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Developed through the Equity Data Unification Think Tank
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Primary Document Version

Seeing the System

Education Data as Equity Infrastructure

A Brief Emerging from the Equity Data Unification Think Tank

Convened by Black EdFluencers-United (BE-U)

Black EdFluencers-United is a national network of educators, researchers, and community leaders committed to advancing educational equity through research, policy dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving. BE-U convenes cross-sector conversations that bring together practitioners, scholars, and policymakers to examine critical issues affecting educational opportunity.

The Equity Data Unification Think Tank convened educators, researchers, and policy leaders over a series of sessions to examine how national education data systems support transparency, accountability, and equity in education.

Why This Matters Now

As debates about the future of national education data systems emerge, the country faces a fundamental question:

How can the United States address educational inequities if the systems that reveal those inequities become harder to see?

Introduction

Across the United States, public understanding of how schools serve students depends on something most people rarely see: the nation's education data infrastructure.

Education data systems make the education system visible. They allow the country to identify patterns in opportunity and inequality across states, districts, and communities. Through these systems, researchers, policymakers, educators, and families can examine trends over time, compare outcomes across communities, and assess whether policies are improving students' lives.

When these systems are strong, the country can see where opportunity is expanding and where disparities persist. When they weaken, inequities become harder to detect—and harder to address.

At a moment when questions about the future of national education data systems are emerging, the stakes are not simply technical. They are civic. The nation's ability to understand and respond to educational inequality depends on the strength, stability, and accessibility of the systems that make those patterns visible.

Without these systems, much of the education system would become difficult to see.

Researchers would struggle to examine national trends.

Policymakers would lose important tools for evaluating programs.

School systems would lose national benchmarks.

Families and communities would lose transparency about how schools are serving students.

Education data systems do something deceptively simple but profoundly important:

They make the education system visible.

Thesis

When national education data systems are strong, the country can see patterns of opportunity and inequality across schools and communities; when those systems weaken, inequities become harder to detect and harder to address.

Why This Moment Matters

Recent decisions about the future of federal education data systems have raised important questions about the stability and scope of national education data collection. (https://hechingerreport.org/proof-points-ies-northern-report/)

At first glance, these conversations may appear technical.

In reality, they have profound implications for how the nation understands educational opportunity and inequality.

If national education data systems weaken or become fragmented:

• Researchers may lose access to consistent longitudinal datasets

• Policymakers may struggle to evaluate programs across states

• School systems may lose national benchmarks

• Families and communities may lose transparency about school performance

When reliable public data disappear, inequities become harder to see—and harder to address.

What Is at Stake

The stability of national education data systems has significant implications for how the United States understands and improves its education system.

If national education data systems weaken or become fragmented:

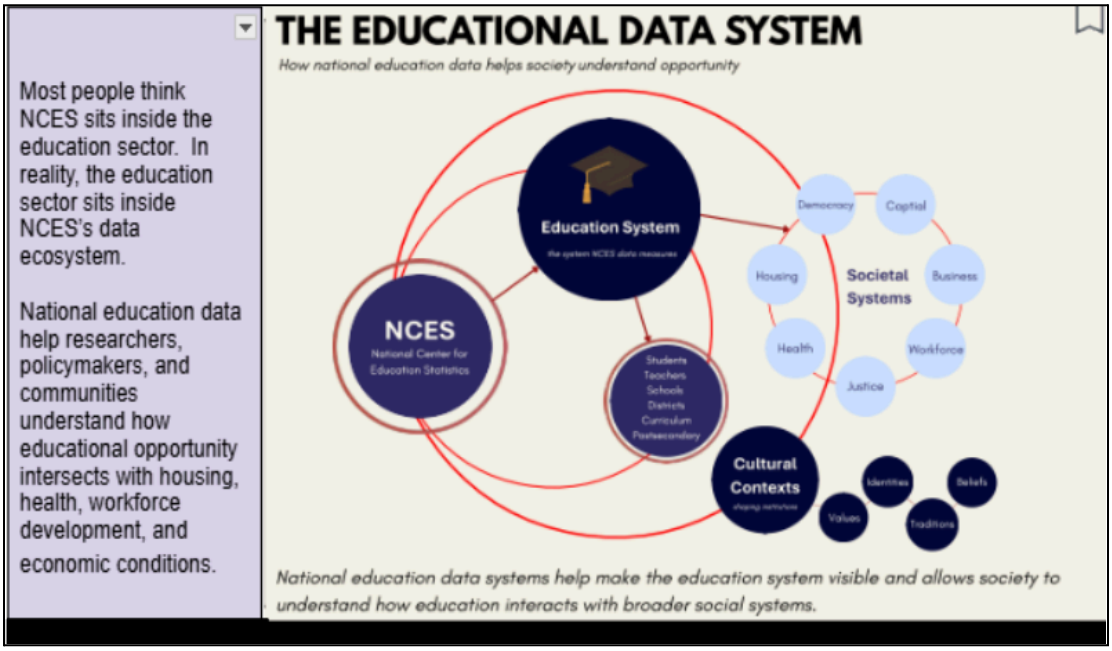
- Disparities affecting students may remain hidden across states and communities
- Policymakers may lose reliable evidence for evaluating programs and investments
- School systems may lose the ability to compare local outcomes with national trends
- Families and communities may lose transparency about how schools serve students

National education data systems do not simply collect information. They enable the country to identify challenges, learn from successful practices, and respond to inequities affecting students.

In this way, education data infrastructure supports the nation’s ability to make informed decisions about its schools and the students they serve. These data also provide the evidence policymakers rely on when evaluating programs and allocating federal education resources.

The Education Data Ecosystem

Figure 1. The Education Data Ecosystem



National education datasets coordinated through NCES help researchers, policymakers, and educators understand patterns of opportunity and outcomes across the U.S. education system.

This ecosystem allows researchers, policymakers, and educators to examine patterns across thousands of communities rather than isolated school systems. Educational outcomes do not exist in isolation. Patterns in schooling often intersect with broader systems that shape opportunity, including housing patterns, workforce development, health access, transportation, and local economic investment.

The National Education Data Ecosystem

The national education data infrastructure includes multiple datasets that together form the backbone of the country's education knowledge system.

NAEP – National Assessment of Educational Progress

Often referred to as "The Nation's Report Card," NAEP measures student achievement across states and allows the country to track long-term academic trends.

Common Core of Data (CCD)

A comprehensive database of public schools and districts across the United States that provides essential information about school characteristics and enrollment.

Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC)

Administered by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR), this federal dataset tracks disparities in discipline practices, access to advanced coursework, special education placement, and other indicators of educational opportunity.

IPEDS – Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

A national dataset tracking postsecondary institutions, enrollment, and outcomes.

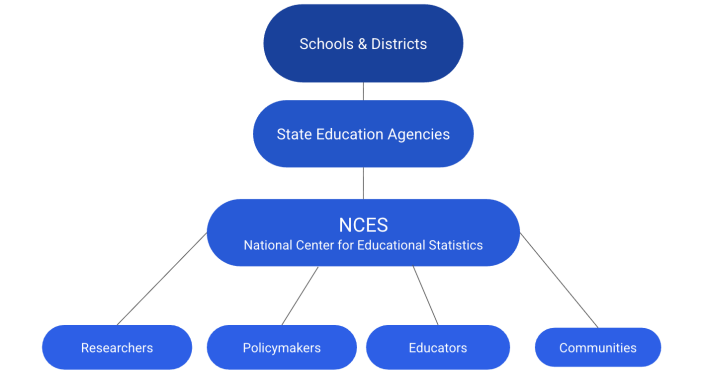
EDGE – Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates

A program that allows researchers to examine educational data in relation to geographic and demographic characteristics.

Together, these systems allow the country to understand educational opportunity and outcomes across communities.

How National Education Data Flow in the United States

Figure 2. How National Education Data Flow

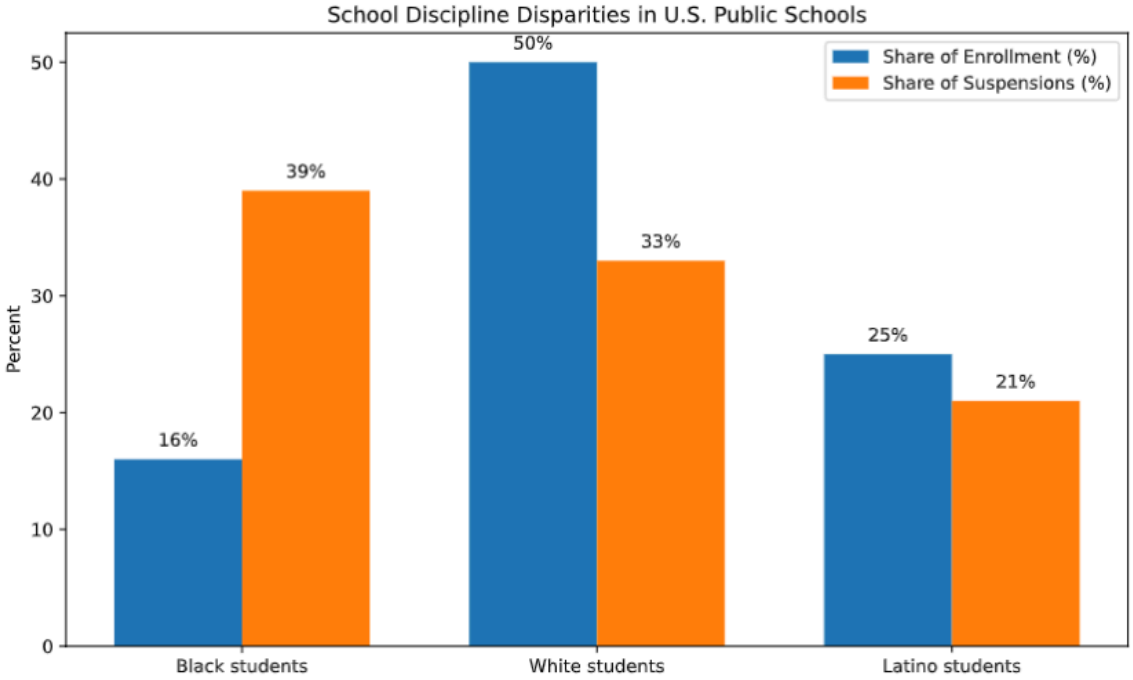


National education data systems aggregate information from thousands of schools and districts, allowing researchers, policymakers, and communities to identify patterns that would not be visible through local data alone.

How National Data Reveal Inequities

National datasets make it possible to identify patterns that would otherwise remain invisible across individual districts. The Civil Rights Data Collection, for example, revealed significant disparities in school discipline practices across the United States.

Figure 3. Example of National Discipline Disparities



Example: School Discipline Disparities in U.S. Public Schools

Student Group	Share of Enrollment	Share of Suspensions
Black students	~16%	~40%
White students	~50%	~33%
Latino students	~25%	~21%

Source: U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection; U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2018). K–12 Education: Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities (GAO-18-258), using 2013–14 Civil Rights Data Collection data. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-18-258>

Patterns such as these became visible because national datasets allow researchers to examine discipline outcomes across thousands of school districts simultaneously.

National datasets have also helped researchers identify gaps in:

- Access to advanced coursework
- Graduation rates across demographic groups

- Special education placement patterns

These patterns have informed civil rights enforcement, policy reform, and public dialogue about educational equity.

Without comparable national datasets, identifying these patterns consistently across the country would be extremely difficult.

Student Perspective: Why Data Matter for Students

Students experience the consequences of education policy decisions every day, even when those policies are shaped by data systems most students never see.

National education datasets help reveal patterns in how students experience schooling across the country. These patterns include differences in access to advanced coursework, disparities in discipline practices, and variations in the support provided to students with disabilities.

For students, these patterns are not abstract statistics. They shape the opportunities available in classrooms, the expectations educators hold, and the pathways open to students after graduation.

When national education data systems are strong, policymakers, educators, and communities can identify these patterns and respond. When those systems weaken or disappear, disparities affecting students may remain hidden for years.

In this way, national education data systems help ensure that the experiences of millions of students across schools and communities can be understood collectively and addressed through informed policy and practice.

Questions Students Often Ask

Students frequently raise questions that mirror the purpose of national education data systems:

- Why do some schools offer more advanced classes than others?
- Why are discipline policies different across schools?
- Why do some students receive more academic support than others?

National education data systems help researchers, educators, and policymakers answer these questions and identify where improvements are needed.

A Policy Example: When Data Make Action Possible

Consider two policymakers evaluating the outcomes of a new literacy initiative.

Policymaker A

A state leader uses national benchmark data to compare outcomes across similar districts nationwide. The analysis reveals that students with disabilities are not benefiting from the literacy program at the same rate as other students.

Because the data make this pattern visible, the state adjusts the program and invests in targeted instructional supports.

Over time, outcomes improve.

Policymaker B

In another context, comparable national data are unavailable or fragmented. Without reliable benchmarks, policymakers struggle to determine whether the program is working or whether certain groups of students are being left behind.

Problems may go undetected for years.

Education policy depends on the ability to **see patterns early**.

National education data systems function as an early warning system for the education sector.

Where Data Are Informing Policy and Practice

National education data systems help educators, policymakers, and researchers identify challenges and improve outcomes across school systems.

For example, analysis of national assessment data has helped states track long-term trends in student achievement and identify where progress has stalled or accelerated. These insights have informed investments in literacy initiatives, mathematics instruction, and teacher professional development.

Similarly, national civil rights datasets have revealed disparities in school discipline practices across districts. In response, many states and school systems have reviewed discipline policies and expanded restorative practices aimed at reducing exclusionary discipline.

National datasets have also helped researchers identify gaps in access to advanced coursework, prompting efforts in some districts to expand Advanced Placement courses, dual enrollment opportunities, and other college-readiness pathways.

These examples illustrate how national education data systems allow the country to identify patterns, learn from emerging evidence, and guide improvements in educational opportunity.

Why Education Data Matter to Schools and Educators

School systems rely on national datasets to place local outcomes in context.

These data help educators answer important questions:

- How do our graduation rates compare with similar districts?
- Are discipline practices equitable?
- Are students with disabilities receiving appropriate support?

National benchmarks allow school leaders to identify trends and make more informed decisions.

Why Education Data Matter to Families and Communities

Publicly accessible education data create transparency.

Families and community advocates rely on these data to understand how schools serve students and to engage meaningfully in conversations about educational opportunity.

Data Governance, Ethics, and Public Trust

Strong education data systems require careful governance.

These systems must balance transparency and accessibility with the protection of student privacy.

Maintaining public trust requires responsible stewardship of education data and clear ethical safeguards.

Key Insights from the Equity Data Unification Think Tank

Participants emphasized several key ideas:

- National education data systems function as civic infrastructure for transparency and accountability
- Education data should remain accessible to educators, families, and community advocates
- Data literacy is essential for using education data effectively
- Protecting national data systems requires collaboration across sectors
- While federal statistical systems remain the backbone of national education data infrastructure, universities, research institutions, and community organizations also play an important role in analyzing, interpreting, and communicating what national datasets reveal about educational opportunity.
- Participants also noted that safeguarding national education data may ultimately require collaboration across multiple sectors. Federal statistical agencies provide the foundation for national data collection, universities contribute research capacity and analysis, and community organizations help interpret how national patterns affect students and communities.

Call to Action

Protecting the Nation's Education Data Infrastructure

Participants in the Equity Data Unification Think Tank identify a clear need to strengthen the long-term resilience of the nation's education data systems.

For decades, national datasets coordinated through federal statistical agencies have allowed the country to understand patterns in educational opportunity across communities. Maintaining these systems remains essential.

At the same time, participants emphasize that safeguarding education data requires a broader ecosystem of stewardship.

This includes three complementary roles:

- **Federal statistical leadership**
  National data systems provide the foundation for consistent, comparable, and longitudinal data across the country.
- **University research partnerships**
  Universities—including Historically Black Colleges and Universities working alongside

other research institutions—expand analytic capacity, deepen interpretation, and prepare future researchers and policy leaders.

- **Community and regional advisory networks**
  Educators, families, and community organizations help interpret what national data reveal and ensure that patterns affecting students remain visible and understood within local contexts.

Strengthening these interconnected roles will help ensure that education data systems remain stable, accessible, and capable of supporting informed decision-making.

Sustaining this infrastructure is essential to the nation's ability to understand educational conditions, identify disparities, and respond to the needs of students across communities.

The Equity Data Unification Think Tank encourages researchers, policymakers, educators, and community leaders to engage in a broader national conversation about how the United States can safeguard and strengthen its education data infrastructure for the future.

NCES Briefs — Participant Acknowledgments

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The Equity Data Unification Think Tank convened the following educators, researchers, and policy leaders over a series of sessions to examine how national education data systems support transparency, accountability, and equity in education.

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