Making Room for What Matters: Innovative School Leaders Want Accountability, but With a Lighter Footprint

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October 2025

CRPE
REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Introduction

In the U.S., public education is at a crossroads. Artificial intelligence is reshaping the opportunities young people will have for work and social connection; basic math and literacy skills have been declining for a decade; and too many students and families find school increasingly irrelevant. Recent efforts to dismantle federal education infrastructure signal dissatisfaction, and accountability for student outcomes is now up for debate. Some argue that accountability must be strengthened; others increasingly question whether holding schools accountable for test scores makes sense at all.

Since 2022, in our annual scan of innovative schools—the Canopy project—accountability has regularly come up as one of the key policy factors that affects schools' ability to design and implement new learning models that will better serve students. As we have written before, Canopy schools are innovating to solve urgent problems by increasing student agency and improving achievement. They are changing how students learn and how teachers teach, responding to community priorities, and preparing students to thrive in an uncertain, AI-driven future. These innovations don't appear to come at the expense of performance on traditional student learning outcomes; exploratory research has found that on average, Canopy schools perform similarly to other comparable schools on traditional measures, and many also self-report promising results in areas that traditional metrics don't capture.

This report informs state and national discussions about the future of accountability policy by answering two questions: (1) How are leaders of Canopy schools affected by current state accountability practices? And (2) What accountability policies do they hope to see in the future? We answer these questions using data from Canopy's annual survey of 186 innovative school leaders (see more below), as well as interviews with eight of those leaders.

About the Canopy project: Canopy is co-led by CRPE and Transcend. It's a national scan to understand where and how schools—district, charter, and independent—are creating more engaging, effective, and empowering learning environments. The project is focused on schoolwide approaches, not just classroom-level experiments. To be in the Canopy project, schools are first nominated by organizations with expertise in school transformation. Leaders of the nominated schools are invited to complete a survey; responses populate Canopy's free public database with profiles for each school, available at www.CanopySchools.org.

About the schools we studied this year: Leaders from 186 schools responded to the 2025 Canopy school survey out of 883 nominated schools that were invited to participate. Of the schools that responded, 147 were public district schools (44%) or charter schools (35%). Responding schools serve widely varying student populations; 66% served high school grades, 52% served middle school grades, and 43% served elementary grades. We asked public district and charter schools about their experiences with state accountability; we did not ask independent schools these questions. While participating schools hail from 41 states, our sample size was insufficient to disaggregate state-level trends.

What do we mean by "state accountability"? States design and administer accountability systems for their schools, including by defining performance expectations, procuring and administering standardized achievement tests, and in some cases, intervening in underperforming schools. All states are bound by federal requirements embedded in the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), including annual testing in English Language Arts (ELA) and math in Grades 3-8 and testing once in high school, and public reporting of data disaggregated by student groups. We asked Canopy leaders for their perceptions of "state accountability practices" because we wanted leaders to focus on their state contexts, and we didn't think they would accurately distinguish between state and federal requirements. Although many schools are also subject to local accountability requirements set by their district or charter authorizer, we did not ask about these because we wanted to generate insights specifically for state-level policy leaders.

Key Findings

Part I: State accountability has mixed effects on innovation in Canopy schools.

1. Canopy leaders say accountability policies help reveal performance gaps and focus attention on core academics. Some schools find this helpful.
2. Canopy leaders say accountability doesn't capture school quality—or highlight which schools to learn from.
3. Few Canopy leaders find accountability data useful for improving student outcomes.
4. Nearly half of the Canopy leaders think accountability makes it harder to pilot new approaches and personalize learning.
5. High school Canopy leaders are four times more likely than elementary and middle school leaders to report that state accountability systems affect them negatively.

Part II: School leaders don't want to eliminate state accountability systems, but they do want to change them.

6. Canopy leaders want accountability systems to balance state test data with other information about learning opportunities, experiences, and outcomes.
7. By a 2 to 1 ratio, Canopy leaders are more interested in "right-sizing" state testing to ensure a lighter footprint than in trying to make tests more instructionally useful.

Our findings suggest that accountability systems are doing at least part of what they were designed for. But today's accountability systems may be holding back tomorrow's breakthroughs, and common ideas for improving state accountability, such as through-year testing, may rest on assumptions that don't hold up in practice.

The following pages detail our key findings and provide recommendations for state policymakers who oversee accountability policy. These recommendations include:

- **Right-size the assessment footprint.** Consider testing techniques that provide essential oversight data while lowering the administrative burden on schools.
- **Differentiate accountability requirements—without lowering standards—for different kinds of schools.** Alternative accountability frameworks could better align high expectations with school missions in schools with specialized designs, such as those serving a large number of recently arrived English learners or students off-track for graduation.
- **Incorporate a broader set of measures into accountability systems.** States can expand measures to include learning opportunities and engagement, and federal policymakers should allow broader interpretations of the "academic measures" required by federal law.
- **Invest in R&D.** Develop valid, reliable, low-burden tools—such as AI-powered, observational, and competency-based assessments—to capture a wider range of student outcomes.

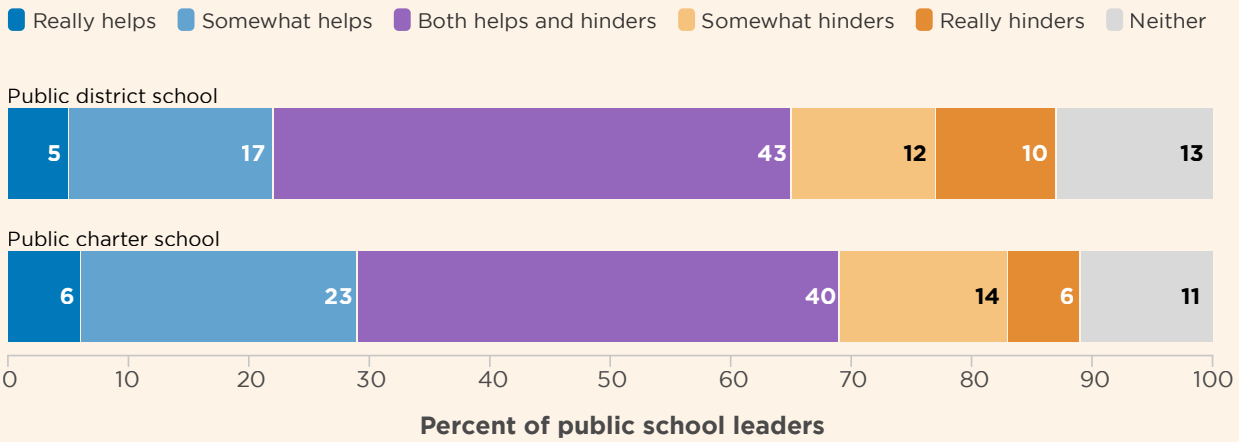
While Canopy school leaders represent a niche perspective on accountability, it's nevertheless a valuable one. Policies don't work when imposed against the will of schools that need to implement them, and even well-designed policies fail without educator buy-in. To the degree that one goal of accountability systems is to accelerate innovation—or even just avoid hindering it—these survey results illuminate school leaders' perspectives on the degree to which states are achieving that goal, and how they can improve.

Part I: State accountability has mixed effects on innovation in Canopy schools

In our survey and interviews, many public district and charter school leaders said accountability both supports and constrains their innovation work (see Figure 1). On one hand, leaders valued having disaggregated data and clear performance goals for driving equity-focused improvements in core academics. On the other, they described how those same accountability practices often overlook what matters most to their schools, fail to deliver actionable information, and make it harder to redesign schools.

Figure 1

How do state accountability practices affect schools' current innovation work?

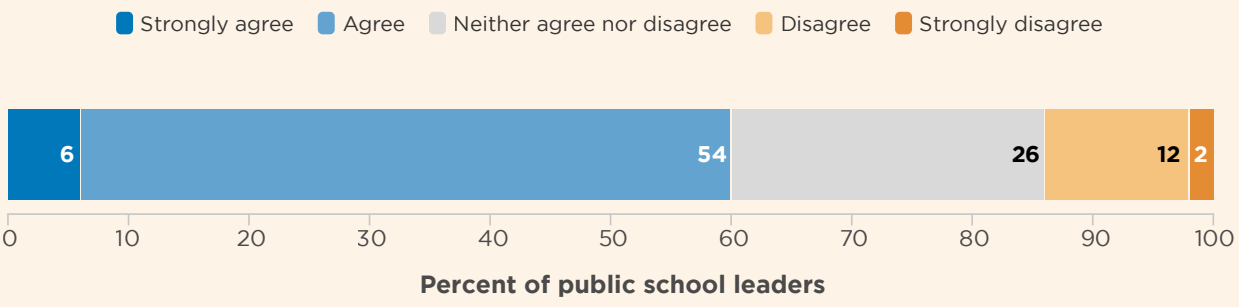


Finding #1: Canopy leaders say accountability policies help reveal performance gaps and focus attention on core academics. Some schools find this helpful.

Sixty percent of leaders in our survey agreed that state systems help identify which student groups in the state need more support (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

State accountability practices help show which student groups in our state need more support to succeed in their learning.



Some leaders shared that state accountability can help identify gaps at the school level as well. One leader wrote in the survey, *"We disaggregate our data [in] multiple ways to assess the performance of a variety of subgroups to ensure that we are addressing the needs of all students. Each year, we do a comprehensive needs assessment in both ELA and math, allowing us to develop plans that specifically devote our resources in a targeted manner."* Another wrote, *"The accountability forces us to ensure we have strong and effective systems in place for ALL students."* A third leader added, *"Seeing our low math scores has spurred reallocation of funds to math team coaching and collaboration."*

Another leader pointed out that the oversight function of state accountability is important for ensuring student protections and fair treatment, saying, *"If we had bad discipline data, if we were [disproportionately] suspending students with disabilities or students of color, that would matter. If that was the case, we would be flagged, and we would deserve to be flagged."*

Some leaders also pointed out that accountability systems establish expectations that help them stay focused on achievement, particularly literacy and math performance. One leader wrote, *"The state's rigorous standards have pushed us to develop data-driven instructional strategies and invest in targeted academic interventions that have contributed to our school being recognized for excellence in ELA and mathematics."* Another appreciated that state performance data delivers helpful information on *"which standards we struggle with."*

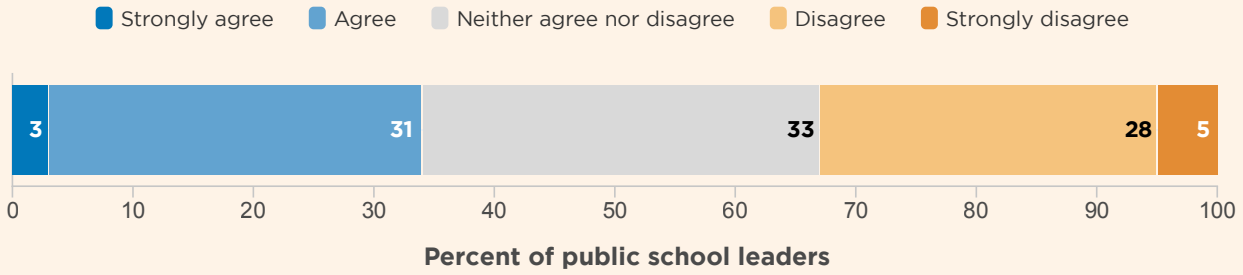
Schools showing high performance on state tests shared that they use the information to celebrate wins and communicate with families. One leader wrote, *"Our standardized results tend to outperform state and local district averages. We take it as one indicator of the efficacy of our model."* Another said in an interview, *"I think it's really good to have an apples to apples comparison with all public schools in [the state] and see how our kids are doing … our parents love the fact that they can see [our school] scoring in the mid to high 90th percentile on every single subject in every single year, and it makes 'em feel really good. It helps with our waitlist and enrollment as well."*

Finding #2: Canopy leaders say accountability doesn't capture school quality—or highlight which schools to learn from.

Even though most Canopy leaders agreed that accountability systems help identify disparities in student outcomes, they were less convinced that accountability systems surface which schools are doing the best job supporting student success (see Figure 3). Many said they don't trust accountability data to highlight schools worth learning from.

Figure 3

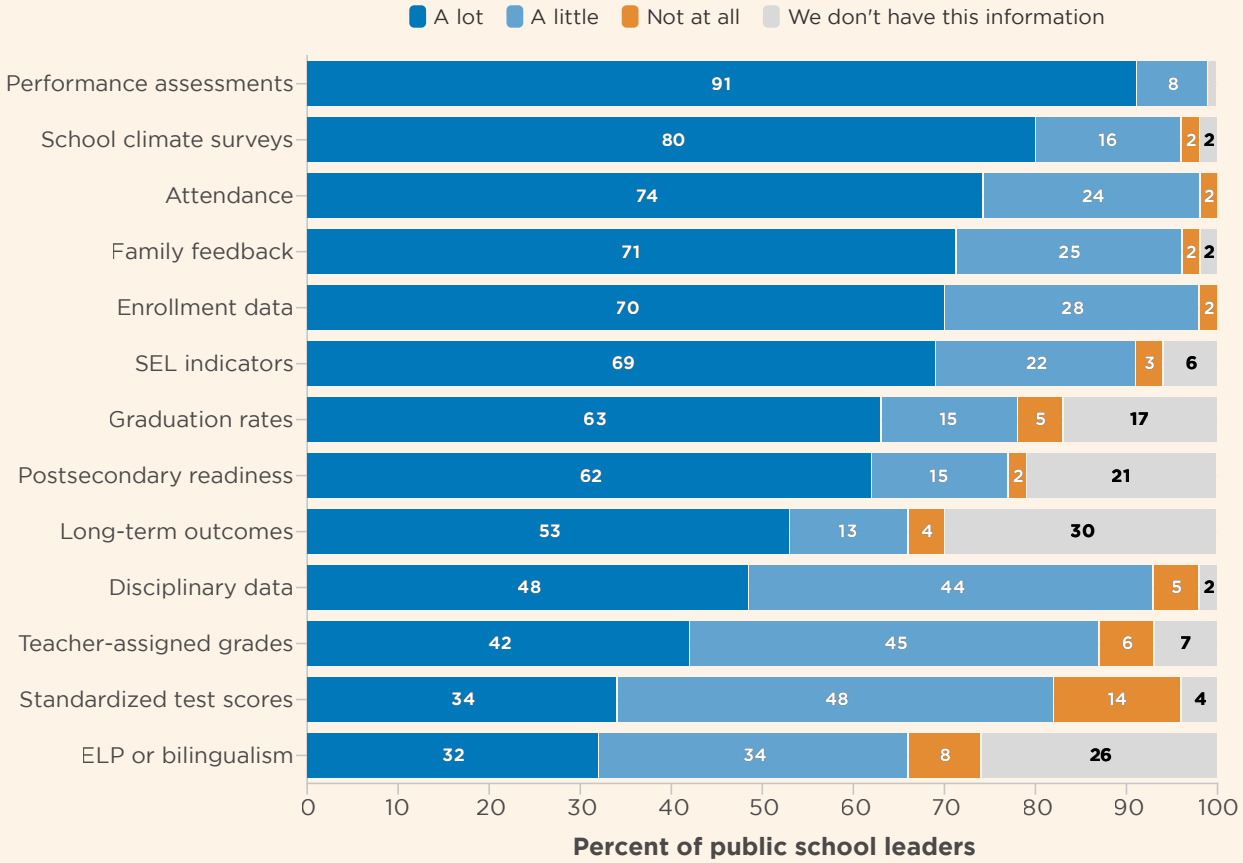
State accountability practices help show which schools in our state are serving students well.



This may be tied to what Canopy schools believe matters most when determining school effectiveness (see Figure 4). While most acknowledged the relevance of standardized tests, they valued other indicators far more, including performance assessments or authentic demonstrations of student learning, family feedback, and measures of student engagement such as school climate surveys or attendance. In fact, standardized test scores ranked among the lowest in a list of success measures that school leaders valued. Charter schools and schools with larger student enrollment were somewhat more likely to value test scores than other schools.

Figure 4

How much do you value the following information when determining how well your school achieves its mission?



But state accountability frameworks put a far stronger emphasis on standardized test results, driven in part by the federal requirement that states place "much greater weight" on academic measures than other indicators of school quality. As a consequence, Canopy leaders felt that many other markers of success in their schools are under-recognized. One leader in North Carolina said, *"No politician is going to say, 'We don't want kids to have these employability credentials, industry accepted credentials,' but yet the accountability model is slanted. We've got one in three kids graduating high school with a two-year degree … and nowhere in our accountability model do we receive any type of value for those programs."*

The perceived misalignment between state accountability and school quality is especially concerning for Canopy schools that are designed for students not well served in traditional settings. For example, Map Academy in Massachusetts is an alternative charter school designed to reengage students after extended absences from formal schooling. *"We are perpetually a school in need of intervention according to typical metrics,"* said the co-founder. *"How does a school that has a 45% daily attendance rate … be considered thriving? Okay, well come see what we do."* Fortunately, the school has worked with the state to define alternative accountability metrics that better align to the school's approach to reengaging students and accelerating their academic growth (see spotlight below). This has the dual benefit of better representing the school's success and also holding it accountable to high standards that suit its mission and design.

Spotlight on Map Academy's alternative accountability framework

In partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), Map Academy created an accountability framework tailored to its mission of serving students traditional schooling has failed.

The framework treats engagement as a prerequisite for academic progress. Students are placed in one of three "engagement phases"—Minimally Connected, Partially Connected, or Connected. Accountability goals vary by phase. For example, the school should help Connected students complete more courses and make greater literacy gains than Minimally Connected students, and should help all students progress to higher engagement levels. When students are not engaged, co-founder Rachel Babcock said, "We can either drop them like every other school has done … or we can keep them enrolled," provide services, and help "repair" students' relationships to school so they can begin making progress again. The alternative framework enables differentiation because, as Babcock said, "During that time that they're not engaging, we have a mechanism to say, 'We're working on this student, but math is not the thing.'"

DESE adopted elements of this model as the standard for alternative charter schools statewide. Babcock said she thinks that any school can negotiate flexible, mission-aligned metrics with the state—though she noted that philanthropic funding and consultant support helped Map Academy build its system.

Leaders of schools that haven't been able to negotiate alternative accountability frameworks with the state described feeling between a rock and a hard place. One leader wrote, *"To align with existing school grading metrics, we would have to shift our focus away from the very population we were created to support."*

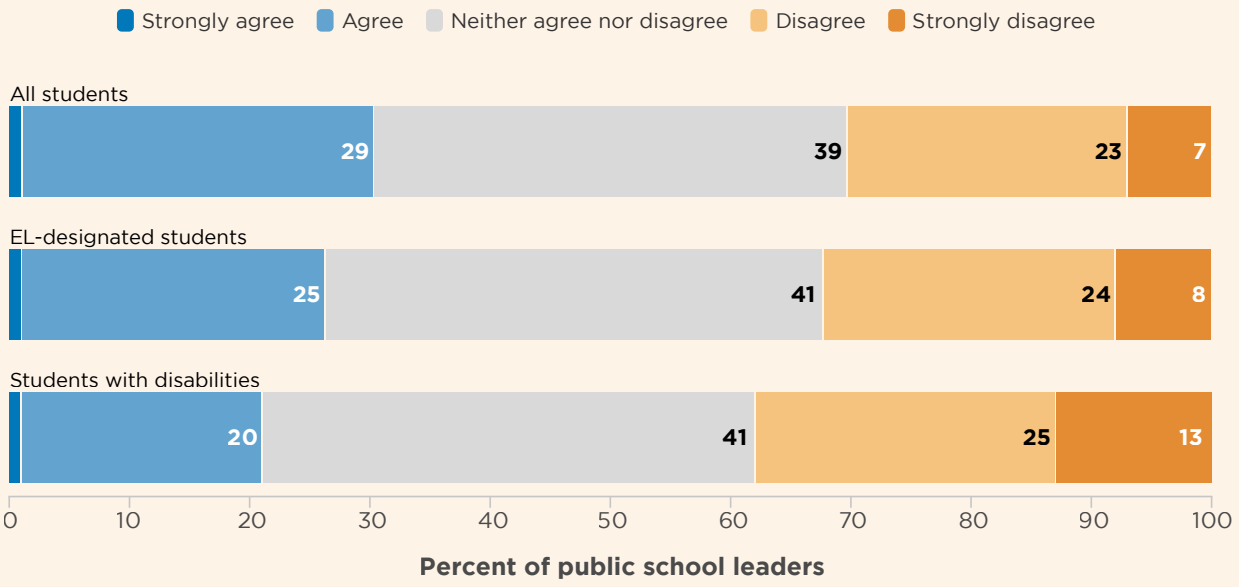
When school leaders feel forced to choose between their mission and their ratings, some tune out entirely: *"How do I work through the accountability system? I ignore the current accountability system because it doesn't matter. One state test does not measure a student's success rate in high school."*

Finding #3: Few Canopy leaders find accountability data useful for improving student outcomes.

Although a handful of Canopy leaders described using state accountability data to improve instruction (see Finding 1), this was the exception rather than the rule. Fewer than a third of Canopy leaders said accountability helps them improve student outcomes (see Figure 5). Even fewer said accountability helps them improve outcomes for students with disabilities and those classified as English learners[1]. One possibility is that many Canopy leaders believe tests don't accurately measure the abilities of these student groups (two thirds of school leaders reported this belief in a recent national NCES survey). Many Canopy schools serve student populations with complex and diverse learning needs, heightening the need for data that is both reliable and reflective of students' strengths.

Figure 5

State accountability practices are useful for improving student outcomes in school.



1. Some readers may wonder if the reason why school leaders don't find state accountability useful for improving EL-designated students' outcomes (Figure 5) is that they don't seem to value language-specific indicators (Figure 4). We would caution against this interpretation because measurement and timing issues can limit the utility of tests that measure the abilities of students learning English. Specifically, state tests have limitations in capturing bilingualism and language proficiency, the "revolving door" effect removes reclassified students from EL tracking once proficient, and language learning takes time—all of which make short-term gains hard to detect and therefore make accountability metrics less useful for showing progress among students classified as English learners.

In the case of students learning English, for example, research shows that state test scores often reflect English learners' language proficiency as much as their academic knowledge, making them less reliable measures of student strengths and making comparisons to other students problematic. One leader of an international school that primarily serves recently arrived Latine immigrants described his school's experience with this challenge. The school was once placed in corrective action after the state flagged its Latine students' low test scores. But the state had compared the school's scores to the state average for all Latine students, despite the fact that the school's students were nearly all newcomers learning English. As the school's demographic mix shifted and the newcomer population declined, their accountability ratings improved despite little change in instruction. In the school's view, the system didn't capture student growth, just the composition of who was enrolled—making it impossible to use state test data for meaningful improvement with this unique population.

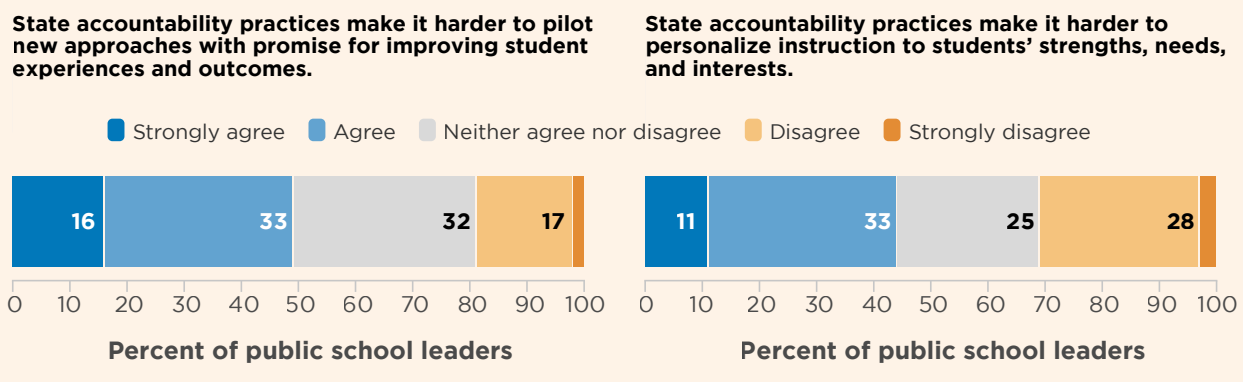
Timing is another barrier. The data generated by state accountability systems often arrives too late to inform instruction or help families make timely decisions. As one school leader put it: *"Without access to clear, timely, and detailed test score data, our educators are unable to analyze student performance effectively or adjust instructional strategies to meet learners' needs. Instead of fostering continuous improvement, the current system creates a barrier to meaningful instructional adjustments, ultimately stifling the potential for innovation in our school."* Leaders also reported that shifting indicators and test formats from year to year make it harder to trust trends or use the data for long-term planning.

Rather than relying on state data, leaders described leaning heavily on local data systems: performance assessments, enrollment data, and other internal indicators that reflect the outcomes they care most about and that better align with the needs of their students. Many also described a broader form of local accountability, grounded in feedback from students and families, as essential to informing school improvement efforts—something they feel is missing from state systems.

Finding #4: Nearly half of the Canopy leaders think accountability makes it harder to pilot new approaches or personalize learning.

We've often heard anecdotally that accountability is a barrier for schools that want to pilot innovative approaches and personalize instruction. In this year's survey, we asked about this directly in two questions. For each, nearly half of school leaders agreed, a smaller proportion of leaders disagreed, and a quarter to a third said neither (see Figure 6).

Figure 6



Our analysis of schools' responses revealed three specific ways that state accountability impedes schools in trying new approaches and personalizing learning.

First, accountability policies assume—or even require—that all students of the same age receive instruction and are tested on the same content at the same time, regardless of learning pace and progress. Leaders described accountability systems as reinforcing a traditional "grammar of schooling"—grade-based expectations, standardized pacing, and age-based benchmarks—that many Canopy schools are actively trying to disrupt. Because students are often either academically behind or ahead of their peers, many Canopy schools are implementing competency- or mastery-based approaches, accelerating learning for those behind and extending it for those ahead. But federal accountability requirements presume schools will focus everyone's time on the same grade-level material.

One leader explained, *"[Our state's system] has restricted us from fully implementing a mastery-based badge system because someone who enrolls in fifth grade has to take the fifth grade test even though they are really working on level three academic skills. … The state accountability system requires that we make them jump around between their skill level and their enrolled grade level."* While the school remains committed to accelerating students' learning to and beyond grade level, the federally mandated state test—which is required to focus on grade-level content—becomes the primary driver of instruction.

A similar issue emerged at a Canopy high school designed to allow students to begin and complete courses on rolling timelines at their own pace. The school's leader said: *"North Carolina policy requires that students who are enrolled in a course by the fifth or tenth day of school complete a state-mandated standardized assessment within the last five or ten days of the semester or school year. This makes it very difficult to implement systems that are designed to move students at their own learning pace."*

In some cases, the barriers that accountability systems create for competency-based education may only be *"perceived,"* as one leader said, and schools can work around them. As noted above, Map Academy has worked closely and continuously with the state to navigate similar constraints. Many other schools, however, have been unsuccessful in finding workarounds.

Canopy leaders also said that accountability metrics focused on math and reading hinder their ability to develop well-rounded learners with both academic mastery and durable skills. While some leaders acknowledged that accountability can help keep focus on core academic outcomes (see Finding 1), many pointed to the downsides of a system that rewards only a narrow slice of learning.

Two leaders described how tested subjects create a persistent undercurrent of pressure to *"cover"* a wide range of math and ELA standards at the expense of depth and the ability to apply knowledge and skills across disciplines. One explained that his school has been steadily moving toward an instructional model that emphasizes durable skills and career pathways, but that teachers tend to default to test prep and *"general knowledge to pass the SAT"* because that's what the state measures and reports. As a result, the school's focus is fragmented instead of coherent.

The narrow focus on math and reading often draws time and resources away from non-tested subjects that are nevertheless mission-critical for schools. In one foreign language immersion school, leaders wanted to pilot a student-directed learning block to build students' skills in goal-setting and independent learning. But to fit the new

block in the schedule, they had to decrease instruction time in another subject. The school leader wrote, *"After careful consideration, we reduced the time allocated to [foreign language] rather than decreasing instructional time in math or English. This decision was driven by the need to protect student performance in math and English, as these subjects are assessed on state accountability tests."*

Given that this school already performs exceptionally well in math and ELA, the fact that leaders made this choice suggests that accountability policies aren't just ensuring a basic standard of math and reading instruction. The leader noted, *"Because our program as a whole produces excellent student outcomes, we are cautious about making changes that could impact those results."*

Canopy leaders saw students as bearing the ultimate consequences of this narrow focus on tested content. One leader argued that current accountability frameworks send the message that *"the bar is really low"*—that good scores on a state test are enough to say a school is doing well, and enough to assure students that they're being well prepared. But, as another leader said, *"The most vital skills are those that contribute to a student's ability to continue to learn throughout their lifetime—skills beyond a test."* Accountability policies not only fail to incentivize teaching those *"vital skills,"* but also send the message that learning them is optional.

Finally, the high administrative burden of planning and administering state tests diverts time and energy from piloting new approaches that are otherwise promising for improving results. Canopy leaders agreed with much of what has been written and said about the loss of instructional time to student testing: *"State assessments and surveys will consume nearly two weeks of learning time, not including time spent in preparation for the assessments."*

In addition, they cited time required from adults as an even larger—and often underappreciated—burden. As one leader put it, *"Accountability measures drain staff resources with time in paperwork, preparation, and proctoring … we have to send people out of the building for multiple meetings, create the testing scheduling; we've got to train all the proctors on how to use the system, because it changes every year. And we can't schedule any instruction using technology for a two-month window, because the computers have to be locked down for testing season."* In the words of another Canopy leader, *"Oh man, [the amount of work] is huge, right? My Dean of Academics … focuses on [the state test] and [interim assessments] … You're almost creating a full-time position just for [state test] administration … It's a lot."*

Canopy leaders named this challenge as particularly acute for students with disabilities. *"For the two-month window of testing, every single special educator, 75% of their job is just test administration, test logistics, data entry. All the [testing] accommodations have to be listed in the state platform, so now I'm pulling my valuable special education teachers out of working with kids to input [data] for a minimum of 30 minutes per kid. … A lot of our [students with disabilities] are doing one-on-one testing, so when teachers are doing a four-hour test with them, that means the other twelve kids on their caseload are getting absolutely no support during the testing window."* While students may only be tested for several hours, the work required from adults—and especially special educators—can take up a majority of their workload for months at a time, pulling them away from directly supporting student learning.

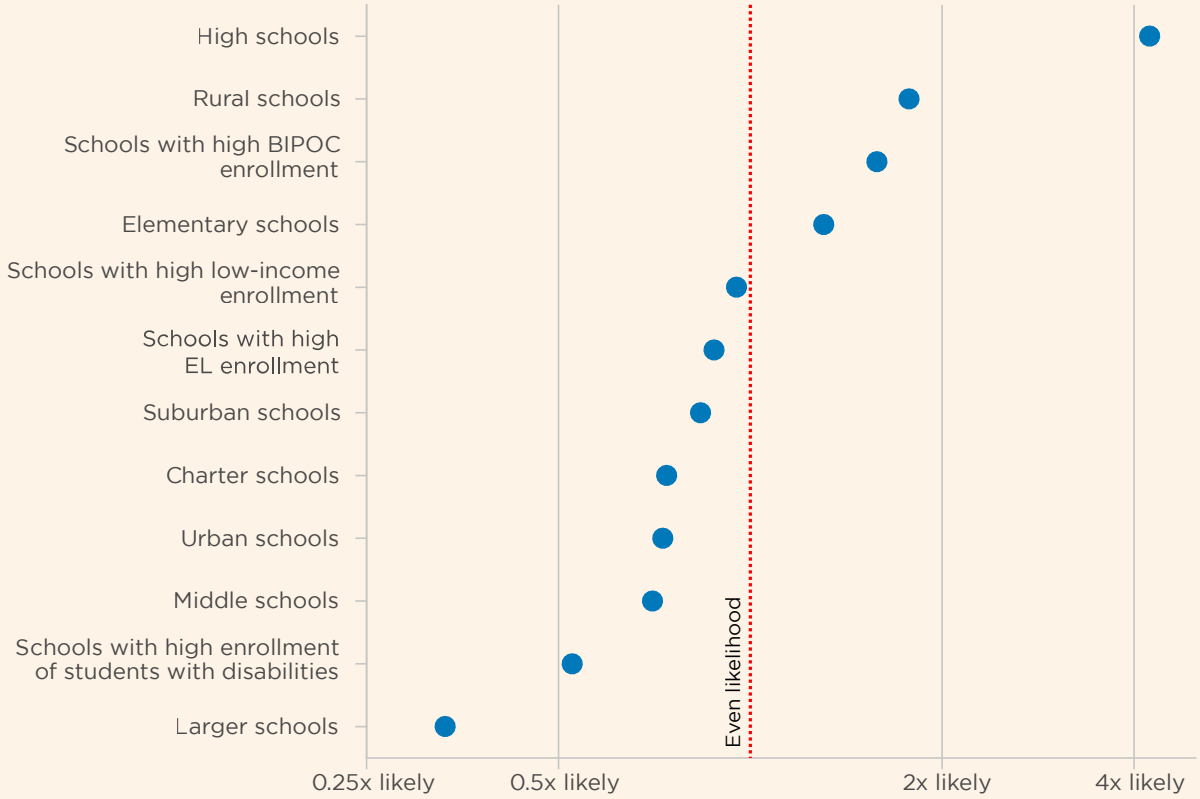
Finding #5: High school Canopy leaders are four times more likely than elementary and middle school leaders to report that state accountability systems affect them negatively.

High school leaders in the Canopy sample were four times more likely than their peers in lower grade bands to say that state accountability systems make innovation harder (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

High schools are more likely to feel hindered by state accountability practices.

Dots represent school characteristics associated with differences in the likelihood of reporting that state accountability hinders innovation. Points to the right indicate greater likelihood; points to the left indicate lower likelihood.



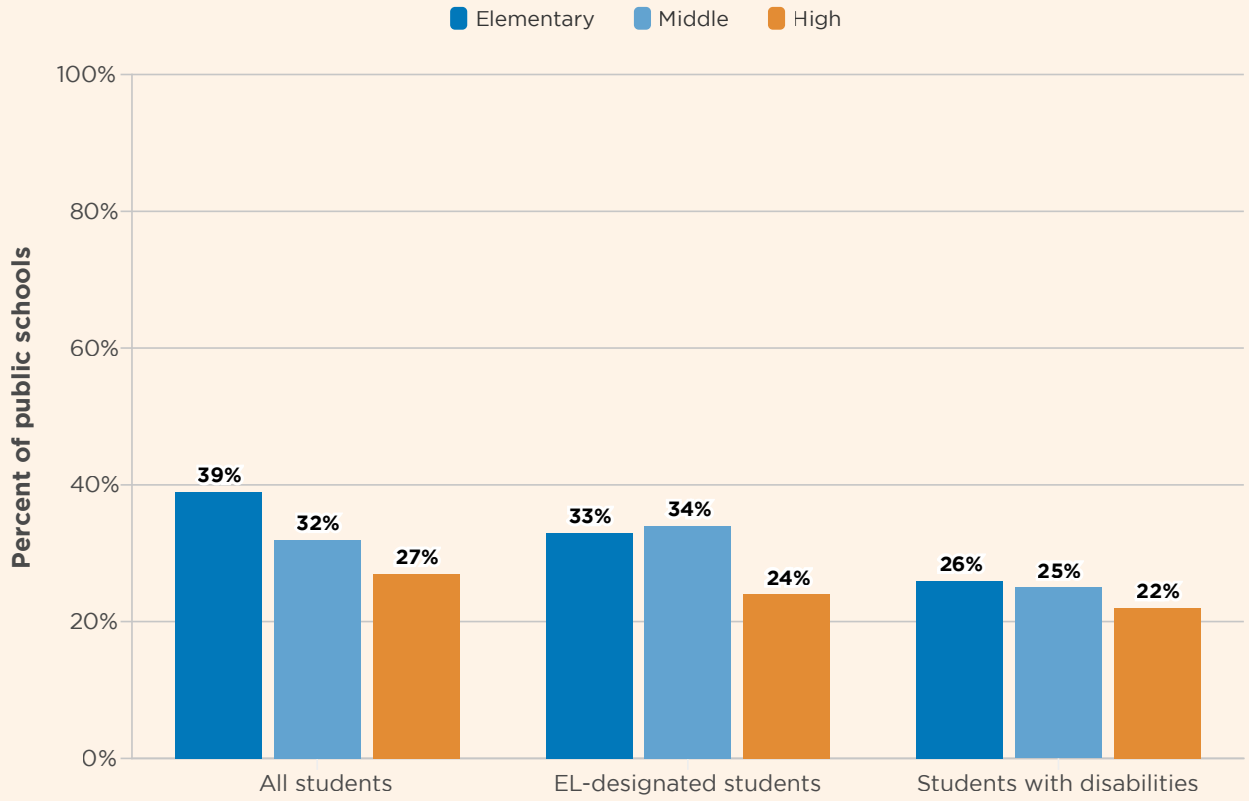
Note. To produce this figure, we used a type of statistical model called Bayesian logistic regression to estimate how school characteristics related to leaders reporting accountability "really hindered" or "somewhat hindered" their current innovation work (N = 147 public charter and district schools). Estimates indicate whether a characteristic is linked to a higher or lower chance that leaders said accountability hindered their work, and by how much. "High enrollment" of students with disabilities, EL-designated students, and students who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) or low-income is defined as enrollment 1 or more standard deviations above the average.

High school leaders were also the least likely to say standardized test data helps them improve student outcomes, particularly for students classified as ELs and students with disabilities (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Fewer high school leaders say state accountability supports student outcomes—especially for English learners and students with disabilities.

Bars show the percentage of leaders who selected "Strongly agree" or "Agree" that state accountability practices improve student outcomes for each group.



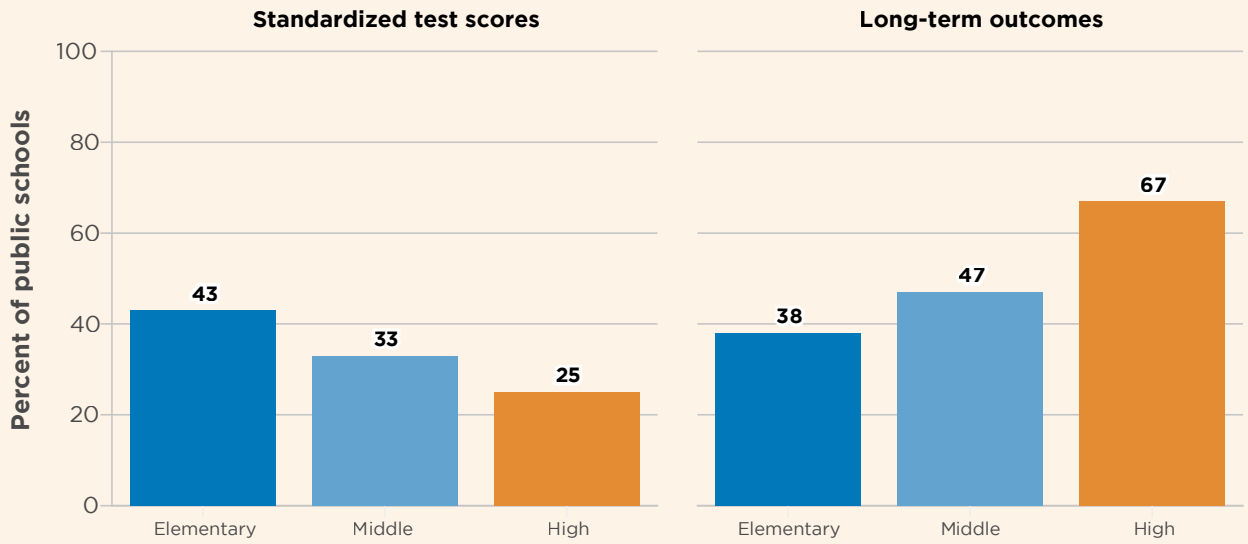
It might seem odd that high school leaders appear most critical of accountability, given that high schools are subject to fewer and more flexible federal accountability requirements than elementary and middle schools. For example, ESSA permits states to determine their own high school–specific student success indicators, and only requires one academic assessment across the four-year high school span (compared to annual testing in grades 3–8).

One potential explanation is that the flexibilities that high schools may receive pale in comparison to the large mismatch they feel between what accountability systems prioritize and what high schools must accomplish. When sharing what information they value to gauge the success of their own schools, Canopy high school leaders valued standardized test scores less than elementary and middle school leaders. But they valued information about long-term outcomes and postsecondary readiness much more (see Figure 9). That kind of information is weighted less in most state accountability frameworks—if it's included at all.

Figure 9

High schools rely more than elementary and middle schools on long-term outcomes data to measure how well they're achieving their missions.

Bars show the percentage of leaders who indicated that they rely on each indicator "A lot."



While Canopy schools at all levels said the narrow focus of accountability systems can have negative consequences (see Finding 4), high school leaders felt especially frustrated by the distance between what they know students need—in particular, postsecondary preparation—and what accountability systems measure. According to the leader of one Canopy school, *"I could move [the percentage of students who matriculate into a two-year or four-year college] to a hundred percent and I would not move my [state rating] by any significant measure because it all comes back to state testing."* The same school leader, proud of the number of students who graduated high school with an associate degree already in hand, said the school got *"no credit"* from state accountability systems for helping students earn those credentials.

Similarly, several leaders flagged that their career and technical education (CTE) programs—often designed to connect students with meaningful postsecondary opportunities—are invisible in accountability ratings. Even when students graduate with associate degrees, industry certifications, or strong job placements, those outcomes are often unrecognized by state accountability systems.

Although states often include these measures within the popular college and career readiness indicator, Canopy leaders nonetheless perceive them as undervalued or not valued at all. This may be a result of how the state defines a qualified CTE program or industry certificate. But regardless of the cause, high school leaders perceive accountability systems as particularly hindering their work.

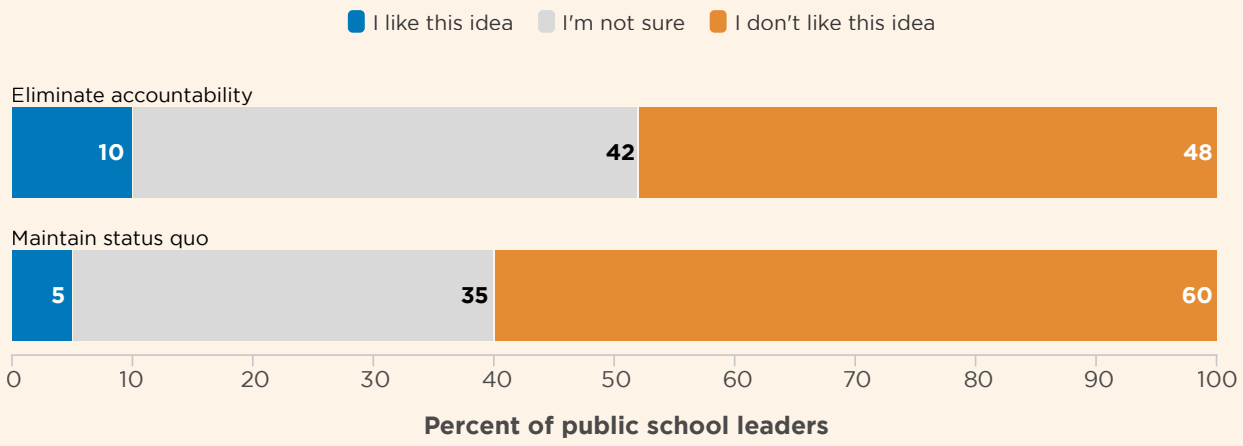
Part II: School leaders don't want to eliminate state accountability systems, but they do want to change them

In addition to surveying Canopy school leaders on their perceptions of current accountability systems, we also asked a series of questions related to their preferences for the future of state accountability. Leaders' responses revealed a middle ground in which they support accountability systems remaining in place, but with meaningful changes.

For example, only 10% of Canopy leaders supported the idea of eliminating accountability, while nearly half—48%—opposed that idea (see Figure 10). Similarly, only 5% of Canopy leaders favored maintaining the status quo, while 60% disagreed and favored some changes.

Figure 10

Policymakers are considering ideas for changing accountability. What is your reaction to these ideas?

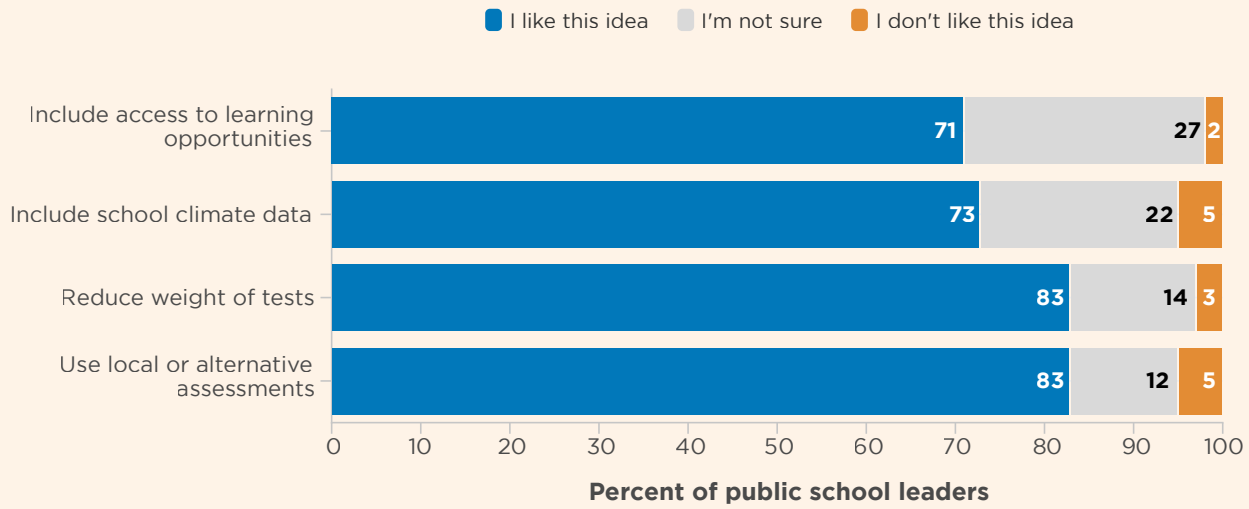


Finding #6: Canopy leaders want accountability systems to balance state test data with other information about learning opportunities, experiences, and outcomes.

One of the key changes that Canopy leaders want from state accountability systems is a more balanced assessment system that places less emphasis on standardized tests of academic achievement and more emphasis on other measures. For example, 71% of Canopy leaders favored more heavily weighting information on students' access to learning opportunities, 73% favored emphasizing school climate data, and 83% favored incorporating local or alternative assessments in accountability systems (see Figure 11). Meanwhile, 83% favored reducing the weight of standardized state tests.

Figure 11

Policymakers are considering ideas for changing accountability. What is your reaction to these ideas?



Some states already include some version of "opportunity to learn" standards in their accountability systems, such as access to high-quality curricular and instructional materials and access to highly qualified teachers. However, there are drawbacks to relying more heavily on these types of indicators: they are often correlated with measures of socioeconomic privilege that bias against communities in poverty, and shifting focus from "outputs" to "inputs" may incentivize cultures of bureaucratic compliance rather than cultures of high performance expectations.

An alternate option may be to more heavily emphasize measures of student experience or student engagement. These measures, which are most typically captured via student experience surveys like the 5Essentials and those developed by the CORE districts in California, can provide actionable near-term data on measures that are highly predictive of a variety of outcomes: according to a recent analysis by Transcend, students who reported higher-quality student experiences on the Leaps Student Voice Survey had GPAs that were almost 15% higher, test scores that were 27% higher on state standardized high school end-of-course algebra and geometry exams, 17% fewer disciplinary incidents, 34% fewer in-school suspensions, and a 33% lower chronic absence rate compared to those who reported lower quality experiences.

Some states are also experimenting with ways to incorporate local assessments into state accountability systems. The Kentucky State Department of Education has leveraged $3 million from the federal Competitive Grants for State Assessment (CGSA) program to launch a framework for a reimagined assessment and accountability system and is working with the Kentucky General Assembly to align state policies in the 2026 legislative session.

Finding #7: By a 2 to 1 ratio, Canopy leaders are more interested in "right-sizing" state testing to keep a lighter footprint than in trying to make tests more instructionally useful.

One prominent theory of action for reforming state accountability systems is to attempt to increase the instructional usefulness of state tests by administering them at more frequent intervals and making the resulting data more immediately available to teachers. Delaware, Florida, Nebraska, and Texas are among the states that have experimented with through-year assessment models, and Montana recently implemented through-year assessments statewide through its Montana Aligned to Standards Through-Year assessment (MAST) system.

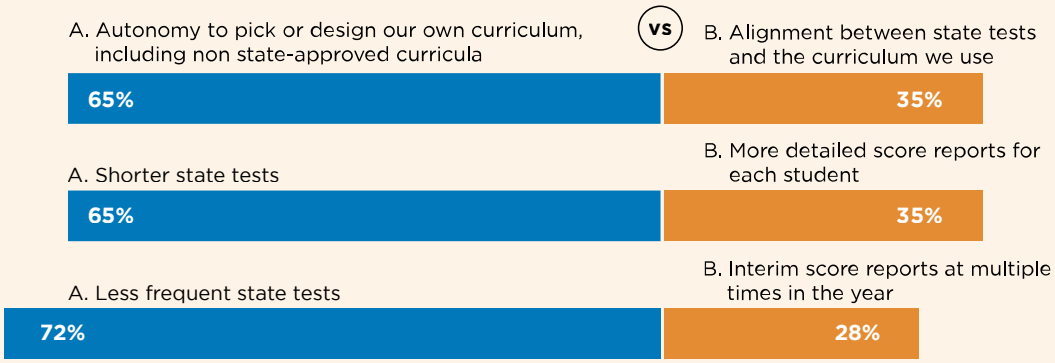
We explored Canopy leaders' interest in this type of reform, as well as an alternate type of reform that calls for shorter and less frequent assessments. In one survey question, we asked Canopy leaders to stack rank (from most desirable to least) six ideas for changing state testing. The response options included three pairs of ideas that would be difficult, if not impossible, to implement simultaneously. For example, "shorter state tests" are difficult to achieve if leaders also strongly desire "more detailed score reports for each student."

We found that:

- By a nearly 2 to 1 ratio, Canopy leaders selected "autonomy to pick or design our own curriculum, including non state-approved curricula" over "alignment between state tests and our curriculum."
- By a nearly 2 to 1 ratio, Canopy leaders selected "shorter state tests"over "more detailed score reports for each student."
- By a bit less than a 3 to 1 ratio, Canopy leaders selected "less frequent state tests" over "interim score reports at multiple times in the year."

Figure 12

Which trade-offs did Canopy leaders prefer?



In interviews, some Canopy leaders—even those who were strongly in favor of state testing—advocated for testing less frequently, not more frequently. They grounded their opinions in desires to lessen the administrative burden of mandatory testing and to increase the opportunities that less-frequent testing would create for them to utilize other forms of assessment. In the words of one school leader, *"At the end of every project, [our model calls for] every student [to] exhibit their learning in a public forum … it could be a mock trial actually held in the County Courthouse tried by real judges, debates, theatrical performances, … [if the state test were every other year], it'd free up a ton of time, so you can do maybe one more exhibition by not losing two and a half weeks of school. [That would be] very transformative … students grow and build agency through these performance-based assessments like nothing else."*

Even though some leaders we interviewed named the late arrival of data as one of the reasons state accountability measures don't help them improve student outcomes, leaders seemed to believe that the various burdens created by more-frequent testing would overshadow any potential benefits.

In short, Canopy leaders want state accountability to stay in place, but to stay in its place.

Implications and recommendations

This data reflects only a small and nonrepresentative sample of schools across the country. However, it reveals the valuable experiences and preferences of school leaders who are trying to build more innovative learning environments. We believe this data supports three implications:

1. **Accountability systems are doing at least part of what they were designed for.** State accountability is incentivizing Canopy schools to focus on academic proficiency, and leaders believe accountability successfully helps identify performance gaps. All schools, including Canopy schools, can benefit from this.

2. **Today's accountability systems may be holding back tomorrow's breakthroughs.** Canopy schools are developing novel solutions and putting in extra time and effort to make them fit the current system. The fact that such extra effort is required likely keeps even the most promising innovative approaches peripheral, ultimately short-changing students and families in need of better solutions.

3. **Popular ideas for improving state accountability, such as through-year testing, may rest on assumptions that don't hold up in practice.** The logic of through-year assessment is grounded in several assumptions:

   a. State assessment data is more trustworthy than other measures.

   b. Through-year assessments provide additional value above and beyond other measures teachers can already access.

   c. Inconveniences in logistics and administration are justified by the instructional advantages through-year testing affords.

But based on our interviews with Canopy leaders, those assumptions may not be fully accurate. Like a well-meaning but misguided boss who requires you to submit a new weekly report "to make your job easier," states focused on making mandated tests instructionally useful risk increasing the administrative burden on schools in order to generate additional data that educators do not want and will not use.

Based on the data and implications discussed above, we offer four recommendations as a starting place for conversation. Focusing specifically on the **state and federal policymakers** who have control over state accountability systems, we recommend that they:

- **Right-size the assessment footprint.** Don't ditch testing, but take seriously the likelihood that some innovative schools will prioritize autonomy and less testing time over more instructionally useful tests. No single test can "do it all," and attempting to craft state tests that simultaneously support state-level actors and provide instructionally useful data for educators creates significant—perhaps insurmountable—design challenges. Instead, states should consider shortened tests or gap-year testing to generate the data needed by policymakers and system leaders while lowering the administrative burden on schools, and federal actors should consider inviting and granting waivers and Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) applications to explore these approaches.

- **Differentiate accountability requirements—without lowering standards—for different kinds of schools.** States should rethink accountability frameworks for high schools and consider alternative pathways for specialized schools, like those specifically designed to serve English learners or students off-track for graduation. They should also consider the possibility of accommodations for schools that have been designated as innovation-focused schools or campuses specifically tasked with originating or testing new educational models. The point is not to compromise on high expectations, but to better align high expectations with a school's unique model for educating students.
- **Incorporate a broader set of measures into accountability systems, such as those related to learning opportunities and/or student engagement.** Many states already include various forms of these indicators, and they can continue experimenting with ways to emphasize them while avoiding creating misplaced incentives. The federal government can support this experimentation by considering creative interpretations of the ESSA requirement that states place "much greater weight" on academic measures, such as interpreting "academic measures" to also include local assessments and/or students' perceptions of the rigor of their school's curriculum.
- **Invest in R&D.** States, the federal government, and philanthropy should invest in new tools and techniques for assessing a broader range of student outcomes in ways that are valid, reliable, cost-effective, and minimize the burden for students in schools. This could include AI-powered tools, observational assessments, instructionally embedded assessments, and competency-based assessments.

States have largely been operating under the same accountability and assessment structure since the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, with only a slight adjustment when ESSA was passed in 2015. States are now trying new approaches to accountability and assessment: experimenting with performance and local assessments in non-federally tested subjects, shifting graduation requirements in New York and Massachusetts, and creating new state indicators, such as Indiana's pathways model for high school. The emergence of AI also offers exciting new opportunities for assessment modalities that were unimaginable only a few years earlier. This moment offers a critical opportunity to supercharge state systems' R&D and produce better evidence of what is possible when the time comes to reconsider our federal accountability and assessment framework.

All of these changes will require states and the federal government to work closely together. The federal government can play a critical role in offering flexibility through IADA and its authority to waive testing requirements, as well as capacity through programs like Competitive Grants for State Assessments (CGSA). Canopy school leaders, and the students and families they serve, are eager for innovation; policymakers should listen carefully to their call.

Acknowledgments

A team of researchers and editors contributed to this report. Amber Cross, Youssef Shoukry, and Sarah McCann supported data collection through the Canopy project. Melissa Fall provided valuable developmental editing support. Alan Bradshaw provided excellent copy editing. Abby Jacobs, Abby Callard, Ana Vargas, and Emily Prymula led communications and content strategy, and Michelle Afentoulis led design. Robin Lake, Leslie Colwell, Lillian Dunn, Deborah Gist, Divya Mani, Josh Edelman, Saya Reed, and Beth Holland were valuable thought partners who gave feedback on early ideas and drafts of this report.

We extend our sincere gratitude to reviewers Morgan Polikoff and Lillian Pace, whose thoughtful feedback and insights greatly enriched the final draft of this report. Their expertise and careful review helped ensure the clarity, accuracy, and relevance of our findings.

We wish to extend a special thank you to the school leaders who provided valuable insights into their school designs through our series of follow-up interviews and, more importantly, for all the work they do to create enriching experiences for the students who walk through their doors.

The Canopy project is a collaborative effort made possible by the contributions of hundreds of nominating organizations and learning environments. The project is supported by the Barr Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is stewarded by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (part of Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation at Arizona State University) and Transcend.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a nonpartisan K-12 education research center at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation. We rigorously examine and test transformative ideas, using our research to inform action. We are truth tellers who combine forward-thinking ideas with empirical rigor. Since 1993, we have been untethered to any one ideology but unwavering in a core belief: public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we work to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice that will drive the public education system to meet the needs of every student.

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