



To: The Honorable Bill Cassidy, Chair, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
From: All4Ed
Re: Response to Request for Information on Measuring Student Growth
Date: February 13, 2026

All4Ed appreciates the Committee's focus on measuring student growth and its recognition that growth data can provide important insights for both families and policymakers. Measuring growth helps illuminate whether students are improving over time and whether schools are supporting progress for students who enter at different starting points. Schools that successfully accelerate learning, particularly for students who begin below grade level, deserve recognition for that work.

At the same time, growth must be understood in relation to clear academic expectations. Growth without a goal is insufficient. Families want to know whether their children are improving, but they also want to know whether their children are performing at grade level and on track for long-term success. A system that reports growth alone, without anchoring that progress to proficiency, risks obscuring whether students are ultimately being prepared to meet academic standards and succeed after high school.

Policymakers likewise need both types of information. Growth and proficiency together provide a more complete picture of school performance and are essential for responsible decision-making. When directing school improvement funds or determining how supports should be structured, policymakers may reasonably differentiate between schools that demonstrate strong growth but low proficiency and those that struggle on both measures. These situations call for different strategies, timelines, and interventions.

This balanced approach is reflected in federal law. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to measure student proficiency while allowing states to incorporate measures of growth. That structure reflects Congress's judgment that accountability systems should recognize progress while maintaining clear expectations for student achievement.

Response to Question 9: Federal Incentives, State Innovation, and the Use of Growth

Legislative changes are not necessary to incentivize growth

Federal policy incentives are not necessary to expand the use of student growth measures.

First, ESSA already provides states with explicit flexibility to incorporate growth into their accountability systems. When Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act through the bipartisan ESSA, it acknowledged the limitations of accountability systems that rely exclusively on proficiency. As a result, the law allows states to include measures of student growth alongside proficiency on annual assessments in their accountability frameworks. Specifically, ESSA permits the use of growth measures under section 1111(c)(4)(B)(i)(II) and section 1111(c)(4)(B)(ii)(I).

Second, state practice demonstrates that this flexibility is working as intended. As the Committee's own materials note, nearly every state already incorporates some form of student growth into its accountability system. This widespread adoption suggests that ESSA's approach has struck an effective balance between federal guardrails and state discretion.

Additional legislative action to further incentivize growth is therefore unnecessary and could be counterproductive. New statutory requirements risk creating confusion, disrupting existing state systems, and diverting attention from implementation and improvement. ESSA's treatment of growth represents a policy success, marking a clear evolution from the exclusive focus on proficiency under the No Child Left Behind Act to a more balanced framework that values both achievement and progress. Preserving that balance, rather than reopening it legislatively, is the most constructive path forward.

ESSA waivers could undercut growth

The continued ability of states to measure growth in a meaningful and consistent way, however, depends on preserving ESSA's requirement for statewide annual assessments. Growth measures rely on students taking the same standards-aligned assessments across a state, which is what allows progress to be measured consistently and compared across schools, districts, and student groups. This consistency is also essential for families, who need information they can trust and understand when evaluating whether their child's school is effectively supporting learning. Without annual statewide assessments, growth data lose their comparability and usefulness, undermining both transparency and accountability.

Recent actions by the Department of Education inviting states to seek waivers from ESSA requirements raise concerns in this regard. If waivers are granted that allow states to depart from annual statewide assessment requirements, states may inadvertently undermine their own ability to use effective growth models and to provide parents with reliable, comparable information. We strongly encourage the HELP Committee to communicate clearly to the Department the importance of statewide annual assessments

and the need to preserve this requirement as the Department considers state waiver requests. Protecting this foundation is essential to achieving the very goals of growth measurement outlined in the Committee's request.

Federal funding is central to state data infrastructure

While no legislative changes to ESSA are needed to incentivize the use of growth, the federal government plays a critical role in supporting the data infrastructure that makes growth measurement possible. Over many years, federal and state investments have enabled states to build longitudinal data systems capable of linking student records across grades and into postsecondary education and the workforce. These systems are what allow states to move beyond single test scores and examine learning over time in ways that inform instruction, accountability, and improvement.

To sustain and strengthen this work, states need predictable federal support and continued modernization of data systems. We encourage Chairman Cassidy to prioritize funding for State Longitudinal Data Systems and the Workforce Data Quality Initiative, and to advance the Committee's Advancing Research in Education Act. These investments respect state leadership while ensuring that states have the tools necessary to measure growth accurately, responsibly, and in ways that ultimately benefit students and families.

Response to Question 5: Supporting Cross-State Learning on Communicating Growth Data to Families

Facilitating cross-state learning is an appropriate and valuable role for the U.S. Department of Education. States have taken varied approaches to measuring and communicating growth, and there is much to be gained from sharing effective practices across jurisdictions.

In addition to supporting learning about how best to communicate growth information to families through school report cards and other tools, the Department can help states learn from one another on a broader set of issues related to growth. These include technical approaches to measuring growth, integrating growth into systems of school improvement, addressing the challenges of measuring growth in early grades and later grades, and aligning growth measures with long-term outcomes.

The Department's ability to play this facilitative role, however, has been significantly diminished. The elimination of expert staff, along with the transfer of the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education to the Department of Labor, has reduced federal capacity to convene states, provide technical assistance, and disseminate best practices. These actions weaken the very infrastructure needed to support state innovation and responsible use of growth data.

The Committee should seek to halt the dismantling of the Department of Education and restore its capacity to support states, consistent with the Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the bipartisan FY 2026 Labor–HHS–Education appropriations law (P.L. 119-75), which states:

The agreement further notes that no authorities exist for the Department of Education to transfer its fundamental responsibilities under numerous authorizing and appropriations laws, including through procuring services from other Federal agencies, of carrying out those programs, projects, and activities to other Federal agencies.

A stable and properly staffed Department is essential to facilitating voluntary, state-led improvement without imposing new mandates.

Conclusion

We appreciate the Committee’s careful attention to the role of student growth in accountability and improvement systems. Growth data, when paired with proficiency, provides families and policymakers with meaningful insight into student progress and school performance. ESSA already provides states with the flexibility needed to incorporate growth, and state adoption demonstrates that this approach is working.

We respectfully encourage the Committee to focus on preserving ESSA’s balanced framework and restoring federal capacity to support cross-state learning, rather than pursuing new statutory incentives. We welcome the opportunity to continue working with the Committee as it explores ways to strengthen student achievement and ensure the nation’s learners have every opportunity to reach their full potential.

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