Getting Down to FACTS

Public Accountability in California: Evaluating the SARCs and the California Dashboard

Shira Haderlein
Arizona State University

Morgan S. Polikoff
University of Southern California

May 2026

Stanford | SCALE Initiative
Accelerator for Learning

Public Accountability in California: Evaluating the SARCs and the California Dashboard

Shira Haderlein, *Arizona State University*
Morgan S. Polikoff, *University of Southern California*

Introduction

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002, standards-based accountability has shaped U.S. education policy. At its core, high-stakes standards-based accountability consists of three components: 1) set clear expectations for what students should know and be able to do; 2) measure schools' progress toward meeting these expectations, primarily through students' scores on standardized tests; 3) reward and sanction schools based on their performance. The underlying goal is to improve school performance by aligning incentives with desired outcomes, using rewards and sanctions to motivate improvements in school behavior and instructional practice.

More recently, U.S. accountability policy has shifted away from the high-stakes, punitive approaches associated with NCLB toward systems that emphasize capacity-building, multiple measures of performance, and greater transparency. These newer approaches place increased emphasis on public accountability, using accessible data and reporting tools to inform decision-making rather than relying solely on sanctions. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states are required to publish public report cards, often in the form of dashboards, that present school and district performance across a set of indicators. In this new accountability system, information and transparency are paramount for helping important stakeholders, from educators to policymakers to parents, make informed decisions about everything from where to send their children to school to how to distribute resources and support.

California's accountability system reflects this broader shift, relying on public-facing tools such as the California School Dashboard (the Dashboard) and School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs) to communicate performance and support decision-making. This paper examines how effectively these tools achieve these goals. Drawing on best practices identified in the research literature and from other

states' accountability systems, we benchmark the Dashboard and SARCs against six principles of effective accountability tools. These principles are developed by the authors and draw on prior research, field guidance, and 50-state reviews of accountability dashboards. We assess where California's tools align with best practices, where they fall short, and what refinements could strengthen their role in informing decisions and driving continuous improvement.

Public Accountability in the U.S. and California

Public accountability has become a central feature of U.S. education policy, particularly following the standards-based reform movement of the 1990s and the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002. While some states and districts (for example, Florida, California, and New York City) had developed earlier accountability policies, NCLB helped formalize national requirements for states to collect and publicly report standardized information on school and district performance, later expanded under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to include a broader set of indicators and more accessible reporting formats.

Standards-based accountability systems are built on a common framework: states set academic standards for what students should know and be able to do, measure performance against those standards (typically through assessments), and use the results to evaluate schools and inform consequences or supports. Early systems under NCLB emphasized proficiency-based measures and high-stakes consequences, while more recent approaches under ESSA have incorporated multiple measures of school performance and placed greater emphasis on continuous improvement and local decision-making.

In this report, we use "public accountability" to refer to systems that make school performance data transparent and accessible to stakeholders, often through accountability tools such as dashboards and report cards. These systems operate through multiple, sometimes overlapping, theories of action. Performance-based accountability uses reported data to trigger formal consequences or supports for schools, while market-based accountability relies on the idea that informed families and communities will use this information to make choices and exert pressure for improvement (Hutt & Polikoff, 2020).

Across these approaches, a common premise is that timely, transparent, and comparable information about school performance can support better decision-making. We distinguish between accountability systems—the broader policy frameworks that define performance, assign consequences or supports, and aim to improve outcomes—and accountability tools, such as dashboards and report cards, which communicate performance information to the public. These tools are intended to operationalize system goals by making data visible and usable for different audiences.

In California, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), adopted in 2013, reshaped the state's public accountability system by shifting focus from compliance-driven measures to a broader evaluation of student success and equity. Under LCFF, districts must create and monitor Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs), setting goals and tracking progress across state priority areas. Within this system, the Dashboard and SARCs serve as the state's primary public accountability tools, translating performance data into information intended for families, educators, and policymakers. The Dashboard provides a public-facing, color-coded system that reports on multiple measures of performance (for example, academic achievement, graduation rates, suspension rates, and college/career readiness), while SARCs provide more detailed information on demographics, test scores, resources, and safety. Together, these tools are designed to make school performance visible and support informed decision-making and engagement (California Department of Education, 2025).

Evolution of California's Public Accountability Since GDTF II

In 2018, we published a **Getting Down to Facts II (GDTF II)** report assessing the California School Dashboard after its first year of implementation. In that report, we commended California for moving away from test-only accountability and toward a multiple-measures framework aligned with equity and continuous improvement; however, we also identified key weaknesses that limited the Dashboard's usability and effectiveness. Chief among these were the need to increase awareness and use of the Dashboard among key stakeholders, improve comparability across schools and over time, provide clearer information about schools' contributions to student learning through growth measures, and strengthen transparency around subgroup performance.

Since the release of GDTF II, California has made several notable updates to its accountability system, reflecting both changes in policy context and efforts to respond to earlier recommendations. These updates are part of a broader shift away from high-stakes, compliance-driven accountability toward a system intended to support local decision-making and continuous improvement. California's approach aims to use transparent, multi-measure data to help districts, schools, and communities identify strengths and needs, allocate resources more effectively, and ultimately improve student outcomes, particularly for historically underserved groups (CDE, 2022). Notably:

1. **Adoption of Dashboard Principles (2022).**

   In 2022, the State Board of Education adopted a formal set of **Dashboard Principles** emphasizing multiple measures, equity, continuous improvement, and transparency. These principles articulate an intent to provide a balanced picture of school performance, avoid overreliance on a single metric, and support local decision-making rather than punitive accountability (California Department of Education [CDE], 2022).

2. **Operational reporting of student growth (2024–25 Dashboard).**

   Beginning with the 2025 Dashboard, California published growth performance categories in English language arts and mathematics for local educational agencies, schools, and student groups (CDE, 2021; CDE, 2025c). These measures are based on a statistical model that compares students' current test scores to expected performance given their prior achievement (model-based growth measure), allowing the state to estimate whether students are making more or less progress than similar peers over time (CDE, 2025c). While this approach moves beyond simple year-to-year gain scores, it does not constitute a full value-added model of school effectiveness.

3. **Expansion of indicators and student groups.**

   Recent Dashboard releases have expanded the scope of reporting beyond core academic and engagement measures by adding new indicators and student group categories, including:

   a. A science performance indicator, based on California Science Test (CAST) results in grades 5, 8, and once in high school, reported for informational purposes; and
   b. Separate reporting for long-term English learners (students classified as English learners for six or more years without reclassification) as a distinct student group.

These additions reflect efforts to broaden the Dashboard's coverage of student outcomes and experiences (CDE, 2024).

4. **Ongoing refinement of reporting resources**

   The California Department of Education has continued to update its Dashboard Communications Toolkit, technical guides, downloadable reports, and explanatory materials to support interpretation and use of the Dashboard (CDE, 2023; CDE, 2025), and continued updates and improvements are ongoing.

The 2025 Accountability Workplan outlines continued efforts by CDE and the State Board of Education to integrate science and student growth more fully into official performance reporting and to revisit key accountability criteria (CDE, 2025a). At the same time, as the analysis in this report shows, gaps remain between the Dashboard's stated priorities and how accountability functions in practice, particularly in how clearly performance and next steps are communicated to families, educators, and policymakers. These tensions highlight the importance of examining not only the system's guiding principles and planned updates, but also how effectively they are realized in the design and use of the Dashboard and SARCs.

Research Questions

This report examines the design and effectiveness of California's public accountability tools through three guiding questions:

1. What are the characteristics of effective accountability tools, based on the literature?
2. How do CA's accountability tools, including the CA dashboard and the SARCs, compare to best practices drawn from the literature?
3. How does California's approach compare to accountability systems in other states?

Data and Methods

This analysis draws on three primary sources of evidence to assess California's public accountability tools.

First, we conducted a targeted literature scan to identify best practices for public accountability systems. This scan included peer-reviewed research, policy reports, and state-by-state reviews from organizations such as EdTrust, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), the Data Quality Campaign, and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Findings from this review informed the development of six principles of effective accountability used throughout the report.

Second, we conducted a content analysis of California's accountability tools (that is, the California School Dashboard and School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs)) to assess their alignment with these principles. We reviewed publicly available materials, including dashboard displays, technical documentation, and supporting guidance, and compared California's design choices with examples from other states identified as "bright spots" in independent, 50-state analyses.

Third, we drew on data from a survey and interviews of California district leaders conducted as part of the Getting Down to Facts effort. These data provide insight into how superintendents and other district leaders use the Dashboard in practice. We do not have comparable data on how parents, students, teachers, or other stakeholders engage with the Dashboard, which is an important limitation of this analysis.

Results

RQ1: What are the characteristics of effective accountability tools, based on the literature?

We know from ample research that information can and does change people's behavior, but the types of information and how it is presented matter. A recent systematic review of education data dashboards finds that design choices strongly shape how users interpret and act on information: complex displays often overwhelm users, and dashboards are most useful when information can be tailored to local context and is paired with proactive dissemination and support to reach key

stakeholders (Curran, Carlo, & Harris, 2024). Drawing on thought leaders and field guidance (CCSSO's report-card best practices; ExcelinEd), independent reviews of state report cards (CRPE; Data Quality Campaign), equity-focused analyses (EdTrust), and empirical literature, we distill this evidence into six principles of effective accountability tools, which will guide our framing for the remainder of the report.

Based on the literature, effective accountability dashboards should:

1. **Anchor in a theory of action and priority users.** They should define the primary user group(s) (e.g., families, educators, policymakers) and purpose of the tool, and align all indicators, visuals, and navigation to those users and use cases. They should work to improve users' experience by collecting regular and targeted feedback on the report card, and suggestions to how improvements could be structured (CCSSO, 2019; Data Quality Campaign, 2023)
2. **Use valid, reliable, and holistic indicators.** Dashboards should select a concise set of academically focused measures, plus a few high-value non-academic indicators, for example, graduation rates and chronic absenteeism. All indicators should be methodologically defensible, comparable over time, and should include clear documentation. For academic indicators, states should showcase growth scores over proficiency scores, which better capture a school's contribution to student learning when estimated from a defensible growth model (CCSSO, 2019; EdTrust, 2024; ExcelinEd, 2018).
3. **Center equity: make every student group visible.** Disaggregate all indicators for required student groups with reasonable n-sizes. Ensure report pages, downloads, and documentation make subgroup performance front and center and use asset-based language (EdTrust, 2024; CCSSO, 2019).
4. **Show trends and enable fair comparisons.** Provide multi-year, school-level trend views and side-by-side comparisons, with notes on any rule or assessment changes that affect comparability. Ensure that comparisons are made on a like-for-like basis, using consistent measures over time and, where possible, comparing schools serving similar student populations or contexts. Make longitudinal performance an at-a-glance experience, not a cumbersome hunt through PDFs. If presenting an overall school rating, consider increasing the number of years used to calculate the rating in order to increase the stability and validity of the rating (CRPE, 2024; CCSSO, 2019).

5. **Design for usability and coherence.** Use plain language, intuitive navigation, high-quality translations, mobile-friendly layouts, and accessibility, and ensure that information is released on a clear and predictable timeline. Where multiple tools exist (e.g., the Dashboard and SARCs), align definitions, visuals, and update schedules so the public encounters one coherent and timely account of school performance (CRPE, 2024; Data Quality Campaign, 2023; CCSSO, 2019). Release data on a predictable and coherent schedule, timed to support meaningful decision-making and school improvement.
6. **Make results actionable.** Connect what users see to what happens next. Link results to school identification categories, improvement supports, resource-allocation reviews, and clear exit criteria. Publish timelines and contact paths so stakeholders know to act on the data (EdTrust, 2024; CCSSO, 2019).

In the context of principle three, it is important to distinguish between equality and equity in accountability systems. Making all student groups visible reflects a commitment to equal reporting, but does not by itself ensure equitable outcomes. Equity requires that differences in outcomes are not only visible, but also interpreted and acted upon to address differing needs across groups. Accordingly, this analysis focuses on the visibility and interpretability of subgroup data as necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for equity.

RQs 2 and 3: How do CA's accountability tools compare to best practices drawn from the literature and how do they compare to accountability tools in other states?

California's public accountability system relies on two primary tools–the California School Dashboard and School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs)–to translate statewide performance data into information the public can use. In this section, we assess how well these tools align with six principles of effective public accountability drawn from the research literature (RQ2). For each principle, we first evaluate California's tools, identifying areas of alignment and key gaps that limit salience, comparability, and actionability for families, educators, and policymakers.

To situate this analysis in a broader context, we also draw on findings from independent research organizations and 50-state reviews that assess the design, equity, and interpretability of state

accountability systems (RQ3). These external assessments provide an important benchmark for understanding how California compares to other states. For each principle, we highlight selected "bright spot" examples from other states that have been identified by independent reviewers as demonstrating stronger design or clearer implementation. Rather than ranking states, these examples illustrate specific design and reporting practices (such as how growth, subgroup performance, trends, and accountability signals are presented) that offer feasible points of reference for strengthening California's accountability system.

To guide our evaluation of California's tools, we applied a three-tier rating system to each principle:

- ✅ **Meets standards** — the feature is present, effective, visible, well-documented, and easy for typical users to find and use.
- ⚠️ **Partially meets standards** — the feature exists but is incomplete, inconsistently implemented, hard to find, or weakly documented.
- ❌ **Does not meet standards** — the feature is absent, only present in obscure formats (e.g., buried PDFs or appendices), or so poorly implemented that it fails to serve its intended audience.

Principle 1: Anchor in a theory of action and priority users

Assessment: ❌Does not meet standards

The California School Dashboard states its purpose is to "provid[e] parents and educators with meaningful information on school and district progress so they can participate in decisions to improve student learning" (CDE, 2026a). Similarly, the landing page for SARCs describes their intent as providing "information to the community to allow public comparison of schools for student achievement, environment, resources, and demographics" (CDE, 2026b). While these statements identify broad audiences (that is, parents, educators, and community members) they are too general to guide effective use.

Three issues stand out. First, the tools conflate distinct audiences. Parents, educators, and community members have different information needs, yet neither tool clarifies how each group should navigate the data or what decisions they are expected to make. Second, the tools lack an explicit

theory of action to connect their design features (e.g., indicator displays, navigation, comparisons) to intended user behaviors. Without a stated change theory, it is unclear how the tools are meant to support meaningful decisions or whether they succeed in driving improvement. Finally, the coexistence of two portals, the Dashboard and SARCs, creates confusion, particularly given their overlapping purposes. If California keeps both, the state should more clearly delineate their distinct roles and how each contributes uniquely to public accountability.

Illustrative Examples from Other State(s)

In reviewing accountability systems across states, we did not identify strong examples that clearly articulate a user-centered theory of action within the dashboard itself. While many states provide performance data and some link results to consequences or supports, few explicitly define who their primary users are or how different stakeholders are expected to use the information presented. Relatedly, most dashboards do not clearly communicate what the reported metrics represent in terms of responsibility or causality—leaving it unclear whether outcomes should be attributed to schools, districts, or broader contextual factors, and how stakeholders are expected to act on that information to improve results. This appears to be a broader challenge in dashboard design, not unique to California.

The research literature offers guidance on what stronger practice could look like. Hernandez (2012) recommends that state data systems include differentiated "gateways" tailored to distinct user groups, such as researchers, educators, policymakers, and families, rather than assuming a single interface can serve all audiences equally well. Other studies of education dashboards find that stakeholder use increases when dashboards are paired with additional communication strategies (such as targeted briefings, printed summaries, or stakeholder-specific materials) rather than relying solely on a public website (Curran, Carlo, & Harris, 2024).

Principle 2: Use valid, reliable, and holistic indicators

Assessment: ⚠️Partially meets standards

California's accountability tools include a broad and holistic set of indicators. The Dashboard reports measures of student engagement and advancement such as chronic absenteeism, graduation rate, and English learner progress, and also incorporates local indicators like school climate, parent

engagement, access to courses, and basic services. The SARCs require districts to report on resources, demographics, instructional programs, finances, faculty, facilities, and student performance. Together, these tools reflect California's commitment to a multi-measure approach to accountability that extends beyond test scores alone.

Yet important gaps remain. The Dashboard continues to emphasize status (current performance) rather than a fully operational student growth model, a core indicator used by many states to assess schools' contributions to student learning over time. Although CDE has recently released growth data, these results are difficult to locate and are not integrated into the prominent speedometer-style ratings that drive public interpretation. Consistent with this concern, the Data Quality Campaign's 50-state review found that California was one of only three states in 2023 that did not consistently report growth indicators identified as essential for understanding school performance (Data Quality Campaign, 2023). Moreover, the College and Career Indicator (CCI) appears superficial on the career side, as it does not fully capture the expanding landscape of industry-recognized credentials, certificates, and occupational licenses that increasingly shape students' postsecondary pathways and labor market outcomes. For SARCs, uneven reporting across districts both in the completeness of the data and the prominence of presentation further weakens their ability to provide a consistent, holistic view of school quality.

Illustrative Examples from Other State(s): Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Montana, and Tennessee

Several states illustrate how accountability systems can use valid, reliable, and holistic indicators of school success. While many states include some form of student growth, Tennessee stands out for elevating growth as a central measure by reporting it alongside achievement and providing ample guides and resources to help users interpret and understand how each measure captures student learning and comes together to form an aggregate rating (see the Tennessee's guide for families and exhibits 1 and 2 below).

Exhibit 1. Student Growth as a Core Component of School Performance in Tennessee

Indicator	Level	Weight	Score
Achievement	5	50.0%	2.5
Growth	5	30.0%	1.5
Growth for Highest Need Students	4	10.0%	0.4
College & Career Readiness	5	10.0%	0.5
			Total Score: 4.9

Calculation of School Letter Grade

A

Source: Tennessee Department of Education, State Report Card / TVAAS accountability framework.

Notes: This image shows how Tennessee incorporates student growth as a central component of its school accountability system. Growth accounts for a substantial share of a school's overall score and is reported alongside achievement and college and career readiness, making progress over time visible and consequential.

Beyond growth, EdTrust identifies states that extend accountability beyond test scores by incorporating additional outcome measures that capture broader dimensions of school performance. Montana and Indiana move past traditional chronic absenteeism thresholds by adopting more ambitious attendance incentives to support students with the greatest needs (The Education Trust, 2022). Georgia strengthens college and career readiness measures by tying accountability to students' success in early postsecondary coursework, providing a more direct signal of preparation for life after high school (The Education Trust, 2022). While this represents a promising start, like other outcome-based indicators, these measures may still reflect differences in student background and access to opportunities unless paired with approaches that better isolate schools' contributions to those outcomes (e.g., impact-oriented measures such as promotion power, discussed in the recommendations below). Illinois takes a different approach to school climate by emphasizing participation in climate surveys to support engagement and improvement rather than using survey results as a high-stakes rating measure (The Education Trust, 2022).

Exhibit 2. Transparent, Indicator-Level Detail Supporting Summative School Rating

Indicator	Achievement	Growth	Growth for Highest Need Students	College & Career Readiness
	Level 5	**Level 5**	**Level 4**	**Level 5**
Measure	Success Rate: 54.8%	Schoolwide TVAAS: 5	TVAAS Score for Highest Need Students: 4	College & Career Readiness: 87.1%
Measure by Subject	ELA Grades 9-12: 59.7%	Literacy: 5		ACT 21+ Score: 43.8%
	Math Grades 9-12: 50.4%	Numeracy: 5		Postsecondary Attainment Score: 78.1%
	Science Grades 9-12: 58.4%	Science: 2		Industry Certifications Score: 67.4%
	Social Studies Grades 9-12: Insufficient N Count	Social Studies: Insufficient N Count		ASVAB Score: 7.9%

Source: Tennessee Department of Education, State Report Card / TVAAS accountability framework. https://tdepublicschools.ondemand.sas.com/school/000510010/performance/grades
Notes: This image provides additional detail that supplements Tennessee's summative school rating by showing how the overall score is derived from multiple, clearly defined indicators. Each indicator (that is, achievement, overall student growth, growth for students with the highest needs, and college and career readiness) is reported separately, along with the specific measures and subject-level data used to assign performance levels. Where data are unavailable or insufficient, the system explicitly notes this, helping users distinguish between low performance and missing information.

Principle 3: Center equity: make every student group visible

Assessment: ⚠️Partially meets standards

Both the Dashboard and SARCs report outcomes for all federally required subgroups, including major racial/ethnic groups, economically disadvantaged students, English learners, and students with disabilities. They go further by including children in foster care, youth experiencing homelessness, students receiving migrant education services, and youth with a parent in the armed forces. They also report results by gender. This breadth means that, at least in theory, families, educators, and policymakers can see how historically underserved student groups are faring in different schools.

Despite this, important limitations weaken the equity impact of these data. Subgroup results on the Dashboard are difficult to find, requiring users to click into "more information" pages rather than being displayed prominently alongside overall results. California also uses a relatively high minimum subgroup size (n-size) of 30 students to assign a performance level, which can both increase the amount of missing information on the Dashboard web page and may allow schools to escape

accountability pressure for inequities in outcomes for certain groups. For reference, EdTrust recommends an n-size of 10 to maximize visibility of underserved groups (The Education Trust, 2022).

Illustrative Examples from Other State(s): Colorado, New Jersey, and Washington, DC

Several states demonstrate how accountability systems can center equity by explicitly incorporating student group performance into school ratings. EdTrust identifies Colorado, New Jersey, and Washington, DC, as strong examples of this approach, noting that each state assigns substantial weight to subgroup outcomes within their accountability frameworks (The Education Trust, 2022). Colorado and New Jersey embed student group performance directly into their overall calculations, ensuring that subgroup results meaningfully influence school ratings rather than being treated as supplemental information. Washington, DC, goes even further by prioritizing subgroup performance across all indicators and differentiating weights by student group, placing greater emphasis on outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners.

It is important to note that while these approaches reflect a commitment to equity, weighting subgroup performance more heavily does not, on its own, ensure equitable accountability. If subgroup outcomes primarily reflect differences in student background or access to opportunities outside of school, such approaches risk attributing those differences to schools and may unintentionally penalize those serving higher-need populations. While there is a strong normative case for prioritizing the outcomes of historically underserved students, these approaches require careful attention to how indicators are constructed and interpreted to avoid reinforcing, rather than mitigating, existing inequalities.

Principle 4: Show trends and enable fair comparisons

Assessment: ❌Does not meet standards

California's accountability tools provide fragments of longitudinal information but fall short of enabling meaningful trend analysis or comparisons across schools and districts. As a result, users cannot easily determine whether schools are improving over time or how they compare to other available options. While such comparisons do not necessarily capture schools' causal contributions to student outcomes, they do provide useful descriptive information about differences in performance

and patterns over time. This information can still support more informed decision-making, even if it does not fully resolve questions of school effectiveness.

The Dashboard allows users to toggle between years, but there is no option for side-by-side comparisons or simple visualizations to show progress over time. Users must manually switch between years or consult archived data to trace performance changes. The SARCs include some multi-year tables; however, accessing earlier reports requires navigating to separate PDFs, making trend analysis cumbersome. The Dashboard provides little guidance about how changes in rules, measures, or assessments affect longitudinal comparability. For example, the shift in the College/Career Indicator from a low-to-high Likert scale to the color-coded performance system between the 2023 and 2024 Dashboards is not clearly explained, leaving users uncertain about how to interpret changes over time.

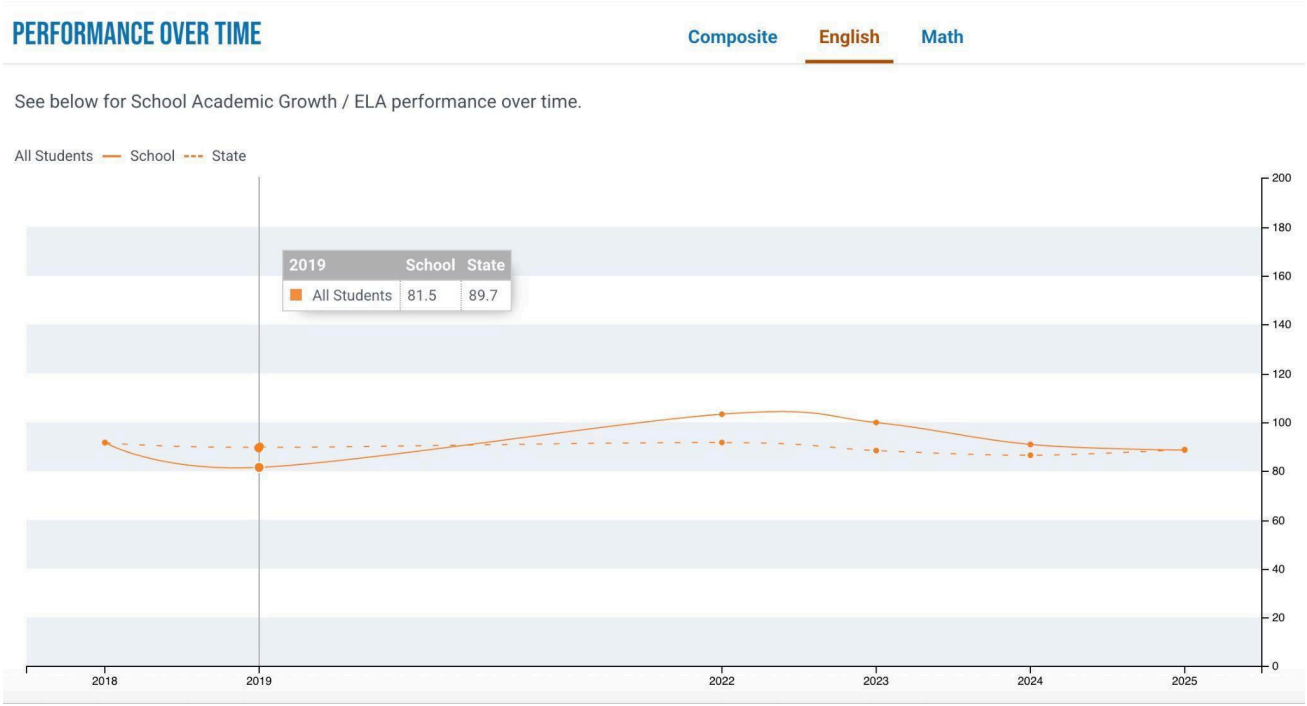
CRPE's review of state accountability dashboards for transparency finds that California performs relatively poorly on the ease with which parents or advocates can locate longitudinal data on school performance. CRPE assigns California a "D" rating for its difficulty or inability to find multi-year data across the seven indicators it identifies as most central to student performance, placing California in the bottom half of states (CRPE, 2024). In its 2025 report, CRPE again scored California poorly in part because it offers no tool for users to compare school performance, either based on geography or a comparison of schools serving similar students (CRPE, 2025). In a state with a large number of public school choice options, leaving parents without any comparative school information puts them at a disadvantage.

Illustrative Examples from Other State(s): Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maryland, Michigan, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee

CRPE's 50-state review identifies a small group of states (Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Michigan, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee) that performed relatively well in making longitudinal performance data available across key indicators (CRPE, 2024). These states generally ensured that multi-year data could be found for most core measures, allowing users to examine changes in student performance over time rather than relying on single-year snapshots. Differences among the top-performing states reflected design tradeoffs rather than overall weakness: for example, Michigan stood out for providing a complete set of indicators, while some other states were missing specific measures, such as growth or social studies. In several cases, viewing trends required additional

navigation, such as toggling across years, but overall these states demonstrated stronger alignment with best practices for supporting trend analysis and fair comparisons than most other states. Some states also stand out for their functionality in comparing schools; for instance, Maryland and Nebraska enable comparisons among schools with similar characteristics, while many other states allow users to select 2 or 3 comparison schools and view their results side-by-side.

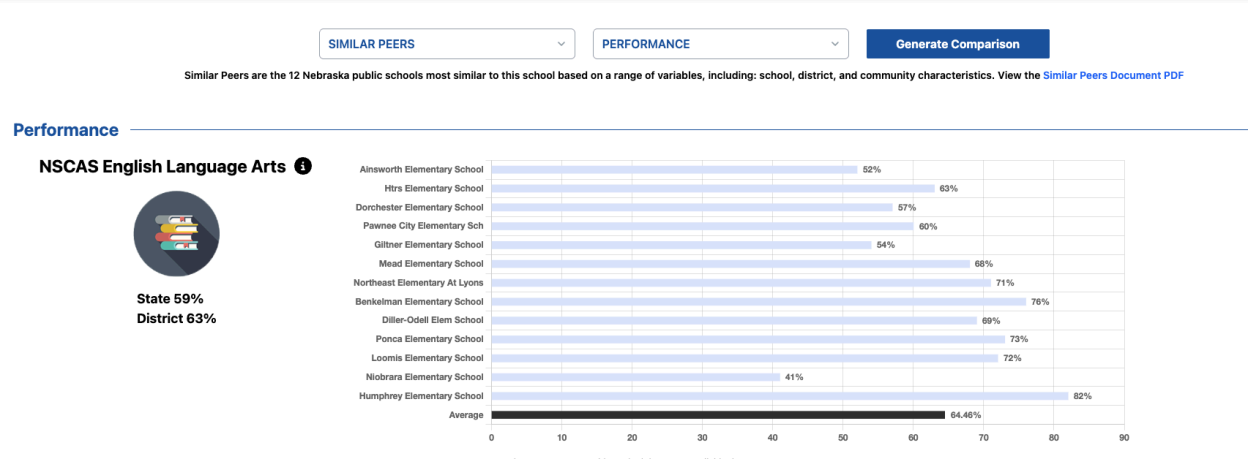
Exhibit 3: Oklahoma Displays Multi-Year Academic Performance Trends



Source: Oklahoma State Department of Education, Oklahoma School Report Card. https://oklaschools.com/school/2025/55I052110/academic-growth

Notes: This image from the Oklahoma School Report Card illustrates how academic performance is displayed over multiple years within a single, integrated trend view. Users can toggle between subject areas (e.g., English and Math) and view performance for all students over time, with school results displayed alongside state averages. Hover features provide precise year-by-year values, enabling easy comparison across years without navigating to separate reports.

Exhibit 4: Nebraska's Side-by-Side Comparison Tool with Similar Peer Schools



Source: Nebraska Department of Education, Nebraska Education Profile (School Comparison Tool). https://nep.education.ne.gov/#/profiles/school/comparison?dataYears=20232024&agencyId=09-0010-002
Notes: This image shows Nebraska's school comparison tool, which allows users to compare a school's performance with that of similar peer schools based on shared characteristics such as grade span, enrollment, and community context. By placing schools side by side on the same indicators and scale, the tool enables families, educators, and policymakers to assess performance relative to comparable schools, rather than in isolation.

Principle 5: Design for usability and coherence

Assessment: ❌Does not meet standards

The Dashboard and SARCs provide extensive information about school performance, but their design and structure make them difficult for most users to navigate and interpret. The relationship between the two portals is unclear: both present overlapping data on student outcomes, yet neither explains how the tools are intended to complement one another or serve distinct roles within a broader accountability framework. As a result, users must navigate the Dashboard and SARCs independently, without cross-links, shared visual conventions, or guidance that would help them understand how information across the two tools fits together into a coherent story.

Within the Dashboard, key results are displayed through radial "speedometer" charts that are visually striking but hard to interpret. The abundance of indicators, each with its own color scale and terminology, also makes it difficult for families and educators to know which measures matter most or how to synthesize the information into a clear picture of performance. California's decision not to assign summative ratings may reflect a desire for nuance, but without stronger interpretive guidance,

users are left to make sense of complex and sometimes inconsistent data displays without much guidance.

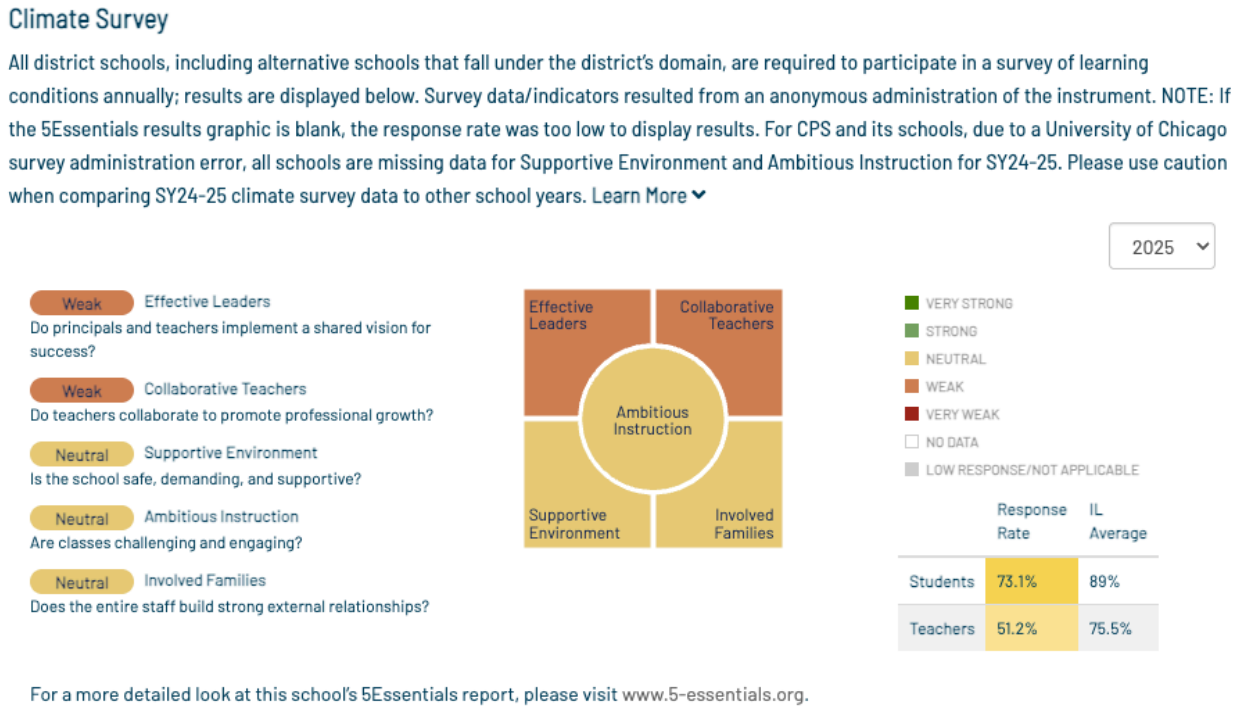
California has made efforts to address these challenges by developing a wide array of supporting materials, including the Dashboard Communications Toolkit, parent flyers, technical guides, and explanatory resources intended to help users interpret the Dashboard and SARCs (California Department of Education, 2023). However, the volume and dispersion of these materials place the burden on users to seek out explanations outside the core tools themselves. Best practice emphasizes embedding clarity, coherence, and guidance directly into the design of accountability systems, rather than relying on extensive supplementary documentation (CCSSO, 2019).

Illustrative Examples from Other State(s): **Connecticut, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, and Oklahoma**

In its assessment of state report cards, CRPE identified Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, New Mexico, and Oklahoma as among the strongest examples of overall usability, noting that these systems were easier to navigate and presented data in clear, interpretable formats that foregrounded key information for users (CRPE, 2024).

Other states illustrate more distinctive design practices that enhance accessibility and coherence. EdTrust highlights Idaho, Kansas, North Dakota, and Oklahoma for using asset-based, contextual language in their report cards, helping frame accountability data as part of a continuous improvement process rather than solely as a judgment tool (The Education Trust, 2022). In addition, Connecticut and North Carolina incorporate disaggregated student group data into comparison tools, features that support more meaningful interpretation of performance differences across schools and student groups.

Exhibit 5. Embedded, Plain-Language Interpretation of School Climate Data in Illinois



Source: Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Report Card (School Climate Survey results). https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/School.aspx?source=environment&source2=climatesurvey&Schoolid=050162020170001

Notes: Illinois' Report Card embeds interpretive guidance directly within its accountability system. School climate results are presented alongside plain-language descriptions that explain what each dimension measures and how to interpret the results. Contextual text, legends, and cautions about data limitations (such as response rates or suppressed results) are displayed within the same view, allowing users to understand the data without leaving the main interface.

Principle 6: Make results actionable

Assessment: ❌Does not meet standards

The Dashboard and the SARCs provide little guidance on what actions should result from the information presented. Performance results are not clearly linked to the state's accountability cycle and schools' identification status, required supports, or exit criteria are not shown alongside the metrics that determine them. This separation forces users to interpret results in isolation, with no indication of next steps or who is responsible for improvement. Similarly, there are few visible connections between public metrics and Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs), which outline district and school strategies for addressing identified needs. Users must navigate across multiple platforms, including the

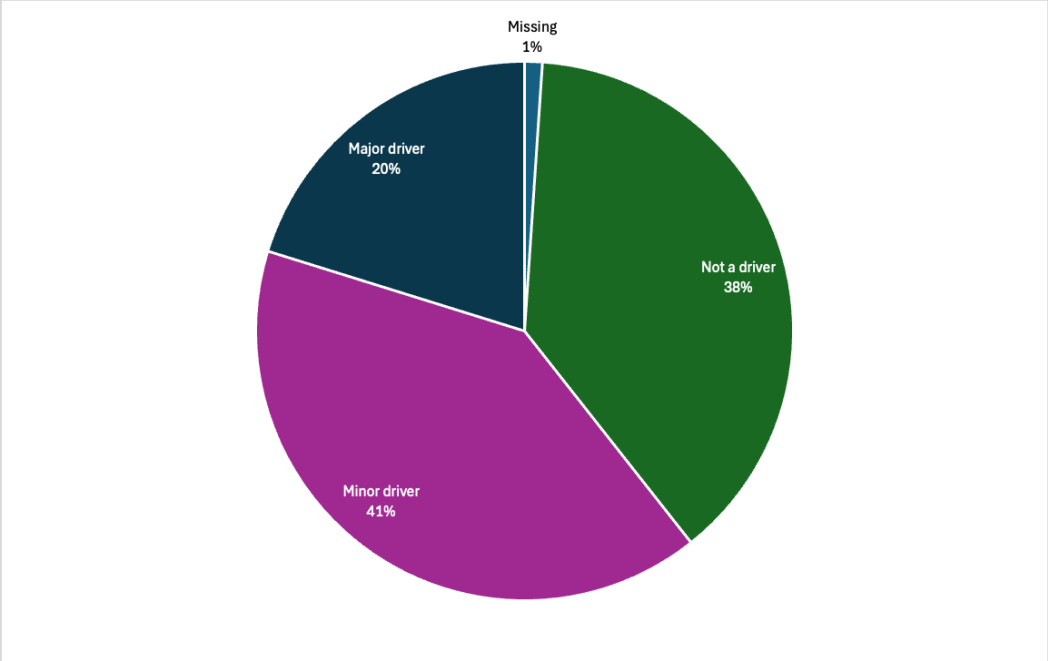
Dashboard, DataQuest, SARCs, and local district websites, to understand what interventions are in place, how progress will be monitored, or where to go for help.

California's Dashboard Principles explicitly emphasize continuous improvement and transparency over punitive, high-stakes accountability. However, even in a low-stakes, capacity-building system, accountability information must make clear how data are meant to inform decisions, guide improvement, and trigger support. Without visible cues about how results relate to differentiated assistance, planning, or monitoring, the system risks functioning primarily as a reporting mechanism rather than as a tool for accountability and improvement. Moreover, when accountability tools provide simplified snapshots without sufficient context or asset-based framing, they risk being misinterpreted in ways that attribute outcomes primarily to students rather than to the broader set of school and system factors that shape performance. These challenges are particularly salient in a multiple-indicator system, where schools performing well on some measures but poorly on others may face unclear signals about what supports are triggered, and why.

Beyond these design issues, California's system lacks basic infrastructure to make accountability data genuinely actionable. Neither the Dashboard nor the SARCs track or report how users engage with the data (such as whether families access improvement plans, educators download resources, or districts engage with technical assistance), which means the system misses opportunities to learn how the system is used and where it falls short. Data are also not consistently available in open, machine-readable formats that would allow researchers or local partners to integrate accountability results into continuous improvement tools. This limitation also constrains the ability of emerging AI-based tools to accurately ingest, interpret, and summarize these data for broader audiences.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of this limited actionability comes from how district leaders actually use the tools. As part of the *Getting Down to Facts* effort, interviews with 94 district leaders from across the state found that only 19 leaders, about 20 percent, identified the Dashboard as a major driver of their district's priorities. These findings suggest that, while California's accountability tools succeed in reporting information, they have not yet become a meaningful lever for guiding local decisions or continuous improvement.

Exhibit 6. Percentage of CA District Leaders who said the CA Dashboard was a minor, major, or not a driver of their priorities.



Source: GDTF District leader survey. "To what extent does the Dashboard drive your priorities?"

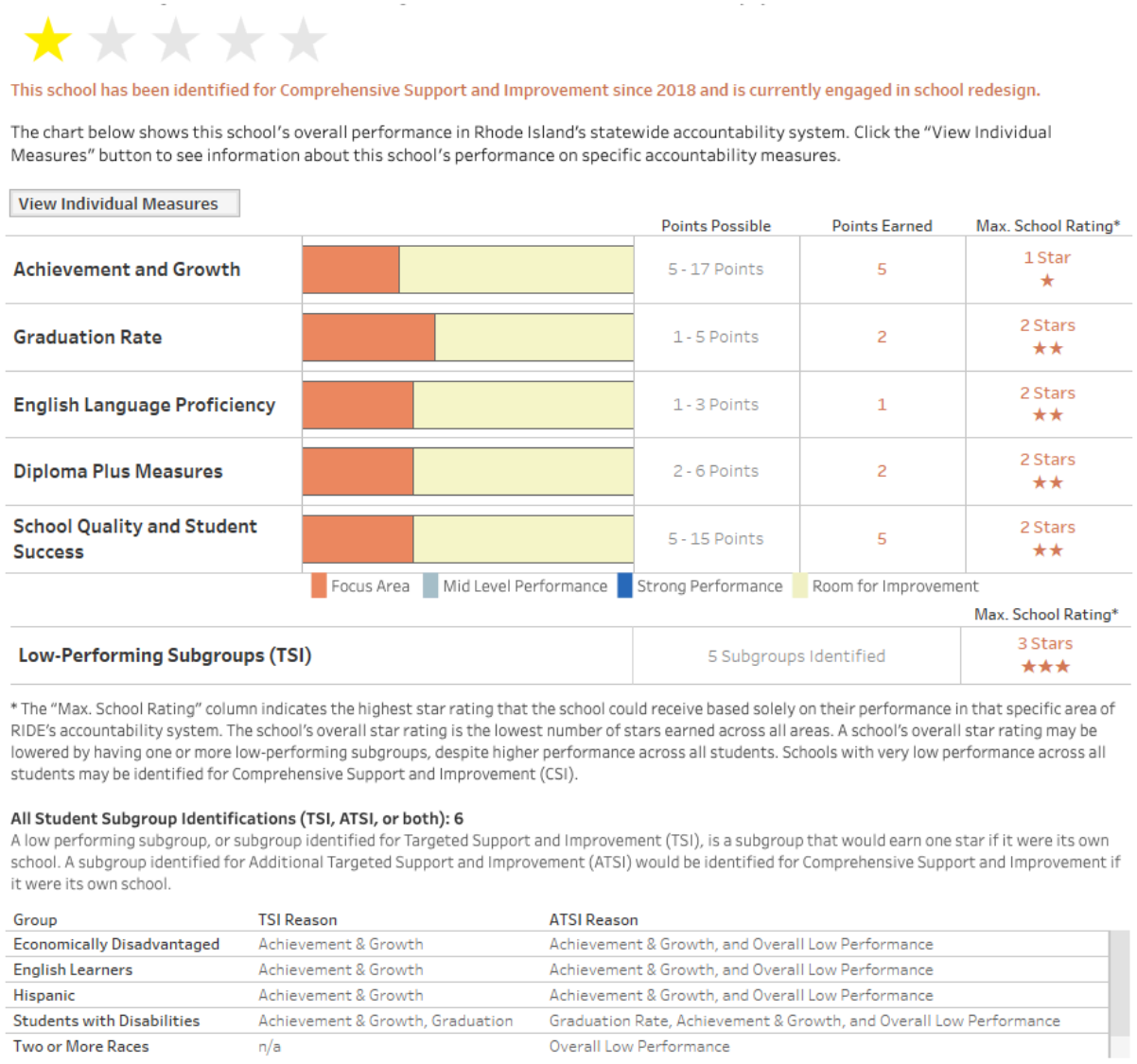
Illustrative Examples from Other State(s): Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Texas

EdTrust identifies several states as strong examples of how accountability systems can more clearly connect performance results to concrete actions and supports (The Education Trust, 2022). Florida and Rhode Island specify clear consequences when schools fail to improve over time, moving beyond incremental interventions to more comprehensive turnaround or redesign requirements. Connecticut and Tennessee structure escalating supports tied to performance trajectories, with defined tiers of intervention, increasing oversight, and explicit expectations for progress as schools remain identified.

Other examples that EdTrust identified as bright spots emphasize sustained improvement and capacity building. Pennsylvania requires schools that have successfully exited identification to articulate how they will maintain gains and continue engaging with state-provided technical assistance, reinforcing accountability beyond the period of formal support. Indiana and Texas link improvement funding to targeted guidance and leadership development, offering hands-on assistance to help schools

strengthen improvement plans and align resources with identified needs.

Exhibit 7. Rhode Island Links Low Performance Ratings to Required Action



★ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

This school has been identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement since 2018 and is currently engaged in school redesign.

The chart below shows this school's overall performance in Rhode Island's statewide accountability system. Click the "View Individual Measures" button to see information about this school's performance on specific accountability measures.

View Individual Measures

	Points Possible	Points Earned	Max. School Rating*
Achievement and Growth	5 - 17 Points	5	1 Star ★
Graduation Rate	1 - 5 Points	2	2 Stars ★★
English Language Proficiency	1 - 3 Points	1	2 Stars ★★
Diploma Plus Measures	2 - 6 Points	2	2 Stars ★★
School Quality and Student Success	5 - 15 Points	5	2 Stars ★★

Focus Area | Mid Level Performance | Strong Performance | Room for Improvement

		Max. School Rating*
Low-Performing Subgroups (TSI)	5 Subgroups Identified	3 Stars ★★★

* The "Max. School Rating" column indicates the highest star rating that the school could receive based solely on their performance in that specific area of RIDE's accountability system. The school's overall star rating is the lowest number of stars earned across all areas. A school's overall star rating may be lowered by having one or more low-performing subgroups, despite higher performance across all students. Schools with very low performance across all students may be identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI).

All Student Subgroup Identifications (TSI, ATSI, or both): 6

A low performing subgroup, or subgroup identified for Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI), is a subgroup that would earn one star if it were its own school. A subgroup identified for Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI) would be identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement if it were its own school.

Group	TSI Reason	ATSI Reason
Economically Disadvantaged	Achievement & Growth	Achievement & Growth, and Overall Low Performance
English Learners	Achievement & Growth	Achievement & Growth, and Overall Low Performance
Hispanic	Achievement & Growth	Achievement & Growth, and Overall Low Performance
Students with Disabilities	Achievement & Growth, Graduation	Graduation Rate, Achievement & Growth, and Overall Low Performance
Two or More Races	n/a	Overall Low Performance

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, Rhode Island School and District Report Cards; https://reportcard.ride.ri.gov/202425/SchoolAccountability?SchCode=28150&DistCode=28

Notes: This image shows a Rhode Island school report card for a low-performing school, where the implications of performance results are made explicit at the top of the page. Schools receiving the lowest overall rating are clearly identified as requiring Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) and, in this case, as being subject to a school redesign. Further down the page, more detailed information explains the school's federal accountability designations, including Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) status for specific student groups and the indicators contributing to identification.

Recommendations

Many of the guiding principles underlying California's accountability system are aligned with recommendations from both the research literature and our own prior report. The Dashboard reflects a thoughtful commitment to multiple measures, equity, and continuous improvement. Yet in practice, the system falls short of realizing these goals. In particular, the Dashboard's complexity and fragmented design make it difficult for users to interpret and act on the information it provides. As a result, even when California has taken care to assemble robust and holistic data, the system does not consistently reach and influence the policymakers, educators, and community members who could most benefit from its use. This challenge is reflected in our survey of district leaders: only a small share reported that the Dashboard serves as a major driver of their district's priorities, suggesting that the system's robust data are not consistently driving decision-making on the ground.

The recommendations that follow focus on practical steps California could take to strengthen clarity, coherence, and actionability while preserving its commitment to a multi-measure, improvement-oriented accountability framework.

Near-term fixes: Improve Usability, Clarity, and Coherence

Several improvements could be implemented in the near term to strengthen the usability and coherence of California's accountability tools without requiring major statutory changes.

1. **Embed clearer interpretation directly into the Dashboard interface.** Rather than relying heavily on external toolkits, technical manuals, and downloadable PDFs, California could integrate more plain-language explanations, tooltips (brief pop-up explanations that appear when users hover over elements), and contextual notes directly alongside indicators within the Dashboard and SARCs. This includes clearer explanations of what each measure represents, how performance levels are determined, and how to interpret changes over time. Where data are suppressed or unavailable, the interface should explicitly explain why, helping users distinguish between missing data and low performance.
2. **Improve cross-linking and integration across platforms.** The current separation among the Dashboard, SARCs, DataQuest, and district LCAP documents requires users to navigate multiple platforms to understand school performance and improvement efforts. In the near term, the

state could introduce clearer cross-links among these systems, allowing users to move seamlessly from performance indicators to identification status, improvement plans, and relevant documentation.

3. **Enhance visibility of multi-year trends and subgroup results.** Although multi-year data are technically available, they are often difficult to locate. Near-term changes could include default trend displays, clearer year selectors, and side-by-side subgroup comparisons that do not require multiple clicks. The state could also develop a simple system that would allow users to directly compare schools of their choice (or schools serving similar students).
4. **Strengthen the validity and reliability of core indicators.** As the Dashboard evolves, California should ensure that its primary measures accurately capture schools' contributions to student learning and long-term success. This includes fully operationalizing and prominently integrating growth measures, as well as refining college and career indicators to reflect meaningful postsecondary and workforce preparation. More broadly, the state should regularly review indicators to confirm they measure intended outcomes, allow fair comparisons across diverse schools, and provide clear, stable signals that support improvement rather than ambiguity.

Medium-Term Reforms: Clarify Audience and Deepen Actionability

Beyond near-term usability improvements, California should consider several medium-term reforms that clarify the intended audience of its accountability system and better align public reporting with improvement efforts.

5. **Clarify primary audiences and differentiate user pathways.** To better align the Dashboard with a clear theory of action, California should explicitly define who the primary intended users are and how the system is meant to support their decisions. Questions that could guide this exploration include: How should parents use the Dashboard, and how should that use differ from how educators, district leaders, or policymakers engage with it? For families, how does the Dashboard complement or provide a viable alternative to platforms such as GreatSchools? For educators, what features support planning, resource allocation, and instructional improvement? Rather than assuming a single interface can effectively serve all audiences, the state could explore differentiated user pathways or portals tailored to distinct needs and examine how the

Dashboard aligns with SARCs, DataQuest, and the Cradle-to-Career data system to reduce fragmentation and ensure that each platform plays a clear and complementary role within the broader accountability infrastructure.

6. **Link public metrics more directly to improvement planning and supports.** The Dashboard and SARCs should more visibly connect performance results to available supports and planning tools. Public-facing pages could include links to relevant LCAP goals, summaries of district or school improvement plans, and contact information for technical assistance. Where identification triggers exist, the criteria for designation and the sequence of expected supports and monitoring should be clearly displayed.

Embrace Bold Transformation: Personalization, Innovative Measurement, and Reciprocal Accountability

California should also consider more transformative shifts in how accountability information is designed, delivered, and used. Such changes would better align the state's accountability systems with its stated values and could position California as a national leader in improvement-oriented accountability.

7. **Move toward more personalized, user-centered dashboards using Artificial Intelligence (AI).** In addition to the user pathways described above, advances in artificial intelligence and data visualization could help surface the most relevant indicators for each user, provide automated explanations of trends, and generate contextual summaries that translate technical results into accessible language. These tools could also engage users in exploring how to apply the data to their own goals, for example, by suggesting instructional planning strategies or areas for professional inquiry for educators and generating sample questions, emails, or conversation guides to help parents discuss accountability results with school leaders. Used thoughtfully, such tools could enhance usability and engagement while preserving the state's commitment to multiple measures and continuous improvement.
8. **Prioritize impact-oriented indicators– for example, promotion power– that more directly capture schools' contributions to student success.** As California continues to refine the Dashboard, the state should elevate measures that more clearly distinguish school effectiveness

from student background characteristics on as many indicators as possible. One promising example is "promotion power," which estimates a school's contribution to long-term outcomes (such as graduation, postsecondary enrollment, persistence, or earnings) after accounting for prior achievement and demographics (Deutsch, Johnson, & Gill, 2020). While promotion power is only one model, the broader principle is that accountability systems should prioritize indicators that get as close as possible to the state's ultimate goals and that fairly compare schools serving different student populations. Embedding impact-oriented measures alongside existing multiple measures would strengthen the Dashboard's focus on continuous improvement, clarify what success looks like, and better support stakeholders in identifying schools that are accelerating.

9. **Embrace Reciprocal Accountability.** Finally, California could build on its improvement oriented philosophy by more explicitly embracing a model of reciprocal accountability, in which performance expectations are matched with clear state commitments to provide support, resources, and capacity-building (Hough, 2025). As Hough (2025) argues, accountability systems are most effective when they balance transparency with meaningful investment in school improvement. Making the state's role in supporting schools more visible would reinforce that accountability is not solely about measuring outcomes, but also about ensuring that schools have the tools and resources necessary to improve.

References

California Department of Education. (2021). *State Board of Education adopts student growth indicators*.

California Department of Education. (2022). *California School Dashboard principles*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/dbprinciples.asp

California Department of Education. (2023). *Dashboard communications toolkit*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/dashboardtoolkit.asp

California Department of Education. (2024). *California School Dashboard release highlights*.

California Department of Education. (2025a). *2025 accountability workplan*. California State Board of Education.

California Department of Education. (2025b). *California School Dashboard and system of support*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/

California Department of Education. (2025c). *Growth model technical documentation.* https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/documents/growthdata.pdf

California Department of Education. (2026a). About CDE's educational data: Accessing educational data. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/aedo.asp

California Department of Education. (2026b). *CAASPP: California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/sa/

Council of Chief State School Officers. (2019). *Communicating performance: A best practices resource for developing state report cards*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED595053.pdf

Curl, C., & Peltzman, A. (2017). *Communicating performance: A best practices resource for developing state report cards*. Council of Chief State School Officers. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED595053.pdf

Curran, F. C., Carlo, S. M., & Harris, K. T. (2024). Making the data visible: A systematic review of systems-level data dashboards for leadership and policy in education. *Review of Educational Research*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543241288249

Deutsch, J., Johnson, M., & Gill, B. (2020, March 5). *The promotion power impacts of Louisiana high schools* (Report). Mathematica, in partnership with the Louisiana Department of Education and Walton Family Foundation.

https://www.mathematica.org/publications/the-promotion-power-impacts-of-louisiana-high-schools

ExcelinEd. (2018). *A–F school grading: Fundamental principles (Policy toolkit)*. https://excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/ExcelinEd.PolicyToolkit.AFSchoolGrading.FundamentalPrinciples.2018.pdf

Hernandez, D. J. (2012). *PreK–3rd: Next steps for state longitudinal data systems (PreK–3rd policy action brief No. 8)*. Foundation for Child Development.

Hough, H. J. (2025, December). *A truce in the accountability wars*. Center on Reinventing Public Education. https://crpe.org/a-truce-in-the-accountability-wars/

Hutt, E., & Polikoff, M. S. (2020). Toward a framework for public accountability in education reform. *Educational Researcher, 49*(7), 503–511. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20931246

Polikoff, M., Michel-Herf, N., Avelar, J., Pillow, T., Pangelinan, C., & Casimere, H. (2024). *State secrets: How transparent are state school report cards about the effects of COVID?* Center on Reinventing Public Education. https://crpe.org/wp-content/uploads/CRPE_SoS3.0_Report-Card_FINAL.pdf

The Education Trust. (2022). *Reassessing ESSA implementation: An equity analysis*. https://edtrust.org/rti/reassessing-essa-implementation-an-equity-analysis/

Ushomirsky, N., Smith, A., & Bommelje, S. (2017). *Trends in state ESSA plans: Equity advocates still have work to do*. The Education Trust. https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Trends-in-State-ESSA-Plans-Equity-Advocates-Still-Have-Work-To-Do-12.20-17.pdf