

Using Data to Drive Continuous School Improvement

The Big Idea:



When students, parents, educators, and policymakers have the right information to make decisions, students excel. Now that Alabama has created its longitudinal data system, we must build it into an effective tool to support academic success, broaden workforce opportunities, and drive systemic change.

What is education data?

Data is one of the most powerful tools to inform, engage, and create opportunities for students along their education and workforce journeys—and it's much more than standardized test scores. Education data—including academic, educator, demographic, and workforce information from early childhood to the workforce—is securely collected from many sources and in many formats, although the type of data, and who can access it, varies.

Why is education data important and who uses it?

Education data guides smart decision-making. We have a limited amount of resources (money, people, and time) and we need to use those resources wisely. Having access to timely and usable information, stakeholders at all levels are able to make better decisions. Individuals, families, educators, communities, and policymakers all need access to data that enables decision-making in their roles.

- Students** → Students can be confident that they are on track for success in college and the workplace, or know what they need to do to get back on track.
- Families** → Parents and families can ensure that schools are responsive to their child's needs and take advantage of additional learning and enrichment opportunities for their children.
- Teachers** → Teachers have a more complete picture of their students' progress plus tools to augment and support their tailoring of lessons to the learning styles and interests of each student.
- School Leaders** → School and system leaders can direct coaching and resources where they are most urgently needed to support student learning and have confidence that they are investing in approaches that have been proven to work in their school and community.
- Key Partners** → Key partners, like afterschool programs, can better bridge the gap between learning in and out of school when they can identify opportunities for students that address their individual needs.
- Policy-Makers** → Policymakers can better understand what programs and interventions are cost-effective and work best for students and school systems, and what career pathways are most in-demand and provide profitable wages for their constituents.

How can we use data to improve schools?

In 2020, the Governor Ivey's Office led the creation of the Alabama Terminal on Linking and Analyzing Statistics (ATLAS) on Career Pathways, a secure system that exchanges and matches student-level education and workforce data from partner agencies while upholding legal protections to ensure the privacy and security of individuals' information. This system was codified into Alabama law in 2023 with the passage of HB 109. The ATLAS on Career Pathways makes it possible to collect data from a myriad of agencies and programs over time to create longitudinal records that can then be aggregated and analyzed for the purpose of improving education and workforce outcomes. Prior to ATLAS, this data was siloed across numerous state agencies with no coordination, leaving our analysis reactionary and not strategic or student-centered.

When information about students is provided in a timely, useful manner, every adult working with a child is able to support that student's learning needs more effectively. Furthermore, when data is tracked over time, Alabama can identify the schools and interventions that are creating impactful growth for students. This vision can become a reality for every student in Alabama, and our state leaders have a unique and critical role to play in bringing it to life.

- Leaders at the state level are best positioned to enact policies and practices to ensure that parents, educators, partners, and students themselves have access to the information they need. ATLAS would provides policymakers with timely information in order to make data-driven decisions on how to utilize taxpayer dollars effectively.
- State leaders can maximize investments in data infrastructure, ensure efficiency in data collection and costs, and reduce the burden on districts by providing data training or tools.
- ATLAS enables state leaders to gather knowledge and lessons learned from highly-effective districts—successes that can be scaled across the state to ensure that data is being used to support student learning no matter where students live.

Guiding Policy Principles

A+ Education Partnership has been working to improve Alabama data policy and practice with the Data Quality Campaign (DQC), our nation's leading voice in this area. In partnership with leaders from across the education field, the DQC developed a set of recommendations to help states enact policies that are critical to ensuring that data is used to support student learning. To make data work for students, we must do the following:

- ① **Measure What Matters:** Be clear about what students must achieve and have the data to ensure that all students are on track to succeed.
- ② **Make Data Use Possible:** Provide teachers and leaders the flexibility, training, and support they need to answer their questions and take action.
- ③ **Be Transparent and Earn Trust:** Ensure that every community understands how its schools and students are doing, why data is valuable, and how it is protected and used.
- ④ **Guarantee Access and Protect Privacy:** Provide teachers and parents timely information on their students and make sure it is kept safe.