analysis and publication of the data.

As with state assessment systems and learning programs, we should strive to refocus this research on real-world outcomes beyond the simple measures of short-term academic gains. This will require partnerships beyond the traditional world of state education departments to connect with the various other government agencies that collect data relevant to life outcomes. We should also prioritize experimentation in our funding efforts so that we can test a wide variety of approaches to learning.

Policy recommendations:

- Establish education research task forces in collaboration with local research universities to provide recommendations for how to collect data to maximize the opportunity for high-quality studies during this crisis.

- To the greatest extent possible, design the funding for all emergency programs to make it possible to measure their impact with Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) to separate treatment groups from control groups.

- Set aside one percent of all education funding for research and partner with independent academic institutions to carry out the research and publish all the results, as well as all the data collected in the research studies.

A compass to guide us through difficult terrain

While it would be tempting in this crisis to simply focus on emergency funding, without a parallel investment in data collection we will be setting out on a difficult journey with no way to know whether we are headed in the right direction. Measurement provides a way forward.

By making emergency investments in data collection, high-quality research and the systems needed to bring all this information together in one place, we give ourselves the best chance to be flexible, adaptable and innovative as we work to meet the new needs of our students.

About 50CAN

50CAN: The 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now is a locally led, nationally supported nonprofit education advocacy organization committed to a high-quality education for all kids, regardless of their address.

www.50can.org

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