



Coalition urges Congress to strengthen data use

By [Frank Wolfe](#)

A broad coalition of civil rights groups urged Congress on March 26 to include strong provisions for disaggregated data use in the looming reauthorization of [NCLB](#).

"Making education decisions that affect all students without the benefit of fully disaggregated data ignores the unique needs of students of color," said Michael Wotorson, director of the [Campaign for High School Equity](#).

Founded in June to examine how the nation's secondary schools serve racial and ethnic minorities, the campaign's members include the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#), the [National Council of La Raza](#), the [National Indian Education Association](#), the [National Urban League](#), the [Southeast Asia Resource Action Center](#), the [Alliance for Excellent Education](#) and other groups.

The use of longitudinal, disaggregated data to measure student achievement is becoming critical in the design of sound policies at the federal, state and local levels. Such data's importance will only rise, given the push in March by Education Secretary Margaret Spellings for differentiated accountability measures for students who have fallen behind.

While the national [Data Quality Campaign](#) has recommended 10 elements as the start of a comprehensive P-12 longitudinal data system, only four states -- Arkansas, Delaware, Florida and Utah -- have put in place all 10 elements.

The elements include the ability to track students over time, student-level demographic and transcript information, and the ability to match teachers to students by classroom and subject.

Without strong data systems, Wotorson said, educators, parents, policymakers and advocates cannot know whether disadvantaged students are graduating from high school and at what rates.

In addition, assisting lagging students will continue to vex educators without such systems, Wotorson said. Schools need clear, consistent definitions of what characterizes English-language learners or former ELL students in order to make good instructional and accountability decisions, he said.

Innovation in Arkansas

Arkansas began trying to use disaggregated data in 1999 when U.S. Deputy Education Secretary Raymond Simon was the chief state school officer for Arkansas. While the state once ranked near the bottom of the nation in education quality, it is now in the top 10, said Charity Smith, the assistant commissioner of the public school accountability division for the [Arkansas Education Department](#).

The state has made significant gains in [Advanced Placement](#) performance, teacher quality and achievement standards, Smith said.

In using disaggregated data, state education officials noticed that some high schools did not offer AP classes, and secondary students did not take state examinations until December of their senior year. As a result of the information provided to policymakers, every secondary school in the state now includes AP classes, and next year, students will likely take ACT exams in grade 11, Smith said.

Arkansas is also moving toward making courses more rigorous for all -- a "one-track" curriculum -- and was one of the first states to require that students pass Algebra II to graduate.

By next year, the state is to institute a "smart core" curriculum to require rigorous coursework for each secondary student. Low-performing students will take the same rigorous classes as others but will have extended day and year opportunities to move toward proficiency and advanced standards, Smith said.

"Dumbed-down classes should be completely abolished," she said.