State Secrets:
How Transparent Are State School Report Cards About the Effects of COVID?

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This report is part of CRPE's State of the Student Report project, which updates the field annually on the state of public education and COVID-19 recovery efforts. It covers what students and families need, how school systems are responding, what barriers they face, and what promising innovations show the potential to propel a more just, responsive, and joyful public education system.

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It's clear that the COVID-19 pandemic took a toll on students' academic outcomes.

Evidence from NAEP, state tests, and even commercial benchmarks all point to the same conclusion: student achievement has declined substantially in core subjects. Meanwhile, student absenteeism has ballooned—chronic absenteeism rates in many locales have doubled. Some evidence suggests the negative effects of the pandemic are more significant for students from historically marginalized groups—students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, English learners, etc. While students have recovered some of their losses, they are not where they were—or where they would have been if COVID-19 had not happened.

But how transparent are these trends to parents or other interested parties? We have lots of suggestive evidence that parents don't understand the magnitude of the COVID-19 downturns in achievement or attendance, or at least aren't as concerned as experts think they should be. Is that because school report cards aren't leveling with parents about how these outcomes have changed since before the pandemic? Looking forward, could parents choosing a school for their child use the state report cards mandated by the Every Student Succeeds Act to inform their decisions or to put pressure on struggling schools? Our team set out to answer this question:

How easy would it be for an interested parent or advocate to find longitudinal data on school performance going back to pre-COVID times?

We first identified seven of the most important indicators of student performance:

- **Achievement levels in ELA/Mathematics**
- **Achievement levels in Science**
- **Achievement levels in Social Studies**
- **Achievement growth in ELA/Mathematics**
- **Chronic absenteeism (or a similar indicator such as "regular attendance")**
- **High school graduation rate**
- **English learner proficiency or growth**

We chose these metrics because they are some of the most critical indicators commonly found on state report cards. Though no measures are perfect, these paint a clear picture of how schools are helping students succeed. Once we identified the seven indicators, we went to each state's report card website (located using Google search) and attempted to find longitudinal school-level data going back to at least the 2018-19 school year (i.e., pre-COVID). We rated each of the seven indicators on a simple four-point scale (0-3), then summed the four ratings and turned them into an A-F letter grade (for more details on the ratings, see the box on the next page). Of course, we recognize that cohorts of students change over time. Year-to-year comparisons are far from perfect, but without more precise data, we think these comparisons provide an important barometer of how students have been affected by the pandemic. In the case of states that had multiple report card systems, we selected the one that best facilitated longitudinal comparisons (i.e., the one that would score the highest grade in our analysis).

While coding, we also noticed that the report card websites differed substantially in usability and interpretability. For instance, some sites featured attractive visuals that we thought a parent would be able to interpret. In contrast, other sites bombarded the user with mountains of disaggregated data that would be very difficult, if not impossible, for an average viewer without a PhD in data science to understand. On some sites, the menus for searching and selecting schools were easy to use, while on others, they were sources of maddening frustration. To capture this variation, we rated each site's usability on a holistic scale (Great, Good, Fair, Poor).

TECHNICAL DETAILS AND CAVEATS

We rated each of the seven indicators using the following four-point scale:

Easily *(3 points)*: We could easily find longitudinal data from pre-COVID. The data was presented clearly with side-by-side comparisons (e.g., in a graph or table with averages by year) so that longitudinal trends were immediately apparent.

With Some Difficulty *(2 points)*: We could find longitudinal data back to pre-COVID relatively easily, but it wasn't presented side-by-side. For instance, many states had a report card where you could easily toggle the years with a drop-down menu, but to compare across years, one would have to copy and paste the data into a spreadsheet.

With Too Much Difficulty *(1 point)*: We could find longitudinal data back to pre-COVID, but locating the data was difficult enough that we thought an average parent would not be able to do it. For instance, in some states, it was very difficult to figure out how to toggle between years or to locate historical data at all.

Could Not Find *(0 points)*: We could not find longitudinal data back to pre-COVID on the given outcome. In some states, the oldest data available was from the 2020-21 school year. In others, data was available for given years (e.g., in a downloadable Excel file for every school in an entire state), but this data was either located on a different website or otherwise unusable for a typical parent or advocate.
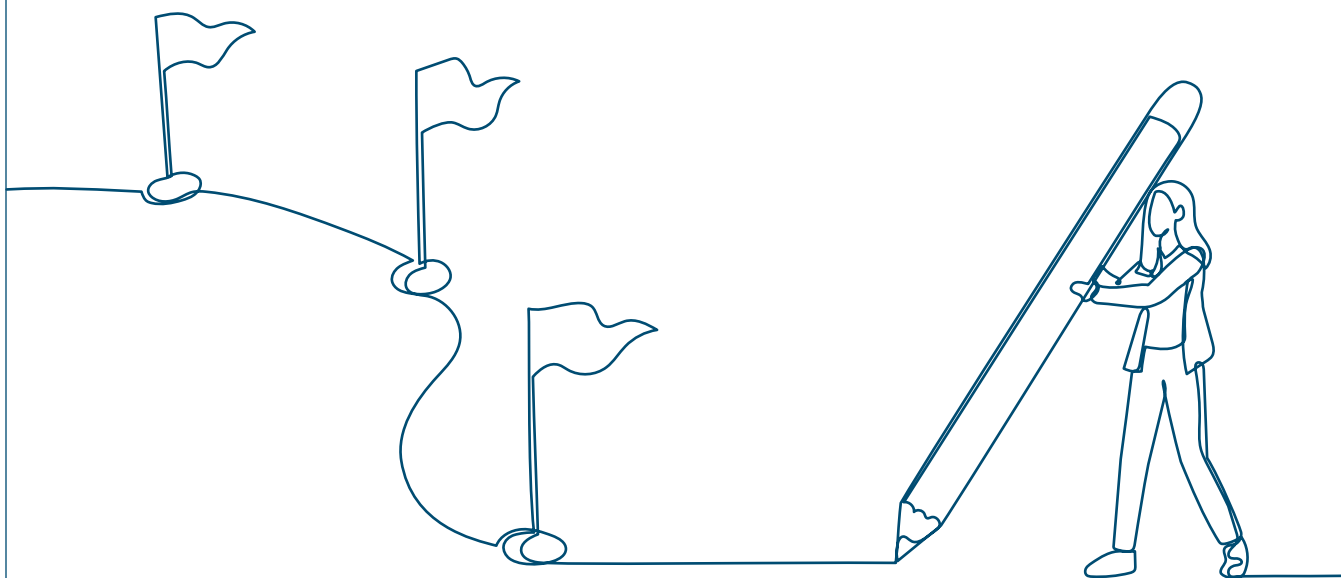
Based on these seven three-point ratings, there were 21 possible points. We rated each state on an **A-F scale: A = 18-21, B = 15-17, C = 12-14, D = 9-11, F = less than 9**. For ease of presentation, we include DC under the term "state" throughout this report.

BEFORE WE PRESENT THE RESULTS, A FEW CAVEATS:

- Our ratings focus specifically on whether longitudinal data are available going back to pre-COVID. If we had rated states on something else (e.g., how clearly they presented data for the given year), we would have arrived at different ratings. For instance, the Data Quality Campaign reviews report cards annually, focusing on which specific data are available (their 2023 review found that 23 states were not reporting achievement by all federally required student groups, and their 2022 review noted that vanishingly few states provided high-quality translations of report cards). We also acknowledge that state report cards were often created before COVID-19 and therefore were not created for the purpose we evaluated them against. Similarly, we acknowledge that some states have changed assessments over time and choose not to report longitudinal trends for that reason. Nevertheless, longitudinal comparisons are important, and we think it is reasonable to focus our report on them.

- Our ratings are based on our own experiences trying to navigate these websites and locate the relevant data. If different people had tried to navigate, they might have had different experiences or gotten different ratings. We note that at least two people rated each state's website, and all discrepancies were ultimately resolved. We also suspect that our team—CRPE staff, ASU PhD and master's degree students, and a tenured full professor—would be more capable of navigating state report card websites than a typical parent or advocate, and thus, we expect our ratings produced a higher bound.

- We collected all our data in March and April 2024. Though we verified our results again in August 2024, if states have changed their report cards since then, our results may no longer apply.

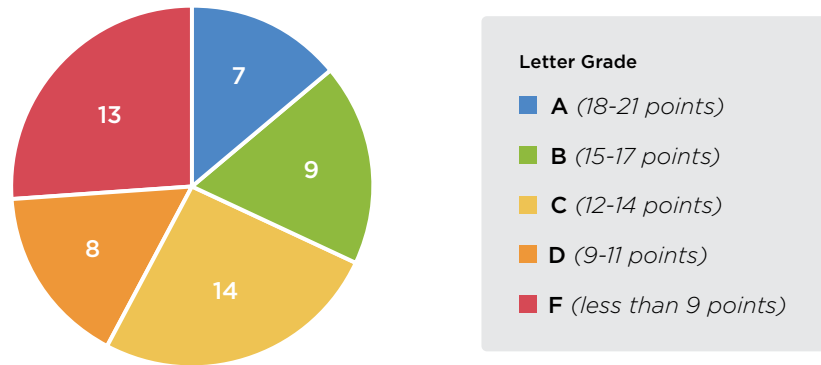## With all that out of the way, what did we learn from our project?
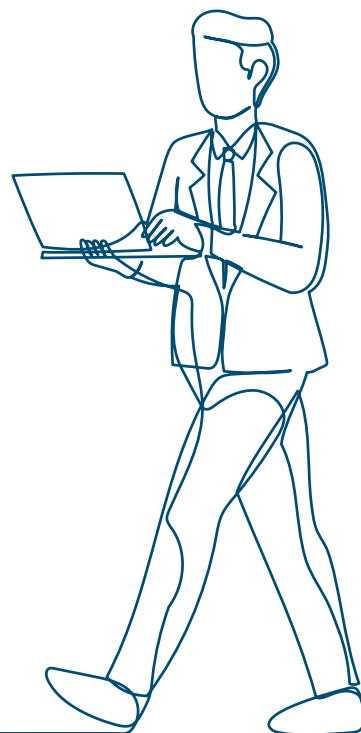
FINDING 1

For most states, it is difficult to find longitudinal data on student performance.

Overall, 35 states earned a grade of C or worse, meaning that they missed 7 or more of the 21 possible points, and just 16 states earned a grade of A (7 states) or B (9 states) (see Table 1). The map on page 7 (Figure 2) shows each state's rating.

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF STATES BY LETTER GRADE

Letter Grade
- **A** *(18-21 points)*
- **B** *(15-17 points)*
- **C** *(12-14 points)*
- **D** *(9-11 points)*
- **F** *(less than 9 points)*

TABLE 1: STATE REPORT CARD RANKINGS BY LETTER GRADE

A	B	C	D	F
7 STATES	9 STATES	13 STATES PLUS DC	8 STATES	13 STATES
Connecticut	Florida	Alabama	Arizona	Alaska
Delaware	Illinois	Colorado	Arkansas	Idaho
Hawaii	Maryland	DC	California	Louisiana
Michigan	Minnesota	Georgia	Iowa	Maine
Oklahoma	Missouri	Indiana	Massachusetts	New Mexico
Pennsylvania	Nevada	Kansas	Montana	North Dakota
Tennessee	Nebraska	Kentucky	West Virginia	Oregon
	North Carolina	Mississippi	Wisconsin	Rhode Island
	Washington	New Hampshire		South Carolina
		New Jersey		South Dakota
		New York		Utah
		Ohio		Vermont
		Texas		Wyoming
		Virginia		

There were seven states tied at the top with 18 points. The specific reasons for missed points varied across the seven, but the most common reason was a missed indicator. For Delaware and Tennessee, our reviewers could not find student growth data, while for Connecticut, Hawaii, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania there was no social studies data available. Michigan was the only top-scoring state where all indicators were available, but in Michigan several of the indicators required toggling across years to get longitudinal comparisons.

The issues in B- and C-rated states varied. In some states, individual indicators had easy longitudinal comparisons, but one or two indicators were absent (e.g., for Missouri and Nevada, growth data and science or social studies data were absent). In other states, most or all of the individual indicators were present, but it was difficult to make longitudinal comparisons across them (e.g., Mississippi, which earned "with some difficulty" across all seven indicators).

At the other end of the scale, 13 states received an F rating. Three states—Maine, New Mexico, and North Dakota—earned 0 points out of the 21 possible. This rating is not necessarily because these states have terrible report cards. Indeed, New Mexico's report card is easy to navigate and visually appealing. Simply put, these states' report cards do not make longitudinal comparisons back to pre-COVID possible for the average user.

FIGURE 2: MAP OF STATE REPORT CARD GRADES

Letter Grade

- A (18-21 points)
- B (15-17 points)
- C (12-14 points)
- D (9-11 points)
- F (less than 9 points)
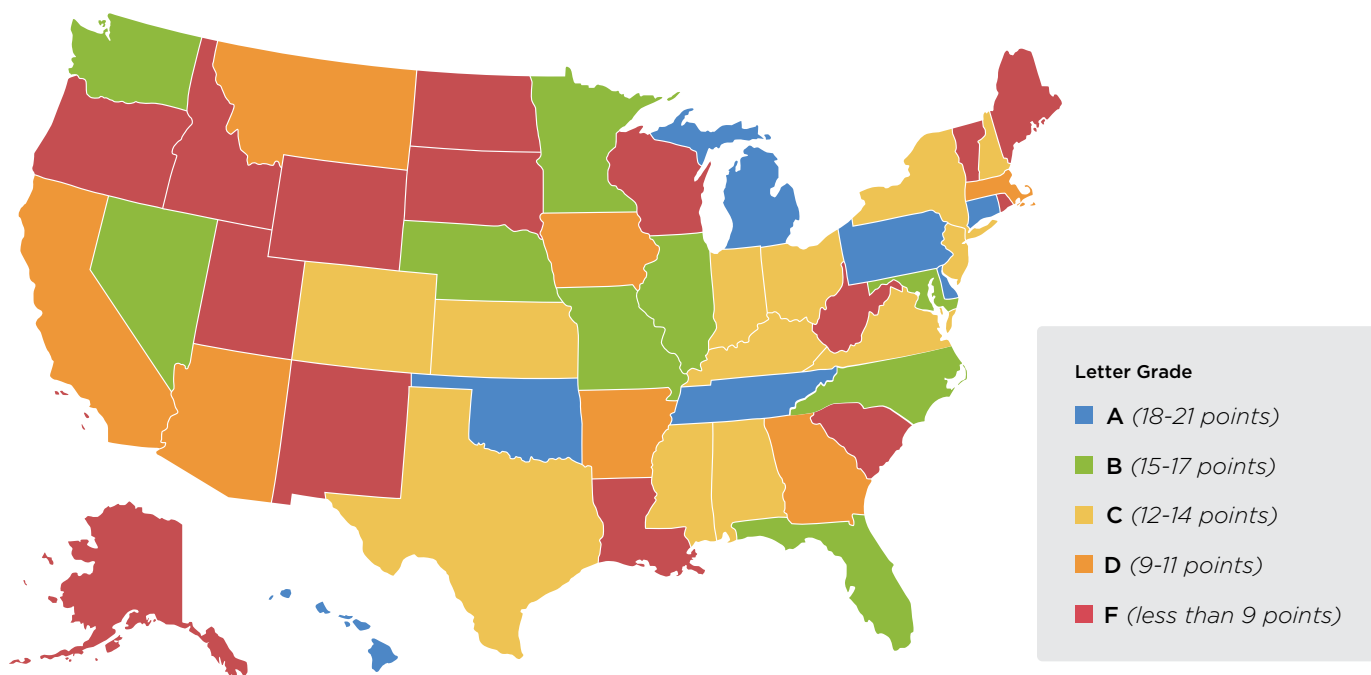
FINDING 2

The most commonly available indicators are graduation rates and ELA/mathematics performance levels. Social studies, achievement growth, and chronic absenteeism are the least commonly available indicators.
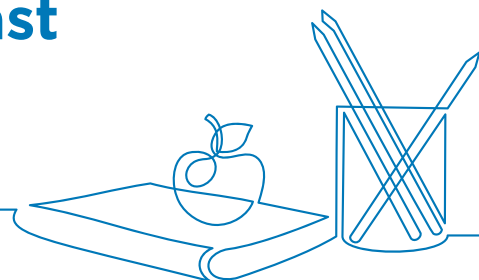
Most states make longitudinal data on ELA/math achievement (40 states) and graduation rates (42 states) available either easily or with some difficulty (about half and half). However, that means 9-11 states do not make even this most basic data available for longitudinal comparisons from pre-COVID. Still, these are the two indicators that look the best. There are very few states where we could not find any usable longitudinal data back to pre-COVID on these two indicators.

Social studies data fare the worst by far, and this is to be expected—relatively few states assess or report on social studies achievement at all (though, given ongoing civic debates, we think this should change–clearly, there is a need for greater civic engagement and understanding of America's democratic systems). However, we were surprised that for 23 states, longitudinal ELA/math growth data was either too difficult (3) or impossible (20) to find. Given the absenteeism crisis, we were also surprised that, for 21 states, longitudinal absenteeism data was either too difficult (7) or impossible (14) to find. We felt these were missed opportunities to inform parents and advocates about trends on these indicators.

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF STATES (INCLUDING DC) AT EACH RATING ON EACH OF THE SEVEN INDICATORS

	ELA/Math Levels	ELA/Math Growth	Science	Social Studies	Chronic Absenteeism	Graduation Rates	EL Proficiency or Growth
EASILY	21	13	16	4	14	23	15
SOME DIFFICULTY	19	15	18	7	16	19	17
TOO MUCH DIFFICULTY	6	3	6	2	7	6	4
COULD NOT FIND	5	20	11	38	14	3	15

FINDING 3

Even in states that scored well, longitudinal performance of student groups was often buried or hard to find.

Although longitudinal data were mostly available in the seven A-rated states, these states still varied in how visible they made the performance of student groups (e.g., racial/ethnic groups, students with disabilities, etc.). Delaware made longitudinal data by student group impossible to find. It was easy to find longitudinal data and student group data separately, but we could not find the intersection on the main webpage. The same was true in Tennessee, where longitudinal data were also a bit buried, though findable with some ingenuity. Connecticut's reports were a breeze to operate but only made it easy to find longitudinal performance for a combined "high needs" group, not individual student groups. Michigan's report card website was tricky to navigate and sometimes slow to load, and it wasn't apparent how to find student group data longitudinally.

On the other hand, some states had longitudinal data by student group readily available. Hawaii's website has a beautiful, easy-to-operate data visualization tool that produces exceptionally clear graphs. These graphs allow the user to toggle from school to school and to add student groups. Oklahoma's website was even more straightforward—their longitudinal graphs typically showed multiple student groups directly (we presume these were all the student groups that met minimum n-size requirements), though the formatting of those graphs was not as clear. In Pennsylvania, once we found the small icon to show us longitudinal graphs, those graphs also indicated every numerically significant student group.

FINDING 4

Overall, state report cards were remarkably difficult to use.

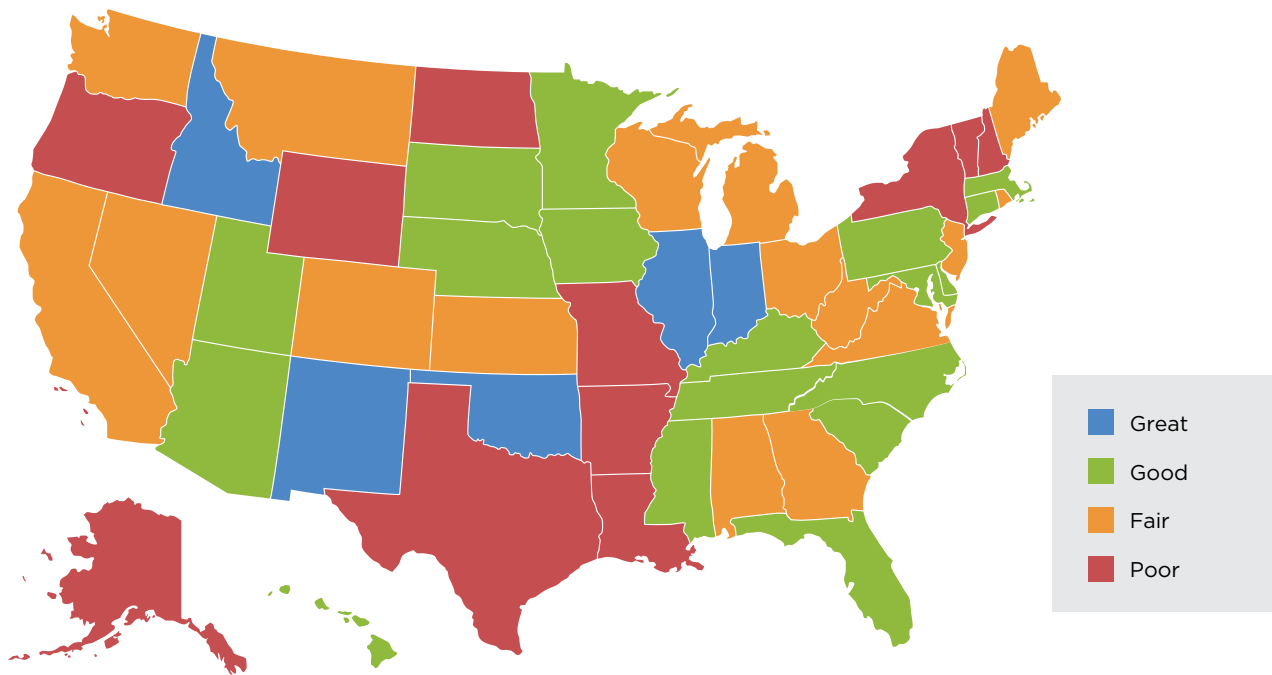## FIGURE 3: MAP OF REPORT CARD WEBSITE USABILITY BY STATE

Legend:
- Great (blue)
- Good (green)
- Fair (orange)
- Poor (red)

TABLE 3: REPORT CARD WEBSITE USABILITY RATINGS BY STATE

| GREAT	GOOD		FAIR		POOR	
5 STATES	18 STATES PLUS DC		16 STATES		11 STATES	
Idaho	Arizona	Minnesota	Alabama	Nevada	Alaska	North Dakota
Illinois	Connecticut	Mississippi	California	New Jersey	Arkansas	Oregon
Indiana	DC	Nebraska	Colorado	Ohio	Louisiana	Texas
New Mexico	Delaware	North Carolina	Georgia	Rhode Island	Missouri	Vermont
Oklahoma	Florida	Pennsylvania	Kansas	Virginia	New Hampshire	Wyoming
	Hawaii	South Carolina	Maine	Washington	New York	
	Iowa	South Dakota	Michigan	West Virginia		
	Kentucky	Tennessee	Montana	Wisconsin		
	Maryland	Utah				
	Massachusetts					

Setting aside the main focus of our work, we were struck by how difficult it was to navigate some state report card websites. We found many common pitfalls, ranging from the relatively mundane to the massive and structural. As a few illustrative examples:

- **Some states have minor technical issues that make usability a challenge.** For instance, Kansas's report card was pretty good and easy to navigate, but several user experience challenges got in the way. There was no landing page with overall performance data, you had to know where to click, and student achievement was obscurely labeled as "performance level reports." There was longitudinal data available on a graph, but the toggle for five years of data was relatively hidden, subgroup data could not be presented alongside each other, and the data were presented in somewhat clunky stacked bar charts.

- **Some states provide too much data in an unwieldy format.** For instance, Texas's state and federal report cards offer a wealth of data broken down by every student group imaginable. However, there are no visualizations; the site only provides massive performance data tables broken down by group. Since the data aren't presented longitudinally in a usable way, we thought all but the savviest users would be befuddled by Texas's report cards. (We note that Texas has updated its school report card system, but because of ongoing lawsuits, these ratings have not been updated since 2022. Given this, we chose to evaluate the report card system with the newest and most complete data, which was their state report card website.)

- **Some states have user interfaces that are all but impossible to navigate.** For instance, rather than providing clear report cards for each school, Vermont offers a series of dashboards that are incredibly challenging to operate or interpret. They are slow, they don't seem to allow for obvious data export, and the figures and tables they produce are hard to understand.

We could go state-by-state and document the challenges with all 51 report cards. All of them had issues, even the ones we liked. In the end, we only identified five states with "great" report cards in terms of usability: Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. Interestingly, these states varied in grade distribution within our point rating system—Oklahoma received an A, Illinois a B, Indiana a C, and Idaho and New Mexico an F. That said, there was a relationship between state ratings on providing longitudinal data and their ratings on overall usability (e.g., 6 of the 7 A states earned a Good or Great rating on usability; only Michigan did not). Still, we thought these five state report cards were easy to navigate, produced tables and figures that were readily interpretable, and put the most important data front and center and helped readers understand it. Our research team thinks other states seeking to upgrade their sites could consider these four usable report card models.

Discussion and Recommendations
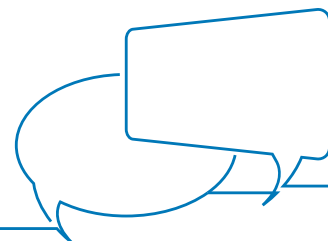
Parents and advocates deserve access to high-quality, usable report card data, especially because we know pandemic learning loss substantially harmed student outcomes (and that these impacts vary widely by locale and student group). But more than this—if the federal government is going to require states to provide report cards, and if states are going to spend money to create them, shouldn't they at least be usable? What purpose are these report cards serving if an average parent or advocate cannot figure out how to use them to answer basic questions about school effectiveness? To that end, we conclude with a few suggestions for policymakers and state leaders to consider when discussing report card improvement.

1. **Band together.** There is no reason to have 51 completely different models of report cards, and many of the most unusable report cards were from smaller or more rural states that might not have the internal capacity to create more appealing interfaces. For instance, of the 13 F states, all are in the bottom 30 states in population size. States should consider working together, perhaps led by an organization like the Council of Chief State School Officers, to improve report cards. The federal government could incentivize this by supporting templates or models that could be adapted rather than leaving each state on its own.

2. **Improve usability.** We have to imagine that states have tested their websites with potential users, though in many cases, it didn't seem like they had. Regardless, these websites need significantly more user experience testing to streamline a) the ways sites present data and b) site use mechanics. Over and over again, we found ourselves lost in a sea of tabs, buried under piles of disaggregated data, or perplexed by confusing visualizations. States simply must do better, and looking at our five Great-rated usability states ([Idaho](#), [Illinois](#), [Indiana](#), [New Mexico](#), and [Oklahoma](#)) might help.

3. **Be transparent.** The ostensive purpose of report cards is transparency—to give the public information about school performance and to help them make decisions. However, when we tasked these state report card webpages with the simple question of how schools are doing post-COVID, most states fell far short. Certain models among the A-rated states demonstrate how other states could improve data transparency about post-COVID performance. We hope our analysis encourages lower-rated states to do so, and we wonder whether the federal government should also push for—or require—a movement toward greater data transparency.

Parents and advocates could also be influential in pushing and supporting states to report data more transparently and in more usable formats. They can do so by looking to the A-rated states on our list and asking policymakers to improve their state's report cards along those lines.

As CRPE's [State of the American Student](#) report and other research make clear, the academic and socio-emotional impacts on young people continue to reverberate. The pandemic also revealed that too many students were not getting the education they deserved even before the pandemic. Transparency in state data reporting is only one piece of the puzzle, but it is a foundational one. Parents, educators, and community leaders cannot advocate for and solve problems they do not know exist.

NOTES ABOUT INDIVIDUAL STATES

- **California** has two systems, the School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs) and the California School Dashboard. This report evaluated the Dashboard because we felt it was more likely to be used by parents and other stakeholders. However, the SARCs would have received the same grades. For the A-F rating, the SARCs would have scored an F because only two years of SARCs are available on the state website and there is no longitudinal data reported. For the usability rating, the SARCs would have scored "fair," because the SARCs are in PDF format (often unique formats for individual districts), though the SARC search engine is easy and useful.

- **Michigan** has a parent dashboard that reports data on the main indicators in its accountability system. This report instead evaluated the "education dashboard," which contained more complete information but was less user-friendly. If we had instead evaluated the parent dashboard, the overall rating would have been lower because the longitudinal data was less accessible, but the usability rating would have been higher because the site was easier to navigate and interpret.

- **North Carolina** produced reports and public dashboards specifically focused on COVID-19 impacts and recovery in 2023 and 2024, though these were not a part of their main dashboard system that we rated.

- **West Virginia** has two systems, ZoomWV and the Balanced Scorecard (which rolls up results from ZoomWV into a public-facing report card). West Virginia's grade is based on an evaluation of ZoomWV, which is the system best designed for longitudinal comparisons.

- **Wisconsin** has two systems, WISEDash (a dashboard) and a report card system. WISEDash contains and presents most of the longitudinal data. Reviewers could not locate WISEDash through either Google searches or navigating the state DPI website–we learned about it from a journalist and through communications from the state DPI. Nonetheless, Wisconsin's grades are based on WISEDash.