

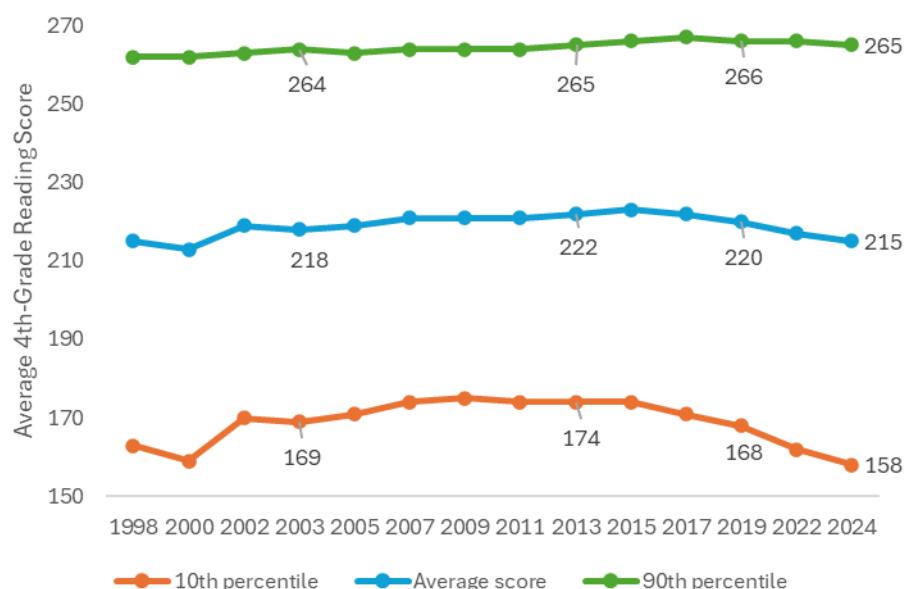
Informing Parents and Policymakers Through School-Level Academic Growth Indicators

Request for Information

The American education system fails the students who need it the most. Over the last decade, the lowest-performing students fell further behind than ever before. For example, in 4th-grade reading, they now score an entire grade level below where they were in 2015.¹ Much of this decline pre-dates the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the highest-performing students perform about as well as they ever have—with little or no pandemic decline.

Students from families with the least resources suffer the most from this academic decline. Elementary reading scores for the students from the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) families are more than three grade levels behind those of the highest-SES students.² This gap is so large that the average high-SES students have similar scores to the highest-performing low-SES kids.³

Student Achievement Has Been Falling Since Before COVID



The obvious way to improve the achievement of students—especially the low-performing and low-SES students who have suffered the most from a decade of educational decline—is to facilitate access to schools that increase their achievement. But how do we know which schools will do that?

Our education system celebrates schools with high average test scores more than those that grow their students' achievement. Fortunately, this has begun to change. Over the last decade, nearly all states have begun to track the academic progress made by individual students and use that information to measure the student growth happening at each school.

Some states have led the way in developing growth measures and systems for sharing that information with families. Much can be learned from these approaches, including how federal laws and regulations get in the way and how the federal government can support state efforts. With that goal in mind, the HELP Committee seeks feedback on the reforms that will best serve students and families.

¹ National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2013-2024.

² National Assessment of Educational Progress, 4th-grade reading, 2024. “Lowest” and “highest” SES refers to roughly the 20% of students with the lowest and highest SES, respectively, based on free/reduced lunch participation and the number of books in the student’s home.

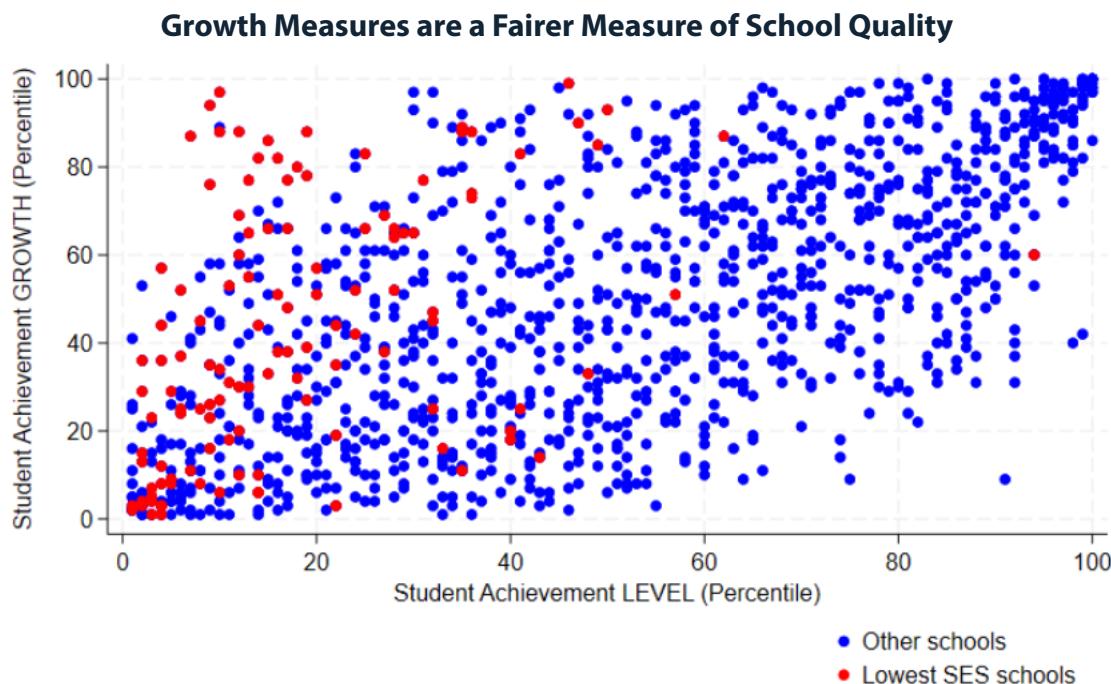
³ HELP committee analysis of 2024 NAEP data.

Policy Goal #1: Fair Measures of School Quality

A fair measure of school quality will capture how much a family can expect their child to learn if they attend a given school. Measures based on how much individual students learn—how their achievement grows over the time they are at a school—more accurately capture each school's contribution to student learning than simply looking at average test scores.

Growth measures are also a fairer way of judging schools that serve large numbers of students from lower-SES families. A school with low average test scores may be a bad school or it may be making tremendous progress with students who arrived with low levels of achievement and are now doing much better but not yet proficient.

Data from Louisiana illustrate this point, but studies of other states reach the same conclusion.⁴ The chart below shows that nearly all of the lowest-SES schools in Louisiana (the red dots) have below-average achievement levels. But many of these schools have above-average achievement growth, and they include some of the highest-growth schools in the state.⁵ We should celebrate the progress these schools are making with their students, not punish them for serving students from low-SES families.



There are a range of methodologies for measuring student growth, such as student growth percentiles, value-added, and value tables.⁶ What they have in common is that they all measure the growth of individual students from one year to the next and use that information to summarize the amount of progress made by students in an entire school.

A potential concern with growth measures is that a student can make a lot of growth but still not be proficient. That is a reason why continuing to track performance levels is important, but for the purpose of comparing schools, growth is a more accurate and fairer indicator of the quality of those schools.

An additional limitation of growth measures is that in most states they can only be calculated beginning in 4th grade because state testing begins in 3rd grade (and two years of data are needed to measure growth).

⁴ Matthew Chingos and Martin West, *Why Annual Statewide Testing Is Critical to Judging School Quality*, Brookings Institution (Jan. 20, 2015), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-annual-statewide-testing-is-critical-to-judging-school-quality/>.

⁵ *Data and Reports*, Louisiana Department of Education, <https://doe.louisiana.gov/data-and-reports>.

⁶ Katherine Castellano & Andrew Ho, *A Practitioner's Guide to Growth Models*, Council of Chief State School Officers (2013), <https://andrewho.scholars.harvard.edu/publications/practitioners-guide-growth-models>.

As a result, growth measures for elementary schools only capture the later grades, ignoring the progress students make in the critical early grades. A notable exception is Louisiana, which has begun testing students in grades K-2 and will incorporate the results into accountability measures going forward.

Policy Goal #2: Empowered Families

Growth measures can only empower families to choose schools that are a good fit for their children if the data are publicly available and communicated in a clear and understandable way. Growth measures can be complex, and states have developed different approaches to calculating them, so states naturally vary widely in how they present this information to families.

Federal law requires states to test students annually in reading and math in grades 3-8 (and once in high school). This makes it possible for all states to measure growth at each of their public schools, though they are not required to do so. In practice, all but five states publish growth measures for each of their public schools. The five states that do not publish growth measures for their public schools are California, Kansas, Maine, New York, and Vermont.⁷

Among the 45 states (and DC) that report growth measures, there are large differences in how they measure and report growth. Most states disaggregate growth measures by student factors such as SES and race/ethnicity, but four states (Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, and Ohio) do not.

States also communicate the information in very different ways, some of which may be easier for families to understand than others. Here are just a few examples of the ways different states calculate growth information on their schools:

- Arkansas: average value-added scores (a score above 80 indicates greater-than-expected growth and a score below 80 indicates less-than-expected growth)
- Colorado: ratings (between 0-100) based on median student growth percentile and percent on-track to proficiency calculations generated using the state's growth model
- Florida: percent of students making learning gains on the state test
- New Jersey: median student growth percentile

The HELP Committee is not aware of any research on which approaches to measuring and reporting growth at the school level are most useful to families.

Policy Goal #3: Informed Policymakers

Growth measures can be a useful tool for policymakers to track educational quality and hold schools accountable for results. Most states use growth measures in their federally mandated accountability systems, and some states incorporate them into A-F letter grades.

Different approaches to measuring growth may make sense for different purposes, such as informing families versus school accountability. For example, families may prefer an easier-to-understand measure whereas policymakers may want to use a more complicated (and accurate) growth measure. In practice, states may be likely to use the same measure for multiple purposes to avoid confusion given the overlapping audiences for these measures.

A key role that federal policymakers play in monitoring student achievement is administering the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is the only achievement measure that is comparable across states and over time. A limitation of NAEP is that it only captures snapshots of student knowledge. NAEP does not track individual student performance over time so cannot currently be used to construct growth measures at the state or national levels.

⁷ HELP Committee analysis of state school report cards and related data dashboards.

Questions for Consideration

The HELP Committee is committed to advancing bipartisan solutions to the achievement crisis facing K-12 education in the U.S. To that end, the Committee invites responses to the questions below, legislative solutions, and any other insights on how the federal government can support states, districts, and schools as they advance pro-student and pro-family policies. Please submit feedback and comments to K12Growth@help.senate.gov by Friday, February 13, 2026.

Fair Measures of School Quality

1. What have states learned from developing different measures of student growth?
2. Are there any kinds of federal support that would be useful to states seeking to implement new growth measures or revise existing ones?
3. Are there design changes to state assessment systems that would support the creation of higher-quality growth measures and are there any federal policies standing in the way of such innovation?

Empowered Families

4. What have states learned about how best to communicate information about school-average growth to families, such as through school report cards?
5. How can the federal government support cross-state learning about communicating information to families?
6. How have states addressed the challenge of measuring growth in elementary schools, where statewide assessments typically do not begin until 3rd grade?

Informed Policymakers

7. What changes to the National Assessment of Educational Progress or other federal data collection efforts would support a national focus on student growth?
8. How have states most effectively used growth data to inform policy decisions?
9. How can federal policy incentivize states to focus on growth and remove any barriers to state innovation?