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Elected Official Brief Version

Seeing the System: Education Data as Public Infrastructure for Equity

Education Data as Equity Infrastructure

A Policy Brief Emerging from the Equity Data Unification Think Tank
Convened by Black EdFluencers-United

This brief emerged from the Equity Data Unification Think Tank convened by Black EdFluencers-United (BE-U), a national network of educators, researchers, and community leaders working to advance educational equity through research and policy dialogue.

Why This Matters Now

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

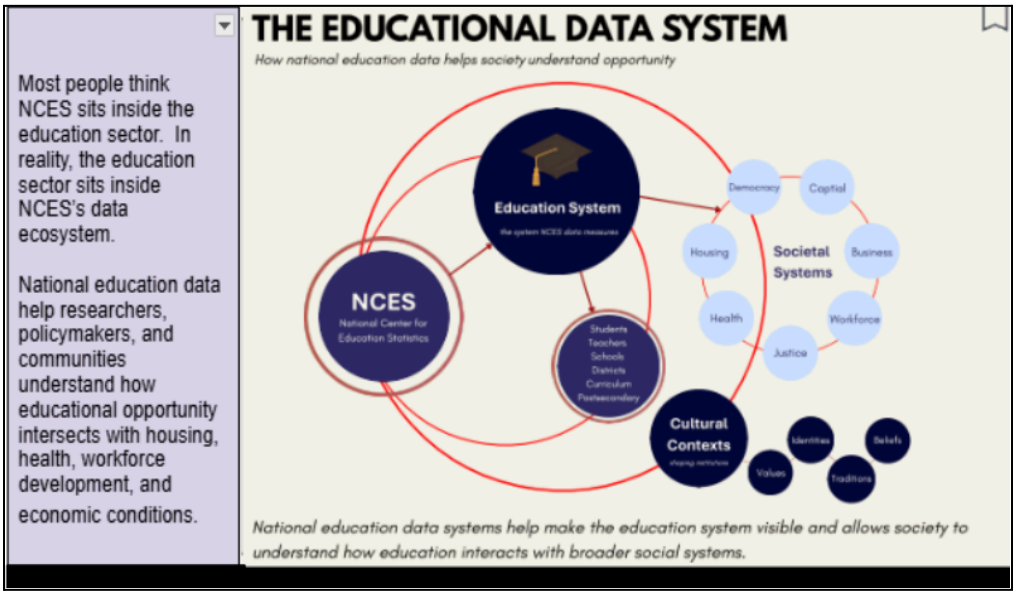
For decades, national education data systems have allowed policymakers to track student outcomes, compare conditions across states and districts, and evaluate whether policies are improving educational opportunity. These systems provide the evidence needed to identify disparities, allocate resources, and assess impact at scale.

When national education data systems are strong, policymakers can see patterns of opportunity and inequality across communities. When those systems weaken, inequities become harder to detect—and harder to address.

At a time when decisions about federal education data systems are being reconsidered, maintaining the nation’s ability to see and understand educational conditions is essential to effective policymaking.

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.

What Is at Stake

National education data systems form part of the country's civic infrastructure for understanding opportunity. Education data also help policymakers understand how schooling intersects with other systems that shape opportunity, including housing patterns, workforce development, and economic investment.

Through coordinated datasets maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics, the nation can examine long-term trends in student learning, track access to educational opportunities, and identify disparities affecting students across communities.

These datasets allow researchers and policymakers to look beyond individual school systems and understand patterns affecting millions of students nationwide.

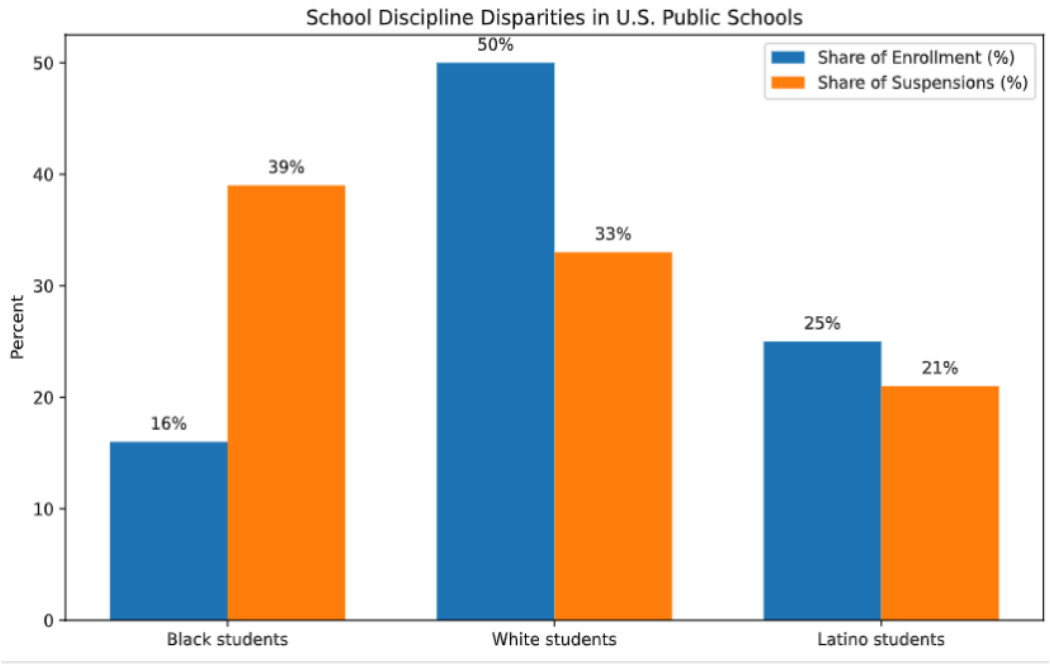
Without reliable national data, it becomes significantly more difficult to answer fundamental questions about educational opportunity and outcomes. National education datasets make disparities visible and provide the evidence policymakers rely on when evaluating programs and allocating federal education resources.

How National Data Reveal Inequities

National datasets make it possible to identify patterns that would otherwise remain invisible across individual districts.

For example, the Civil Rights Data Collection has revealed significant disparities in school discipline practices across the United States.

Figure 3. Example of National Discipline Disparities



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 only because national datasets allow researchers to examine discipline outcomes across thousands of school districts simultaneously.

Why Students Are Directly Affected

Students experience the consequences of education policy decisions every day.

Access to advanced coursework, school discipline policies, availability of experienced teachers, and access to learning resources all influence students' educational experiences.

National education data systems help ensure that these patterns can be identified and addressed across communities rather than remaining hidden within individual districts.

Key Insights from the Equity Data Unification Think Tank

Participants in the Equity Data Unification Think Tank—including educators, researchers, and policy leaders—identified several priorities for sustaining the nation's education data infrastructure:

Protect national education data systems.
Reliable national datasets allow policymakers to understand long-term trends in educational opportunity and outcomes.

Ensure transparency and accessibility.
Education data should remain accessible to researchers, educators, and communities seeking to understand and improve educational conditions.

Support informed policymaking.
Strong data systems help policymakers evaluate which programs and policies are improving outcomes for students.

Participants also noted that safeguarding national education data may benefit from broader collaboration among federal statistical agencies, universities, and community organizations that analyze, interpret, and communicate the meaning of national datasets.

Call to Action

Maintaining strong national education data systems is essential for transparency, educational equity, and evidence-informed policymaking.

Participants in the Equity Data Unification Think Tank encourage policymakers and institutional leaders to consider how the nation can strengthen the long-term resilience of its education data infrastructure.

Historically, national datasets coordinated through federal statistical agencies have provided the backbone of the country's education data system. Protecting these systems remains essential.

At the same time, participants suggested that strengthening the nation's education data ecosystem may involve collaboration across several complementary areas of stewardship.

- **Federal statistical leadership**
  Federal data systems continue to provide the foundation for national education data collection, reporting, and long-term trend analysis.
- **University research partnerships**
  Universities—including Historically Black Colleges and Universities working alongside other research institutions—play an important role in analyzing national datasets, advancing research capacity, and preparing future policy and research leaders.
- **Community and regional advisory networks**
  Educators, parents, community organizations, and advocacy groups help interpret what national education data reveal about students and communities and help ensure that patterns affecting educational opportunity remain visible to the public.

Together, these complementary roles can help strengthen the nation's ability to collect, analyze, and interpret education data while supporting responsible policymaking.

Maintaining strong national education data systems ensures that policymakers have the information needed to evaluate programs, identify disparities, and make informed decisions that support the success of students across the United States.

NCES Briefs — Participant Acknowledgments

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 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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