



Opinion

Editorial Board

How to track educational performance? Here's a good start.

States should be pressing for school accountability. To do that, they need data.

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What are the best ways to measure whether an education system is preparing students for life after high school? That's a difficult question to answer because of a lack of quality data. Thanks to the National Governors Association, that could soon change.

Colorado Gov. Jared Polis (D) focused his year-long term as chair of the bipartisan association on reframing how states measure and track educational readiness from kindergarten through 12th grade. He convened seven meetings around the country to hear from experts on which metrics, beyond literacy and math, matter most to prepare children for long-term success. The result is [a report](#) that he will unveil next week in Colorado Springs at the annual summer gathering of governors, which he shared with The Post's Editorial Board.

The governor's view is that states value what they measure; therefore, they need to more carefully track whether young people are getting the tools they need to thrive. "We don't want states to achieve success by reducing standards," Polis said.

He believes readiness rests on four elements: academic foundations, workforce preparedness, civic engagement and lifelong well-being. The first three are fairly self-explanatory, and academic research has identified dozens of data points that predict future success. Measuring well-being, on the other hand, is much tougher than tracking the availability of apprenticeships or Advanced Placement courses. Themes that came up repeatedly during Polis's listening sessions are that students should finish high school with a strong sense of self, psychological skills to persevere through hardship and a clear, attainable path toward a meaningful and contributive adult life.

Polis acknowledged that metrics for such soft skills probably are not well-suited to control funding formulas because they can lead to reference bias or potential data manipulation. Nonetheless, they're still valuable to monitor.

Polis understands that making data publicly available, in as close to real time as possible, will drive accountability and lead to continuous improvement. Numbers on chronic absenteeism by school, for instance, could generate public pressure on principals to get more students back into classrooms. Highlighting how schools are doing on nonacademic indicators, such as the availability of after-school programs for science and technology, might similarly empower families to advocate more effectively.

Three states already offer great examples of educational dashboards that others should build upon. Indiana measures students' work ethic, communication and collaboration skills as well as civic, financial and digital literacy. Kentucky tracks how its high school graduates perform in college, including grade-point average and credits earned. Rhode Island measures chronic absenteeism and an array of other data.

The NGA plans to launch a pilot project this fall to help five states build out customized dashboards over 18 months, with hopes that others will follow. Applications will open after next week.

The chairmanship of the NGA typically rotates between Republicans and Democrats, and the governor who gets the job picks a signature initiative. Last year, Utah Gov. Spencer Cox (R) focused on "healthy conflict" and how to "disagree better." The year before, New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy (D) devised a playbook for how states could address the youth mental health crisis.

In 2005, the NGA spearheaded an initiative — which all 50 governors at the time signed on to — to improve data collection and reporting about graduation rates. Six years later, the federal government began requiring states to do so. But while graduation rates reached all-time highs in the subsequent years, graduates didn't necessarily become better equipped for college, trades or the military.

Polis, who is halfway through his second term as governor, issued a data-focused executive order earlier this year to compel five state agencies to share data so that Colorado can create a cradle-to-career coordination system that tracks how kids are doing, longitudinally, from pre-K through high school into higher education and the workforce. The governor has a libertarian bent and believes that states will have an interest in prioritizing different metrics tailored to their own needs based on industries in the region and the jobs they think will be available in the future.

At a time when the Trump administration is seeking to eliminate the federal Education Department to return as much power as possible to the states over setting standards, governors feel a sense of urgency to better track student progress. Knowing which states are doing the best job will allow for easier imitation and for the scaling up of good ideas. Competition between schools, districts and states will lead to more students being ready for whatever the future might hold.
