February 13, 2026

The Honorable Bill Cassidy
Chair
Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions
428 Senate Dirksen Office Building
Washington D.C. 20510

Dear Chair Cassidy,

I am writing to provide Knowledge Alliance's (KA) comments in response to your recent call for feedback on how students' academic success in K-12 schools is measured. As the national association representing education research, evaluation, and technical assistance organizations that partner with States, districts, and the Federal government to improve outcomes for all learners, Knowledge Alliance appreciates the opportunity to submit comments on this topic. This is an important and timely issue as States continue to refine accountability systems and continuously seek better ways to communicate meaningful, actionable information about student learning and progress to families.

KA members have unique expertise through their long-standing work and relationships supporting all States on data, evidence, measurement, evaluation, and assessment issues. KA's members have deep expertise in how growth measures are developed, interpreted, and communicated, as well as the practical challenges States face in making this information clear, comparable, and useful for teachers, families, and policymakers.

The comments below reflect the on-the-ground experience of KA members and are intended to inform efforts to strengthen the effective use and communication of academic growth indicators nationwide.

Fair Measures of School Quality

1. What have States learned from developing different measures of student growth?

States have learned a great deal from developing and implementing student growth measures. There are multiple valid ways to define and calculate student growth, and approaches vary widely across States. Since the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), nearly all States have adopted student growth measures as part of their accountability systems. One key lesson is that both growth and proficiency work, and are most meaningful, when considered together. This is especially important in parent reporting, as growth measures should be interpreted in relation to achievement levels—for example, indicating how far a student remains from proficiency and whether their rate of progress is sufficient to close gaps over time. States have learned that growth measures

can provide a more complete picture of school impact than proficiency alone, particularly for students starting below grade level. They have also learned that growth measures are technically complex.

Many States therefore use more than one growth measure to answer different questions about student progress and school performance. States have also learned that growth approaches can extend beyond test-based achievement to other indicators, such as English learner progress and chronic absenteeism, offering more timely insight into whether schools are improving rather than waiting multiple years for proficiency shifts to appear. For example, States have increasingly applied growth methodologies to indicators that serve as early or "leading" signals of improvement.

Finally, evidence-based research underscores that growth measures are most meaningful when interpreted alongside instructional context. For example, studies examining reading instruction highlight the importance of pairing growth data with information about instructional quality and curriculum, particularly to ensure that measured gains reflect deeper learning rather than surface-level improvements.

Despite these challenges, many States, such as Washington, Massachusetts, and Michigan, have implemented growth measures successfully and found they provide valuable insight into school impact beyond proficiency alone. Overall, States have found that growth measures have become an important tool for targeting supports, monitoring improvement, and informing accountability decisions.

2. Are there any kinds of Federal support that would be useful to States seeking to implement new growth measures or revise existing ones?

Establish a Federal Technical Assistance (TA) Center on Growth and Value-Added Measurement: Many States face recurring, and similar, technical challenges like mobility, missing data, and comparability after test changes. A TA center could provide evidence-based guidance on best practices, create a repository of research on growth models and accountability that States could use to guide both their for with modeling and the design and implementation of their accountability systems, and support peer-State learnings.

Support Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS): Sustained investment data infrastructure, particularly SLDS, benefits the implementation of new growth measures or revision of existing ones. Growth measures are only as strong as the underlying data systems that allow States to track student progress over time. Renewed funding and technical assistance—similar to the former SLDS Technical

Assistance Center—would be especially important for smaller States and districts that lack the resources to build and maintain this capacity independently. KA supports improvements to the SLDS program included in the HELP Committee's bipartisan Advancing Research in Education Act (AREA) and increased annual appropriations for SLDS to strengthen this foundation.

Provide flexible resources for development and validation*:* Flexible use of Federal funds is also essential. States need resources to develop, test, and validate new growth measures before attaching high-stakes consequences. Greater funding for research, development, and evaluation would allow States to work with assessment experts to ensure that new measures are comparable, reliable, interpretable, and useful.

Invest in technical assistance through Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) and Comprehensive Centers (CCs): Federally funded technical assistance structures play a critical role in developing, applying, and interpreting growth measures. For example, the RELs work directly with States on their data, research, and evaluation needs. Driven by State-expressed priorities and interests, RELs work with States to develop, test, and understand growth measures that are most helpful in their specific contexts. The CCs provide complementary capacity-building and implementation support, helping States implement new growth measures, translate the findings from the measures, and help leaders utilize this information to more efficiently direct resources and support. Together, RELs and CCs form a critical infrastructure for supporting States in developing growth measures that yield the information the States need and then help States interpret these measures to make changes to improve student outcomes.

Provide Guidance on Data Standards and Comparability: States have also learned that technical challenges—such as student mobility, chronic absenteeism, and pandemic-related disruptions—complicate growth calculations and interpretation. These experiences underscore the need for Federal guidance and research on data thresholds, comparability, and reporting standards, as well as continued work by entities such as NCES to support States in furthering their data system alignment to the Common Education Data Standards (CEDS), which will ultimately support greater transparency and consistency in calculating and reporting related to growth measures. There is strong precedent for this kind of Federal leadership: in the mid-2000s, NCES undertook a multi-volume effort to examine how high school graduation rates should be computed, evaluating proxy measures, formulas, underlying assumptions, and the strengths and weaknesses of

each approach before recommending a consistent method that States now widely use. Given the similar variability in how student growth is currently defined and calculated across States, Congress could consider commissioning a comparable study of growth measures and collect lessons learned from States in the development and implementation of their growth models to identify best practices and support greater consistency and transparency nationwide. Such a study could also include lessons from designing communications of growth to policymakers, educators, and parents and the responses to those communications. Additionally, Congress could consider funding a research program on the relationship between features and the design of accountability systems and the impact on educational practices, student achievement, and other educational outcomes. Currently, there is limited research on these topics. Such Federal support would help States strengthen their accountability systems while ensuring growth data is meaningful, comparable, and clearly communicated to families and policymakers.

3. Are there design changes to State assessment systems that would support the creation of higher-quality growth measures, and are any Federal policies standing in the way of such innovation?

High-quality student growth measures depend on high-quality assessments. As States pursue assessment innovation—such as spreading testing across the year or combining multiple assessment components—it is important that both State and Federal validity reviews examine whether these systems support not only accurate proficiency results but also reliable growth calculations over time. State evidence and the Department of Education's Federal peer review process should explicitly consider the extent to which innovative assessment designs can produce defensible growth measures. At the same time, innovation should not come at the expense of the technical quality and comparability needed for trustworthy accountability of proficiency measures.

States are also exploring alternative conceptual approaches to growth. Some, informed by organizations such as Excel in Ed, are examining criterion-referenced progress toward proficiency rather than norm-referenced comparisons, with an emphasis on how effectively schools accelerate learning for their lowest-performing students.

While many Federal policies allow flexibility, differences between Federal and State reporting systems, and the absence of common reference points for proficiency (e.g. NAEP and State assessments), can complicate interpretation for families and policymakers. Thus, Federal policy is not necessarily standing in the way of

assessment innovation, but States would benefit from Federal guidance, technical assistance, and sustained funding to ensure that assessment models can produce reliable growth and accountability measures.

Empowered Families

4. What have States learned about how best to communicate information about school-average growth to families?

States have learned that communicating school-average growth to families requires information that is clear, accessible, and visually intuitive. Growth measures can be complex, but families are able to engage with them when States provide plain-language explanations, strong design, and helpful context rather than technical jargon. Many States—including California, Massachusetts, Washington, and Colorado—have improved understanding through visual report card elements, layered explanations, and user-friendly tools. Prior experience also shows that simplified graphics and examples can help families quickly grasp what growth means, reinforcing that effective translation and communication are as important as technical rigor.

States have also benefited from shared learning facilitated by organizations such as CCSSO, Cognia, Learning Heroes, and the Data Quality Campaign, which highlight best practices in data reporting and parent communication.

Finally, some States are beginning to explore ways to provide additional context alongside growth results, recognizing that families often want to understand not just *what* outcomes look like, but *why* they may be occurring. These efforts include contextual tools that pair student outcomes with information about school conditions and resources—such as comparisons of performance and expenditures—to help families better interpret what contributes to observed results.

5. How can the Federal government support cross-State learning about communicating information to families?

The Federal government is uniquely positioned to support cross-State learning on effective communication with families by identifying shared challenges, evaluating promising approaches, and disseminating findings in ways that are timely and accessible. Federal convenings and communities of practice—such as those supported through the Comprehensive Center Network—provide an important venue for States to share practical lessons and parent-facing communication strategies without duplicating effort. Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) can also contribute by supporting States' data and evidence needs and conducting

applied research on how growth measures and report card information are most effectively understood by educators and families. Congress could also consider supporting a technical assistance convening model, similar to the former SLDS Technical Assistance Center, bringing together data experts and end users—families, educators, and policymakers—to design communication tools grounded in real use cases. Continued investment in these networks can help strengthen transparency and trust in student growth data nationwide.

In addition, Congress could help States improve how student growth information is communicated by encouraging more consistent reporting elements and clearer explanatory resources within ESSA report cards. While ESSA requires States to publish report cards, many vary widely in usability and do not provide families with the context needed to interpret growth measures. Federal support for shared templates, communication toolkits, technical assistance, and dedicated funding for report card improvements would help States invest in high-quality design and parent resources, rather than relying on limited State funds or redirected assessment dollars.

6. How have States addressed the challenge of measuring growth in elementary schools, where Statewide assessments typically do not begin until 3rd grade?

Build Systems for Support, Communication, and Intervention: Measuring growth in early elementary grades remains challenging because most States do not administer Statewide assessments in grades K–2. In these earlier grades, States often rely on diagnostic screeners and interim assessments to guide instruction. For example, some States, such as Alabama, administer State reading assessments in grades 2 and 3 with clear thresholds that trigger targeted interventions and parent communication. Other States, including Colorado and Florida, provide State-approved early literacy assessments at no cost and require regular administration to support instructional decision-making. Overall, States have addressed the challenge of measuring growth in early grades by encouraging coherent systems of improvement—rather than extending testing downward—so that early grade measures are aligned with instructional priorities and student support, as seen in initiatives such as Kentucky's United We Learn.

Research suggests that flexibility is essential for States to determine how best to measure growth in K-2 in their specific State contexts. Federal policy should support flexibility to allow States to choose their preferred growth measures such as alternative "leading indicators," interim measures, or State-approved benchmarks without mandating uniform assessments.

Informed Policymakers

7. What changes to NAEP or other Federal data collection efforts would support a national focus on student growth?

It is important to recognize NAEP's design limitations. NAEP is a sampling assessment and is not intended to produce student- or school-level growth measures. Attempting to calculate individual growth across grades would require substantial redesign and would introduce significant psychometric and comparability challenges. The greater national need is strengthened Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) capacity and related supports, rather than major changes to Federal data collection instruments.

Rather than pursuing student-level growth through NAEP, Federal efforts could emphasize trend analyses that examine shifts across performance levels between administrations, supporting richer discussions of State progress and the policies that contribute to improvement. National evaluations can complement this work by identifying cross-State priorities, scaling effective approaches, and disseminating actionable findings.

8. How have States most effectively used growth data to inform policy decisions?

States most commonly use growth data within ESSA accountability systems to guide support for low-performing schools, identify promising practices, and recognize schools demonstrating significant progress. Growth analyses have informed differentiated support strategies and highlighted schools "beating the odds," supporting more nuanced conversations about improvement beyond proficiency alone.

In practice, growth data is often used more operationally than at the highest State policy level. It is frequently applied at the district and school levels to help leaders identify where additional attention or resources are needed and what types of instructional supports may be most effective. Some States, such as Colorado and Massachusetts, have integrated growth measures more directly into broader policy conversations, but the most typical and impactful use remains directing improvement efforts—through targeted interventions, programmatic adjustments, and professional development—to strengthen student learning outcomes.

9. How can Federal policy incentivize States to focus on growth and remove barriers to innovation?

Because growth is already embedded in State accountability requirements, it remains a key incentive. Additional Federal incentives could accidentally create new compliance burdens. The most promising Federal role is enabling cross-State learning and implementation support, such as connecting "strong States" with "next best States," sharing practical implementation lessons, and reducing friction through support structures (such as a SLDS-style convening or technical assistance approach), rather than creating new incentive structures.

Thoughtful Federal support for research, data, evidence use, technical assistance, and communication can help States focus on growth in ways that are meaningful, responsible, and responsive to local needs.

Knowledge Alliance appreciates the opportunity to provide these comments and thanks Chair Cassidy for his leadership on understanding how to measure and understand student growth so we can continuously improve information for parents, teachers and decision makers and improve student outcomes. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to Rachel Dinkes rdinkes@knowledgeall.net.

Sincerely,

Rachel Dinkes
President and CEO
Knowledge Alliance