

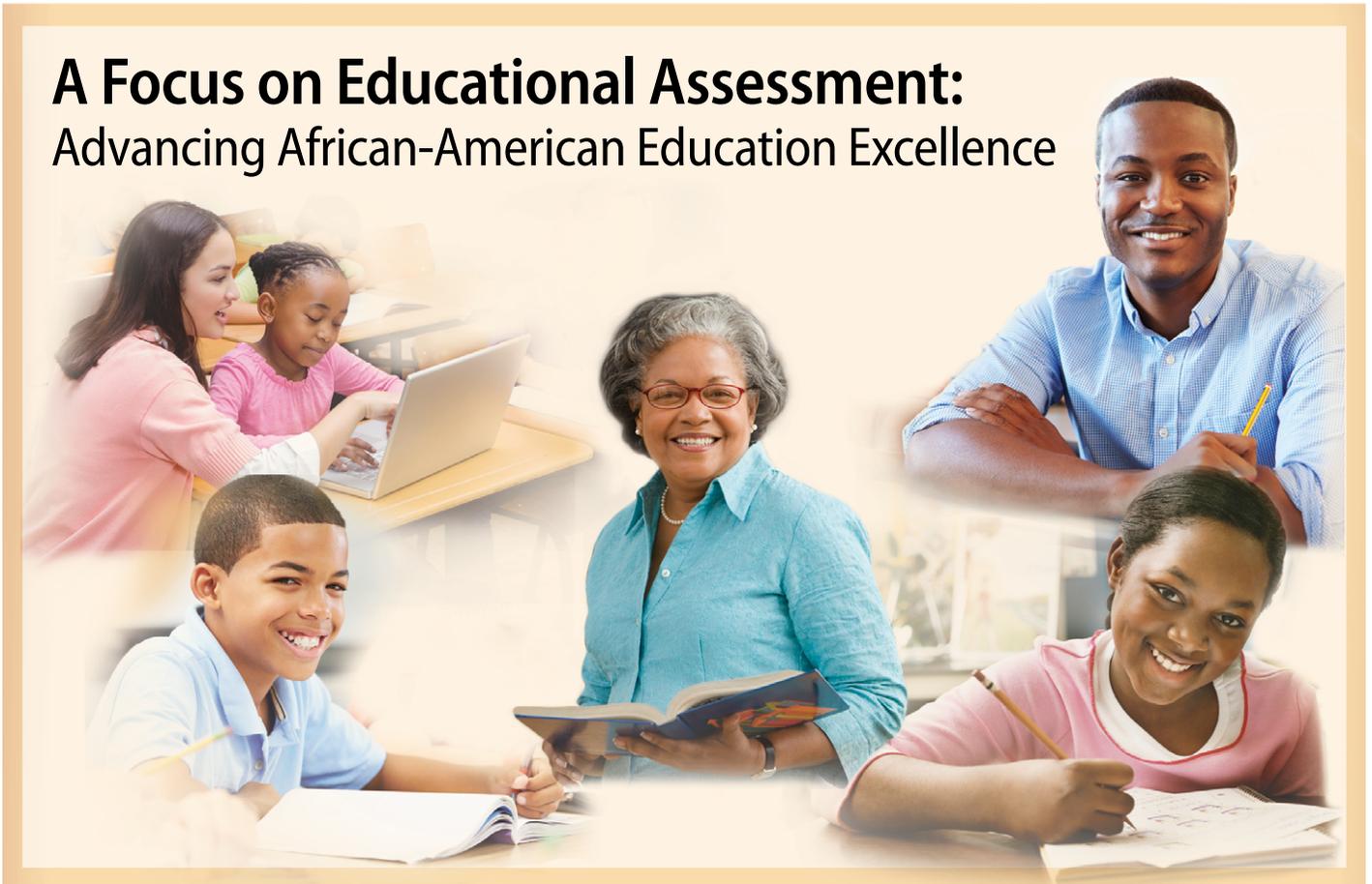
# POLICY NOTES

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## A Focus on Educational Assessment: Advancing African-American Education Excellence



### *In this Issue*

African-American students in the United States continue to face many educational challenges and experience persistent achievement gaps in academic performance. This conference brought together assessment developers and

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ETS, ACT®, the Center for Assessment, the College Board®, the Learning Policy Institute, and the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine co-convened the conference *A Focus on Educational Assessment: Advancing African-American Education Excellence* on April 3 and 4 at the Keck Center of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. More than 135 people from approximately 100 organizations — including universities, assessment organizations, policy institutes, nonprofit social service agencies, and national, state and local education organizations — participated in the conference.



Scott Marion of the Center for Assessment outlined key characteristics of high-quality assessments.

Research has consistently shown that among the major population groups of the United States, African Americans face the greatest educational assessment challenges, and continue to perform at lower rates on a variety of large-scale assessments. This conference explored how better assessments, policies and interventions can improve educational outcomes and African-American student achievement. Panel discussions focused on providing context and areas of opportunity for promoting African-American educational excellence, including building better and more equitable assessments in K–12 education, charting new directions on assessment in federal and state policies, and broadening the types and the scope of assessments for college admissions.

**Michael Nettles**, ETS Senior Vice President and Edmund W. Gordon Chair for Policy Evaluation and Research, initiated the organization of this conference to expand upon discussions he and other members of President Obama’s Advisory

Commission to the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans began on the role of assessment in promoting positive educational outcomes. This conference and these subsequent *Policy Notes* are an effort to launch an ongoing conversation and strategy forward to improve African-American educational excellence while focusing on educational assessment.

In her introduction to the conference, **Linda Darling-Hammond**, founder of the Learning Policy Institute, summed up the purpose of this conference by asserting that with “better assessments, better used,” we will improve education generally and support African-American educational excellence specifically.

## Making Better Assessments

The data on student performance and outcomes generated by assessments can inform policymakers who are shaping the future of education, teachers who are making curricular and instructional decisions, and parents who are guiding their children’s education.

**Scott Marion**, President and Executive Director of the Center for Assessment, presented a list of key characteristics of quality assessments. He asserted that the best assessments are:

- **ESSENTIAL** – represent the big ideas and skills of the domain
- **COMPLEX** – require students to engage with the content in deep and meaningful ways
- **AUTHENTIC** – are not contrived and represent real-world activities
- **EQUITABLE** – allow different groups of students to show what they know

- **INSTRUCTIONAL** – coherent with instruction and provide learning opportunities
- **RICH** – provide opportunities to develop extensions beyond the assessment
- **ENGAGING** – feature thought-provoking and interesting problems
- **ACTIVE** – allow students to construct meaning with other people and/or resources
- **ACCESSIBLE** – allow students of differing ability levels to work productively on the task
- **FEASIBLE** – can be completed within bounds of time and cost, are locally appropriate

Newer assessments on digital platforms provide process data that can offer insight into student performance and task approaches — that is, student interactions with the test result in digital trails that reveal students’ testing and even thinking processes. One example provided by **Peggy Carr**, Acting Commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), is the 2016 eighth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing pilot, which found that there are two types of fluent writers. Both groups started writing quickly and fluently, and produced text with little hesitation. However, one group completed extensive revisions toward the end of the assessment, while the other group did very little editing.

Quality assessment can change behaviors, and educators can use it to teach and encourage development to meet standards. **Randy Bennett**, ETS’s Norman O. Frederiksen Chair in Assessment Innovation, discussed how assessments done well can improve teaching and learning, as the Cognitively Based Assessment of, for and as Learning (CBAL®) research initiative at



Edmund Gordon, honored conference guest, Linda Darling-Hammond of the Learning Policy Institute and Randy Bennett of ETS, sharing conversation during the conference.

ETS shows. Well-constructed formative and summative assessments can be seen as academic interventions, which promote student growth and achievement. While summative assessments measure a student’s general standing with respect to a given area of learning, formative assessment materials scaffold students in relatively small steps through learning progressions, and give students practice intended to facilitate the transition between levels in a progression.

Panelists and conference participants consistently affirmed that deeper learning matters, and that assessments should tap into deeper-learning and higher-order thinking tasks. Darling-Hammond emphasized the need to make more “educative assessments” — assessments that promote teaching and learning and ensure that assessment is authentic — in which completing the assessment questions becomes a growth opportunity. According to a 2012 RAND study, current state assessments are typically not strong in providing test items that cover deeper learning. These



Victor Powell of Alexandra City Public Schools and Stephanie Wood-Garnett of ISA listening intently during conference proceedings.

researchers found that only 3–10 percent of U.S. elementary and secondary students were assessed on selected deeper-learning skills through state mathematics and English-language assessments. However, the newer state assessments, including those developed as part of PARCC and Smarter Balanced, are beginning to change this. Overall, developments in the assessment innovation landscape are promising, with increasing use of performance-based tasks and projects.<sup>1</sup>

Assessments aimed at providing instructional utility and teacher feedback are especially promising. Marion suggested that the field consider movement from individual assessments to system assessments to improve instructional utility. Suggested innovative actions include providing curricular supports as part of the assessment systems, improving units of study with replacement unit material, and connecting assessment results to curriculum and learning materials. **Scott Norton**, Deputy Executive Director

of Programs for the Council of Chief State School Officers, discussed Indiana as a promising example: the state is systematically using assessment data to improve teaching. While this practice is currently underutilized, education leaders and policymakers should consider how to build this skill into policy and teacher professional development.

The implications of better assessments for African-American students is that the assessments would be better indicators of what students know and can do at all ability levels. They would better detect performance gaps when they exist; be more authentic, engaging and accessible; and provide more diagnostic data to help teachers understand where learning support is needed.

## Assessments for College Admissions

Panelists discussed the need to diversify how we assess college readiness and how new assessments can do that. **David Wilson**, President of Morgan State University, provided contextual examples of how current college admissions assessments may not capture students' academic capabilities. Academic, school, noncognitive and demographic factors are related to both SAT® and ACT® performance. However, the relative importance of socioeconomic status and other demographic characteristics may be small when accounting for other factors. Researchers found that socioeconomic status and other demographic characteristics — including parent's education level, race/ethnicity and gender — accounted for only 4 percent or less of the variance in ACT scores after taking into account high school coursework and grades, school characteristics, and other noncognitive student characteristics.<sup>2</sup>

**Neal Schmitt**, Emeritus Professor of Psychology and Management at Michigan State University, described the 12 dimensions of student performance uncovered by prior research, noting that only three of these are categorized as intellectual dimensions; the remaining are interpersonal and intrapersonal. Thus, the importance of noncognitive factors in student success is clear.

## 12 Dimensions of Student Performance

### Intellectual

1. Knowledge and matters of general principles
2. Continuous learning, intellectual interest and curiosity
3. Artistic and cultural appreciation

### Interpersonal

4. Appreciation for diversity
5. Leadership
6. Interpersonal skills

### Intrapersonal

7. Social responsibility and citizenship
8. Physical and psychological health
9. Career orientation
10. Adaptability and life skills
11. Perseverance
12. Ethics and integrity

In his work to develop alternative measures of student performance, Schmitt has shown that there are two noncognitive measures that have been proven to be predictive of student performance potential:

- **Situational judgment inventory**, in which a situation is presented along with several alternative courses of action. Respondents



Broadening the Types and the Scope of Assessments for College Admissions panel participants included Neal Schmitt of Michigan State University, Greg Perfetto of College Board, David Wilson of Morgan State University, and chair Tom Rudin of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

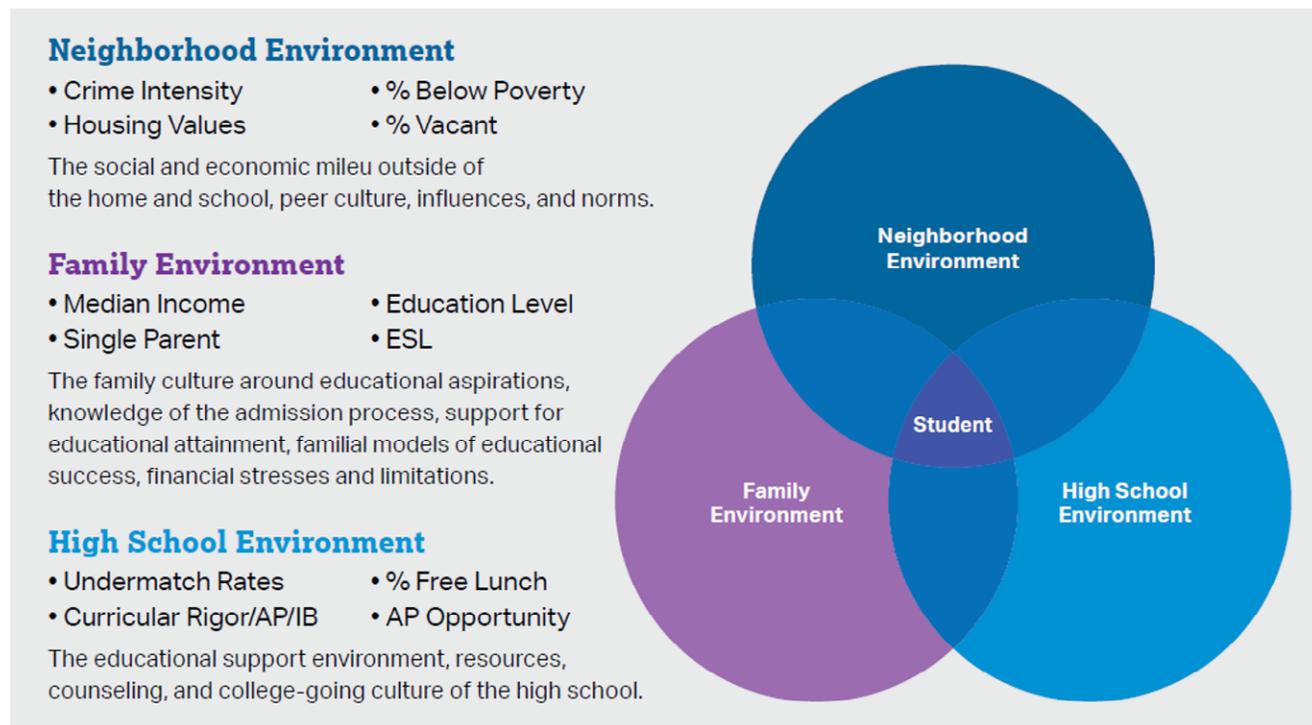
are asked to indicate what they would be most likely and least likely to do.

- **Biodata**, which is made up of short, multiple-choice reports of experience/background and interests/preferences.

Subgroup differences on these measures are markedly lower than ACT and/or SAT scores or high school GPA. Thus, incorporating biodata and the situational judgment inventory into the admissions battery would increase the proportion of African-American student admissions.

According to **Tom Rudin**, Director of the Board on Higher Education and the Workforce at the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, it is important for college admissions officers to look beyond individual attributes and accomplishment and consider the opportunities and obstacles students experience in the context of their communities, schools and homes. As a society, we need assurance that all assessments have contextual elements for providing equity and quality in education. Honored guest and conference participant **Edmund W. Gordon**,

## A Conceptual Model of Environmental Context with Data Alignment



Source: Perfetto, G. (2017). Conference presentation *Broadening the Types and Scopes of Assessments for College Admissions*.

Professor Emeritus, Yale University and Teachers College, called for the “cultivation and measurement of availability” in educational opportunity. The College Board is beginning to provide this with their “adversity index,” thus developing a systematic way to gauge and appreciate the contexts in which students live.

**Greg Perfetto**, College Board Executive Research Scientist, reviewed the conceptual model of student environmental context and discussed the development of an educational context dashboard, which includes an adversity index. Expected to become publicly available in Fall 2018, the contextual dashboard gives college admissions officers information to better understand applicants’ environmental context, including opportunities, obstacles and resources.

## Improved Use of Assessments

In a 2015 student poll by Gallup®, only 50 percent of students reported being engaged in their schooling.<sup>3</sup> **Stephanie Wood-Garnett**, current President of the Institute of Student Achievement (ISA) at ETS, asserted that this constitutes a crisis in student school engagement, which disproportionately affects low-income and minority students. To change this, the narrative around school must change for students and their parents. Wood-Garnett suggested that to facilitate such a change, we need to acknowledge that far too often assessments have been used punitively, especially for low-income and minority students. Consequences range from the cancellation of art curriculum to entire schools being labeled as failures. According to

Darling-Hammond, we must “use assessment to expand opportunities for learning rather than shut them down, to support useful tracking not to inspire a ‘kill and drill’ curriculum. To include rather than exclude by supporting learning opportunities and fighting for access for African-American students.”

**Wayne Camara**, ACT Senior Vice President of Research, emphasized the importance of examining the effects and backlash caused by the misuse of high-stakes assessments. Bennett’s recent report on the opt-out movement, in which large numbers of parents are refusing to allow their children to sit for standardized tests, highlights some of these concerns. Opt-out is “an issue that appears to be as much about test use as about tests themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

Assessments must be fair, valid and culturally appropriate. College Board Executive Research Scientist **Michael Walker** suggested that to equalize performance, assessment developers must skip content areas whenever subgroups differ in preparation; choose only easy questions that most examinees would answer correctly; choose only hard questions that most examinees would get wrong; and remove all questions that look culturally biased. Additionally, the adoption of technology in assessment has to be watched carefully because differential exposure to technology may lead to greater performance gaps.

## Policy Context and Constraints

In order to make measureable progress in closing performance and score gaps for African Americans, panelists and conference participants agreed that not only must assessment development and use be considered, but key societal factors



Linda Darling-Hammond, Michael Nettles of ETS, Stephanie Wood-Garnett and Lillian Lowery of The Education Trust took part in the Toward Better Equity and Assessments for U.S. K–12 Education Systems panel discussion.

that may be at the root of population gaps in this country must also be addressed. This includes disproportionate levels of poverty, a rise in racial and socioeconomic school segregation, unequal distribution of high-quality teachers, and the school-to-prison pipeline — evidence of which, according to former President and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights **Wade Henderson**, can be seen as early as preschool in the excessive expulsion of African-American boys.

## Achievement Gaps

**Lillian Lowery**, Vice President, P–12, The Education Trust, reminded conference participants that cumulative data can mask the achievement gap between student subgroups, which speaks to the need to disaggregate data from large-scale assessments. Current national large-scale assessments are designed to provide useful information about African-American



Michael Nettles and Gerry House, formerly of ISA, with jazz trombonist and member of the African Diaspora Consortium, Delfeayo Marsalis.

students and other subgroups, in addition to providing data on the larger population.

**Peggy Carr**, Acting Commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), discussed the value of the NCES K–12 longitudinal assessments such as NAEP in providing context for policy decisions. The data does not provide answers to why and how to improve, but does provide a comprehensive view of student achievement, including persistent achievement gaps in performance based on race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

Carr described how achievement gaps can be divided into three pieces: 1) between-school differences attributed to differential achievement between schools; 2) within-school differences attributed to differential achievement within schools; and 3) indeterminate differences that cannot be clearly attributed to either between-school or within-school differential achievement. NCES analysis shows that the portion of the gaps explained by within-school differences are larger than between-school differences. Notably, recent analyses of the NAEP data showed gendered differences in the impact on test scores of attending high racial density schools. There is a significant drop in eighth-grade NAEP Math scores for African-American boys in majority African-American schools that is not paralleled by African-American girls. Conversely, it appears that White male students in majority African-American schools perform better than expected.

While NAEP scores show that the Black-White achievement gap persists, there has been some narrowing of the gaps over the last several decades, and overall scores have tended to improve for all major subgroups. **Stephen Lazer**, CEO of Questar®, discussed how the use of proficiency cut scores leads to the appearance of measured increases in the achievement gap. For instance between 2000 and 2009, the Black-White NAEP score gap decreased, while the average fourth-grade mathematics scores for both African-American and White students increased substantially. The average 2009 score for White students fell above the proficiency level cut point, while the average score for African-American students was at the basic achievement level. So the achievement gap as defined by proficiency actually increased, while the achievement gap as defined by the raw score decreased.



Investing in Education Interventions to Improve Student Learning and Performance panel: Pictured are Patrick Manning, Ernest Morrell and Kassie Freeman of the African Diaspora Consortium; Joseph Olchefske of Springboard Education; Gerry House (center), Greg Budzban and Bill Crombie of The Algebra Project; panel chair James Comer of the Yale University Child Study Center; and Michael Nettles.

Lazer also cautioned that context and perspective matter when interpreting large-scale assessment results, and achievement gaps presented in national averages cover an often wide range of local conditions that warrant further exploration. For example, the Black-White NAEP score gap could range from 57 points in one location to 6 points in another.

## Strategic Interventions

Throughout the conference, panelists and conference participants placed emphasis on the need to make investments in educational improvements aimed at addressing structural and cultural inequalities. **James Comer**, Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at Yale University Child Study Center, chaired a conference panel focused on strategic interventions designed to improve student learning and performance. He stressed that to help close the achievement gap we must create a school culture that reinforces that all students can learn and be successful.

Intervention suggestions included advocating for developmentally supportive schools, quality

after-school programs, strong curricula and teaching, evidence-based whole-school reforms and culturally connected curricula. **Joseph Olchefske**, CEO, Springboard Education, discussed the role of quality after-school programming focused on closing the supplemental education gap. The Springboard after-school program model employs licensed teachers, provides academic support, and has activities that grow self-esteem and socio-emotional skills/resilience, and reduce risky behavior.

**Bill Crombie**, National Director of Professional Development for the Algebra Project, and **Greg Budzban**, Mathematics Professor at Southern Illinois University, discussed the Algebra Project's efforts to develop the skills of students scoring in the bottom quartile of mathematics. The program's unique pedagogical approaches help students in the lowest quartile transition from algebra to calculus, thereby improving college readiness.

**Kassie Freeman**, founding President and CEO of the African Diaspora Consortium and Senior Faculty Fellow at the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Teachers College, Columbia University; **Patrick Manning**, Andrew W. Mellon



Freeman Hrabowski, of the University of Maryland – Baltimore County, gave the keynote address at the conference.



Wade Henderson of The Leadership Conference, James Comer, and ETS's Walt MacDonald and Michael Nettles during *A Focus on Educational Assessment: Advancing African-American Education Excellence*.

Professor of World History, Emeritus, at the University of Pittsburgh; and **Ernest Morrell**, Macy Professor of Education and Director of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, discussed

the role of culturally inclusive curriculum in promoting student achievement and engagement through the lens of the African Diaspora Advanced Placement® (AP®) course they are currently developing. The new course aims to improve students' cultural connections, understanding of global history and sense of identification, with the hopes of increasing AP course participation and academic achievement, especially among African-American students.

**Gerry House**, formerly of the ISA at ETS, highlighted the ISA's evidence-based efforts to reinvent high schools so that underserved students graduate ready for college and career. The whole-school reform approach used by ISA has been shown to be effective for increasing the achievement of high-need students in general, and African-American male students in particular. Throughout the conference, other possible interventions were discussed, including universal early childhood education and college summer bridge programs.

## Recommendations and Next Steps

Henderson helped end the conference by asserting that we need to work to "make America as good as its ideals." This requires that we, as advocates and leaders in education, take responsibility for promoting equity and excellence in education. In his keynote address, **Freeman Hrabowski**, President of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, underscored the need for both local and national leadership in addressing the challenges African-American students face. Conference participants and panelists discussed the need to make sure that we, as a society, work to tear down institutional barriers as well as ensure resource equity.



Peggy Carr of NCES, Steve Lazer of Questar, Michael Walker of College Board and Wayne Camara of ACT participated in the Measuring and Interpreting Achievement Gaps in K–12 Large-scale Assessments panel discussion chaired by Stephanie Wood-Garnett.

Henderson asserted that if we are serious about addressing the broader issues, we must be organized to make it happen. He encouraged us to acknowledge that addressing structural issues and working to ameliorate serious problems in society are big responsibilities and require coordinated efforts. “There is power in a coalition,” he declared. “We must work within an alliance — no one entity can do this, we need continued collaboration for this.”

Following this call for continued collaboration, panelists and conference participants discussed recommendations and next steps. This included a plan to develop a cross-organization agenda of actions toward improving the education and assessment performance of African-American students, which will begin with a publically signed statement of agreement between the conference co-sponsors. The statement will provide a unified vision on how to promote educational equity and performance through quality assessments, while supporting the development of strategic interventions for African-American students. Assessment-focused

suggestions included increased investment in formative assessments as well as in open-ended and task-based assessments, which measure higher-order thinking and understanding, and the development of assessments that expand the tools for decision making. Suggested new assessment tools should measure dimensions beyond students’ content knowledge and problem-solving, such as social-emotional/noncognitive skills and contextual adversity, which includes attributes of disadvantage or neighborhood, family and school environmental data associated with educational outcome challenges.<sup>5</sup>



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education policy experts to discuss how assessments can be better leveraged to support African-American educational excellence.

Panelists and conference participants concluded that assessments must be culturally appropriate and provide clear and timely feedback for improvement and action. The punitive use of assessments should be addressed, and a future where assessments play a primary role in growth and development actualized. Panelists called for increased investment in formative assessments as well as open-ended and task-based assessments, which measure higher-order thinking and understanding. Moreover, assessments that expand the tools for decision making by measuring dimensions beyond students' content knowledge and problem-solving, such as noncognitive skills and contextual adversity, warrant further investment.

The conference ended with a plan to develop a cross-organization agenda of actions toward improving the education and assessment performance of African-American students, which will begin with a publically signed statement of agreement between the conference co-sponsors. This statement will detail how to promote educational equity and performance through quality assessments, while supporting the development of strategic interventions for African-American students.

## Endnotes

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