THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
INTERSECTIONS
How should schools measure student success?
Wednesday, May 23, 2018

PARTICIPANTS:

ADRIANNA PITA
Office of Communications
Host

LAUREN BAUER
Fellow, Economic Studies, The Hamilton Project
The Brookings Institution

ANNE WICKS
Director, Education Reform
George W. Bush Institute

(MUSIC)

PITA: Hello, and welcome to Intersections. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita. In today's episode, we're going to be talking about some questions, education standards and school and state accountability as set up under the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act. With us today to help us with that is Lauren Bauer, who's a post-doc Fellow in Economic Studies and the Hamilton Project here at Brookings and Anne Wicks who's the Director of Education Reform at the George W. Bush Institute. Anne and Lauren, thank you for being here.

WICKS: Thank you.

BAUER: Thanks for having us.

PITA: So in 2015, of course, the Every Student Succeeds Act was set up as basically to help restructure some of what No Child Left Behind started, and one of the things that it did was require that states have, in addition to their test-based reading and math metrics in graduation rates, at least one other measure of school quality, our students' success in the hope that broadening the scope of education requirements would help improve school quality and student achievement, both for our understanding of education achievement, but also in terms of student outcomes.

So I'm going to ask you both to help our listeners today start out with a discussion of what some of these additional accountability measures are under ESSA and then later on we're going to go into the spotlight of your two particular issues. You've looked at chronic absenteeism issues and issues of college and career readiness. But to start us off, can you talk to us a little bit about why they wanted to add measures of accountability and how ESSA has improved on some of the No Child Left Behind goals and measures of attainment. Would either of you like to start?

BAUER: So I think it's important to take a step back and think about what accountability is trying to accomplish more broadly and what necessitated this change to broadening the measures. So accountability generally directs a school to improve on measures to which stakes are attached. So under No Child Left Behind obviously the most prominent example is we wanted schools to improve in reading and math proficiency among their students, and so what did we find? The best paper on this is by Tom Dee and Brian Jacob and what they found is that

No Child Left Behind induced a quarter of a standard deviation increase in math achievement by 2007, which is a big gain, but what do we lose when that's the only thing that we're targeting.

And so what we also learned from No Child Left Behind is that emphasis in other key areas, others we think is really important for schools to be focusing on like social studies and science decline and schools were, you know, changing the way they allocated time, so there was less time being spent in recess and in gym time, that kind of stuff. And so under reauthorization, the idea was reading, math is still centrally important, but we want to give states the opportunity to decide what other things are really important for school quality, and so that's where this school quality and student success measure came in. It gave states the opportunity to say, "This is what I also value and this is what I want schools to be focusing on because that's what high-stakes accountability does. It focuses your attention on things that are important to make improvements."

WICKS: That's a great overview. The way we think about it, which I'm sure doesn't surprise you, given where I work, President Bush obviously was the chief architect of No Child Left Behind working with some Democratic partners, obviously the late Senator Ted Kennedy and then also George Miller and John Boehner in the House, really pushed forward a chance to understand truly how well all kids were being served, and we all remember President Bush's memorable phrase, "The soft bigotry of low expectations" which really described this phenomenon of setting different expectations for certain groups of kids.

So the way we think about No Child Left Behind is that it is as much a Civil Rights piece of legislation as anything else, and the way we define accountability at the Bush Institute has sort of three simple elements: You set high standards for what you think kids should know and understand and learn and be prepared to do, you measure against those standards, and you use that data then to design the sort of right interventions and supports to help all kids succeed. Sometimes there's consequences. Those supports tend to be consequences often for the adults in the system, but not always. Accountability in and of itself, as you said, helps people focus very clearly on what matters most.

So when we think about the changes under ESSA, it's important from the Bush Institute perspective that we don't lose that focus on reading and math. We think that's really critical no matter what kids end up doing over the long-term. They're going to need to read, to write, to do math to solve problems, we all know that. But I think what we're curious about from the Bush Institute's perspective is what else can we learn that helps inform how children learn and what's meaningful to measure over their long-term success which is what gets into some of these student success and school quality measures that are new, and not a lot has been research proved, right?

We know there's a lot of experimentation which is some of the upside of ESSA, is that states get to experiment a little bit, but we're also as equally focused on making sure that states follow through on these plans that are measuring meaningful things, the measures aren't meaningful and we don't end up with another set of distractions that take people away from the core academic preparation that we think is so vital.

PITA: In terms of setting out these measures in a way that makes sense, can you talk a little bit structurally what that means? The states have to submit plans for the Department of Education to say, "All right, well, here's our idea of what we're going to measure." Do the Department push back at all if they ever said, "Oh, you know, that's too vague or that's too easy, or like that's a good idea, but you can't sufficiently quantify that to measure it?" Do they help them build these that they would be meaningful, or how did that work?

BAUER: I think that there was not as much pushback as one would expect based on the way that the law is written, and so, you know, in order for a school quality and student success metric to qualify, it's supposed to be valid, reliable, and comparable. That means that it has structural integrity in and of itself, like if you see it, you know it, right? It's reliable in that how you measure it is consistent and so the way you measure in one school has to be the exact way that you can measure it in another school.

And comparable meaning that you can fairly compare schools against each other along it, and it's my feeling that some of the surveys that passed, like the school quality surveys, which are incredibly important tools for school leadership to use to improve their school climate and culture don't qualify under the valid, reliable, and comparable metric, and so when we at the Hamilton Project, I, Dianne Johsoback and Megan Mumford wrote this paper that said, "Here's What You Should Do," we specifically said do not use these surveys because we don't think that they qualify anything.

Some states still chose to and those plans have been approved by the Department of Education, so I don't think that there was a sufficient feedback as I was hoping to see on some of these metrics, and we'll see how that plays out in schools and states because if they're using them, we're going to find out a lot of information about it.

WICKS: Absolutely. We'll learn a lot, and I think it's really interesting the Department was very clearly there should not be a strong federal role; this is really up to the states, and so I think we saw that come through in some of the feedback on the plans. The part that I think makes a lot of us nervous, the nerdy wonky types, Lauren and I (laughter) I'm including in that bucket and our colleagues --

BAUER: I'm wearing my glasses.

WICKS: Yes. And our colleagues that the plans were generally underwhelming. There are some bright spots --

BAUER: That's right.

WICKS: -- but they were underwhelming. There's a lot of questions, right, like, are states going to actually step forward and do what we hope they'll do, take advantage of this moment to craft a vision of, "You know what, here's what matters in our state; here's what the vision we have for what all of the kids in our state need to know to learn to understand in order for us to be successful, to have economic vitality, all those things that will matter over the next 20 to 30 years."

There were a couple of states that crafted a vision like that. New Mexico comes to mind, and did that, but there were many states who left a lot unsaid or TBD or a little fuzzy, using measures like Lauren was talking about, the surveys that don't have a lot of research reliability, and not that they're not potentially a useful tool to a principal, but they wouldn't be what you'd hang your accountability hat on, like we are going to make decisions based on this data in a broad sense as opposed to, "Here's how I'm going to operate day-to-day in my school based on this survey data."

PITA: Okay. And how many states went for sort of the minimum, maybe one, maybe two others, versus how many really went for it, as you said, to create a broader vision and come up with multiple other measures; do we have any notion of that?

BAUER: So I would think about it a little differently. It's not so much the minimum; it's are you doing something that's sensible and transparent.

PITA: Okay, (inaudible).

BAUER: So I'm focused very much on chronic absenteeism because I think it's the most valuable additional thing that elementary schools can be working on, middle schools, too. For high schools, it's chronic absenteeism plus these college and career readiness things that Anne is going to be talking about. And so for a state to say, we're going to do student achievement in math and reading, growth in student achievement for elementary schools, graduation rates for high schools, increasing English language proficiency among English language learners which is a new requirement under ESSA, and chronic absenteeism. To me, that is ambitious --

PITA: Mm-hmm.

BAUER: -- it is sensible, and it's transparent to schools, districts, state leaders, and anyone else who's watching. And so if that was what you did, then that is a good thing. I think the harder thing is actually a state like, could say Kentucky, which has chosen between 17 and 19 additional school quality and student assessment (inaudible) where, you know, one of the things we learned from No Child Left Behind is these things have to be motivating, and if each individual little thing is going to count for very, very little and how we calculate a school somewhat of a rating, then they may not work on any of them and they'll just roll the dice and say, you know, "I have no idea how my schools can perform on these 17 different metrics." We'll find out and we're not going to work on chronic absenteeism because it only counts for two percent, you know, so I think there's different ways to think about it. Anne, do you have --

WICKS: No, I absolutely agree, more is not more. Fewer better is actually the best, right, so what Lauren just described is exactly right. When I read plans like Kentucky's, I feel badly for the leaders, the superintendents, the school principals, the people who are actually charged with implementing that because where do you make decisions, so the state is not really helping their own educators in terms of making the right kind of decisions to support their kids. They're like, throw it up in the air, maybe pick whatever lands first, and hope for the best, but it's not allowing for really thoughtful decisions which are not easy. They're never easy to figure out exactly where to focus, but they're not helping the people who actually are on the frontlines in schools with kids every day working to make sure kids can be successful.

PITA: One other sort of wonky process question to ask right before we got into the meat of your particular areas was that question about when the schools are trying to figure out what works. Lauren, I really liked in your paper, you laid out these six principles for how schools and states should be looking at their measures, and obviously you were tying it back to your chronic absenteeism work, but they were principles that work across the measures, and one of them

was -- I think I'm sort of pushing two of them together in a way -- it's about that tension between giving school districts and states the flexibility that if one of their measures- maybe they decide it wasn't crafted quite right and they want to be able to adjust it, giving them that flexibility, but also not letting them -- I don't know if it's a question of changing it too easily, but making adjustments to then make it look like they're having an achievement, but they haven't actually are making progress. Can you talk a little bit about that tension between flexibility and gaming the system?

BAUER: Yeah, so this is, if you read our strategy paper, starting with Goal Number 3, which is called, "Beware, Gold Posts Can be Moved". So indicators that can be changed over time by moving the passing threshold or altering how outcomes are measured or introducing or replacing measures obscure true gains and losses. So under NCLB, we found that states did find ways to lower standards for kids by making tests easier, or making tests shorter, or doing this, and so it's still a problem with ESSA, right? This is sort of a fundamental thing. People can add, swap, drop, or change measures annually and change the definitions, too.

So I think the thing that we're worried most about with these school quality and students success measures is two-fold. One is that because it sort of came out of kind of nowhere, some states are still piloting things that they might want to include later, and so we're not going to have in every state the exact same measures over time, for not a terrible reason, but not the greatest reason. They're still working out the kinks in the system and we want them to be using things that are valid, reliable, and comparable, and that perhaps they have low-stakes baseline data, too, so that they can use that low-stakes data to make sure that some of these gaming things aren't happening when you attach the stakes to them.

WICKS: Lauren, talk a little bit about low stakes data (inaudible) (laughter). That's a really important piece for people to get that's a little wonky.

BAUER: This is one of the reasons why we thought chronic absenteeism was the best of the school quality and (inaudible) indicators is that when you collect data under low stakes, meaning for attendance, you're collecting data because you need to know who's in school for lots of reasons, including some sort of medium things like funding formulas, but you also just need to know who's in school every day. And so there are no stakes attached to that data for years and years, and you've been collecting attendance data since the 1880s.

So we sort of have the sense that for a long time we are just collecting these data, but when that attendance data switches to being high stakes, meaning that schools are being held accountable for how high or low that number is, that's when the gaming incentives start, and so if you have a baseline of low-stakes data where there was no gaming necessary, you just were collecting a number, when you compare it to the high stakes, you can sort of troubleshoot, you can identify outliers, you can focus attention and it just gives you a way of seeing if these new high-stakes data are real or not.

So the problem with attendance, though, is that chronic absenteeism is when students are absent for 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason, and that's an important part of the definition because if you're not in school whether you're sick, whether you're on vacation, whether you're truant, you're just not in school, and so you're not learning what's being taught, and states did a really nice job of those that's left a chronic absenteeism in sticking to that. It doesn't matter why.

But we're already starting to see, in some states, some fiddling at the legislative level of what chronic absenteeism means, so in a state like New Jersey, they're already saying, "Well, now we think these kind of absences aren't going to count, and actually we're going to leave to the state commissioner of education the ability to change any rule to make an (laughter) absence not count anymore." And so that's a real problem because you're lowering the threshold for schools out of the back.

WICKS: And it totally misses the point of chronic absenteeism (laughter) which is -- I mean, we could have that same argument about testing, right? At the end of the day, it's important to measure whether people are getting what you want them to get, right? So like we do this in medicine, for example, if you're -- like it's not a testing in itself. I feel like it's become like this weird, horrible thing that floats out there and scares people. It's like the boogie man.

And actually, assessment is just a part of learning. Right? It's a part of learning in any setting. Chronic absenteeism is, you can't learn if you're not in school for whatever reason, as you said, and I think what is frustrating is we're watching states try to implement this as that disconnect happens so quickly if someone's trying to game an absence. Right?

BAUER: Mm-hmm.

WICKS: That the kids are who suffer. Right? Like so all that is, adults sort of making some adult decisions, and kids ultimately are the ones who are suffering and that's the part that I think it's so important, that having folks pay attention to how these plans are being implemented. That's like why people care, why we're paying to attention to see where these decisions are being made that ultimately don't serve kids, the whole point of why we all do this work.

PITA: On the question of gaming and holding, whether it's schools or states, accountable for whether they're gaming the system, where does that responsibility lie? Are states supposed to be monitoring their school districts and correcting if they see gaming going on in particular districts? Is, again, the federal Department of Education supposed to be monitoring states and do they have any weigh-in in going, "Guys, we can tell what you're doing; don't do that. You're not helping your kids by doing this." Who's job is that; where does that lie?

WICKS: Yes. (laughter) Right?

PITA: Everybody.

WICKS: Everybody. Everybody. I mean, Lauren, you can probably speak to more of the specifics of how this is happening, but, yes, that's how this is supposed to work. The federal department is paying attention to what's happening in the states, the states using their data to pay attention to what's happening in schools and districts, superintendents paying attention to the data that shows what's happening across their schools. Right? There's a -- there should be a flow along the way, but I think it's less clear this time around, and, Lauren, you should add to this, what sort of consequences will happen with when things derail. I think that's where we have a lot less clarity.

BAUER: I think that's an incredible open question that we're going to learn a lot more about as sort of the first round of summative ratings come in and we're starting to identify the lowest performing schools, and, you know, whether people feel comfortable with how that identification happened based on whether the measurement was fair --

WICKS: Yes.

BAUER: -- but we're going to find out. (laughter) We don't know yet. We're still in the sort of very first stages of -- you know, not even every state's plan has been approved yet, so we're in the -- still in the development approval setting-up implementation piece, and we're using the lessons of No Child Left Behind to sort of set markers as to where we're going to be looking for things, and I think that's one of the most valuable things as a researcher from the evidence of No Child Left Behind is being able to outline where we think this is going to go and help practitioners identify places, especially those who are really interested in doing this right, where problems might arise and how to deal with them.

PITA: Oh, since we already started talking about the chronic absenteeism issue, Lauren, why don't we take this opportunity to have you dive in and give us a little picture about what this looks like. You used the 10-percent number. I think in your paper you talked about the being in the equivalent basically for three weeks.

BAUER: Right. It's about three weeks of school. So chronic absenteeism is really important. When students are absent from school, they're not learning what's being taught. It's disruptive to the teacher; it's disruptive to the students in their classroom that have better attendance because, you know, teachers are spending their time remediating. They may hold lessons until more students are present. It's a problem for everyone in terms of learning.

And we see this in the evidence, and we find it in our paper room with the research that we do that students who are chronically absent tend to remain chronically absent. Schools that have a chronic absenteeism problem tend to continue to have a chronic absenteeism problem. It's haunting. Surprising to people, Kindergarten students actually have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism among elementary school students up through 12th grade when you sort of intersect with this truancy dropout issue, and students who are chronically absent in Kindergarten are less likely to be proficient in reading and math in third grade. Students with a chronic absenteeism problem are much more likely to drop out of high school, and so there are really deep consequences and it's really predictive of the things that we care about centrally, reading and math achievement and graduation rates.

And so yesterday, the Department of Education released the next wave, the 2015-16 Civil Rights Data Collection, which is the only national survey to determine how many (inaudible) gaps in students there are in the United States. In 2015-16, more than 58 percent of schools had a chronic absenteeism rate above 10 percent. That's really bad.

WICKS: Enormous.

BAUER: It's an enormous problem for schools, and when we're trying to improve achievement and improve graduation rates, if students aren't in school, it's really hard to do that. And so what we're asking people to do, is to focus on things that are friends. So if you're improving attendance, you're going to improve achievement, and we have evidence of that. If you're improving attendance, you're going to improve graduation rates, and so why not draw attention to that using high-stakes accountability to have schools focus on improving their students' attendance, and that's what we are hoping people do.

PITA: Sure. What are some of the interventions that you've seen that have showed some promise?

BAUER: Yeah, so there are a lot of interventions that work. The approach that attendance works which is the real sort of nonprofit leader in this space suggests is this three-tiered approach to intervention, and so Tier 1 approach is, are things that sort of everyone can do pretty easily and universally, and this is things like, you know, texting parents about attendance or when their kid is absent or checking in if their kid is sick or not or why they're not there, or sending mailings home to parents, just letting them know sort of how their kid is doing on attendance and what matters, so we have some new experimental evidence from a texting program done in Pittsburgh by Ken Smythe-Leistico and Lindsay Page.

They found that they halved Kindergarten chronic absenteeism by having just an administrator at school texting parents when their students were absent, and Todd Rogers at Harvard has actually spun-off a company called "In School Today" where they send these mailings and he reduced chronic absenteeism by 11 percent, and (inaudible) their most impressive study.

And then Tier 2 interventions are sort of more intensive for students with higher need, and this is where we see things more like mentors or additional adults who are truly focused on students' attendance, building relationships with students and their parents, and sort of in a variety of experimental and nonexperimental settings, we're seeing that success mentors and the Check & Connect Program out of Chicago are doing a nice job in reducing chronic absenteeism among kids and also it's improving their achievement as well, right, all of these things are connected.

And Tier 3 strategies are for truly chronically absent students. This is when you sort of get other social service agencies involved; you may have to get the justice system involved. But there are other things that schools have routines for. Like, I was talking to my sister yesterday. My sister was a chronically absent student. She has a disease that did not allow her to be in school, and, you know, the school kind counselor had a system for students like that.

So for students who are quite sick who cannot come to school, there are programs in place for them, and, you know, as long as you're learning in school and there are a variety of ways in which they check up on that. I would bring her homework in for her to school, like there are Tier 3 strategies that a lot of schools have in place that are working for kids who have severe and notable issues, but it's these Tier 1 and Tier 2 strategies where you're just trying to get everyone to do a little bit better that I think are where we're seeing the most push now.

PITA: Great. Anne, I'd like to bring you in at this point to talk about the measure that you were looking at which is the question of college and career writing that was just kind of -- I thought it was interesting. It's sort of this bucket of --

WICKS: Yeah.

PITA: -- issues of behaviors and measures that look at how students are ready for what comes next after K through 12. Can you talk about some of the examples of some of what qualifies as a college or career readiness thing, and how states are incorporating this?

WICKS: Yes, it is much messier, sadly, (laughter) than chronic absenteeism and I have to say we love chronic absenteeism. We released the spotlight earlier this year just talking about exactly what Lauren described about how powerful it can be and what a more immediate connection you see between kids and learning by doing some of the interventions she described, so we think that's really -- that's really powerful.

So I think part of the challenge with college and career readiness is there's so many data points you can track and there's no research that says, "These are the two things that you should track that are going to be most meaningful." When Lauren was talking about reliable, valid, and comparable, it's a little bit jumbly, and there's lot for us to learn, so we see expects don't agree on what to track, but they do agree that districts should track what they have access to and are available to.

I think in our spotlight we reference like 25 or 30 different data points that people could look at that range from SAT ACT scores that you might expect are graduation rates to post-secondary enrollments so you can see how many kids are leaving your system and going on to something else whether it's college or credential, down to things like counselor-to-student ratio, right, so not all of those are really meaningful accountability measures.

They might be useful operational data points to track, so I think our recommendation at this point until we can learn more about what research is saying, that districts figure out what are they already tracking; what might the state be tracking. Access it and organize in a way that they can start understanding the landscape and understanding what actually is in place and what they're doing, and then when they have that baseline of data, whatever it exists, they can start to be more thoughtful about the policy decisions they're making, particularly with a lens to equity, right?

They can see, oh, it's not just that we've increased 20 percent more students in our district are accessing AP, Advance Placement, courses, or have international baccalaureate schools to attend. They can see who are those students, which subgroups are those students are attaining that, what does this look from an equity lens.

PITA: Sure.

BAUER: And that's another really important legacy of No Child Left Behind is the desegregating of the data and making sure that schools are reporting out from these key subgroups that we have to know, and certainly some of the changes of ESSA, particularly the focus on English language learners is something that we know that we needed to do better on because of these No Child Left Behind requirements.

WICKS: It's funny to think about how we're so used to having desegregated data --

BAUER: I know.

WICKS: -- now, but that was new, you know, when No Child Left Behind came onboard which was when we were talking about it being equal parts Civil Rights legislation and education. It was that you could no longer sort of hide things under the law of averages in the school. You actually had to see how is this school or district serving every subgroup of students and highlighting those achievement gaps that we kind of knew about and could see it through NAEP data and other places, but this really put a spotlight on it in a way that I think has been powerful and useful for policymakers and implementers.

PITA: Great. And I so want to come back to that question of the data because the Bush Institute had a really good (inaudible) truly you guys came up, but just to keep on the college and career readiness issues for a little bit. One of the big questions I had was, given that the students leave school, right, they go onto college or they go onto certificate programs or apprenticeships, is that question of how a school tells whether their policy changes are effective, right, because now, again, the child has left school; they might have even left the state to where they're going to college or getting a job. How can schools track those outcomes to tell about whether what they've done is effective or not?

WICKS: That is the million-dollar question, right, like so it is post-secondary enrollment, but also
post-secondary completion over time, right, so it's not just that you're starting but how many kids actually are finishing within a four to six-year cohort and what, again, from an equity perspective, what does the subgroup data look like within those completion rates I think is

really important. It gets harder to tell, right, because there is only so much that the K-12 system can actually control within its own boundaries, right? And this is where the experts disagree a little bit on what are the right data to track because how far forward can you go?

In our spotlight we talk a lot about partnerships and how important these partnerships are in the cities that we spotlight. Many of them have partnerships with higher ed, so it gets into this question of: If I'm a governor of a state and I realize that we're spending hundreds of millions of dollars on remediation in our public higher-ed system, and we enroll a significant number of students who came through our state's public K-12 system, that's going to get my attention, right? Something is missing in our preparation, so I think we'll be learning more with states as they go over the coming years about how they're understanding the quality and the preparedness of the kids who come out of their K-12 systems into higher education and beyond.

PITA: And on the question of career readiness, one of the things you talked about in your paper is that there's obviously things like professional certifications and vocational training and stuff like that that kids don't necessarily need to go to a four-year liberal arts degree to be considered on a successful track for their life, but one of the things that often comes up when the kids are still in high school it's often sometimes from the parents' perspective of, is my kid being siloed into this --

WICKS: Mm-hmm.

PITA: -- not college track? How have you seen states address that question of whether it's siloing, whether you're preventing kids from going into the college track who they might need a little extra support, but they could do it if they wanted to; how do you thread that needle or how are states dealing with this?

WICKS: This is such an important (laughs) and powerful question because there's no question that college or career preparedness has a ugly history in tracking that's related to race and ethnicity and socio-economic status and all sorts of things that's really important that we acknowledge and are open about as people are trying to navigate this going forward, which is why desegregating the data helps so immensely because you can see what's being accessed.

The way we think about this is it's not "and/or", it's an "and", so all students need to be prepared for college and career, right, so there's no daylight between a strong academic foundation whatever you end up doing. That's really, really critical, and this gets back to why chronic absenteeism is so important, right, like all kids need to have this strong academic foundation so they have genuine choices about where they go. One of the things we talk about in our paper is awareness, how important awareness is, that kids are exposed to a variety of things, so that includes planning and advising, but it also includes work-based learning which could be an internship or a project base that they're doing in connection with the employer.

It could be actual training certification that they get access to in school. It can be early college high school, all sorts of things that they get exposed to because kids, of course, don't have full measure of the world, don't have full measure of their own interest and potential. When you're growing up, you need exposure and you need adults who are helping and guiding you, so all that matters, but nothing is material if they don't have that strong academic foundation so that they're making true and genuine choices about their own futures.

PITA: Right. So to get back to that data question that you both have touched on a bit, when we talk about whether data is reliable or whether it's comparable, whether schools and states have the data that they need, that's a big question that has come up and the Bush Institute has written about this, about how quickly, whether it's schools getting their test reports back from the state, whether states are understanding the full picture of what's going on in all of their schools. You guys came up with this platform that you called "The State of Our Cities" tool that looked at this whole range of education measurements across was it -- I think it was 114 cities?

WICKS: You got it.

PITA: Can you talk a little bit about that; talk about this problem of reliable data and how, again, whether it's states are trying to grapple with it or whether it's a question of the federal government trying to help the states grapple with it?

WICKS: Well, "State of Our Cities" was the result of Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings coming to The Bush Institute. He's the mayor in the city where we live and he said, "I have all this sort of implied authority around education in Dallas, but I have no true way of knowing how is Dallas doing relative to New York or Chicago or Denver. How do I know when he's the competitive guy; how do I know what we're really good at --

PITA: Right.

WICKS: -- and who else do I need to catch up to?" And he said, "So can you help me understand that?"

And we realized an opportunity to help primarily city leaders whether they're mayors, they're superintendents, they're city council members, they might be funders, all these people who are floating around trying to improve education but looking for some data anchors to do that. We set out to collect all the publicly available education data that we could parse down to the city level and put it into an interactive user-driven comparisons. You can pick, I want to compare Boston to Sacramento, for example, and look at about 30 different measures, as you said there's over a hundred cities in there.

The challenge is, of course, is not every data set is equally matched, so you might be looking at, okay, here's the data for teacher absenteeism for 13-14, and I'm going to compare that to teacher salary data from 15-16. There's no perfect data world, but we tried to take as much as we could find that was valid, comparable, and reliable, and put it in the same platform to help people get a sense of what's happening at the city level. And so our audience for that is not other researchers or policymakers necessarily. It's the people who are actually charged with implementing policies and making change in their own community as whether it's a city or a state.

PITA: Is there any push to help states standardize that data and order that it be more comparable, in order that it be better measurable, or are any states on their individual basis working with the schools to come up with more standardized?

BAUER: So here's what I would say to states, "Make your data available."

WICKS: Step 1.

BAUER: Step 1 -- (laughter) for as many people as possible for as many researchers as possible. I'm happy to sign a privacy agreement with any state who's willing to give me all of their data, (laughter) but to really make it available. I think, you know, the reason we know a lot about a lot of things is because North Carolina and Florida are absolute leaders in making a tremendous amount of data available to scholars who use it thoughtfully to learn a lot about kids in schools, and that's how we make progress. We make progress because of leadership from the states of North Carolina and Florida.

You know, in this chronic absenteeism paper, you know, we were able to find really great data from the state of Connecticut, the state of California, the state of New Jersey, the state of Utah, the state of Rhode Island. Some of it was easier to get than others. We had to, you know, build a data-scraper to get some of this stuff down, but regardless, you know, we're using the data from these states and we're learning about these states and I'm following up with these states because they made their data publicly available, and the more states who can see the value in getting the data out there for people, the more they're going to learn about their kids.

PITA: Are you planning on keeping this "State of the Cities" tool updated going forward?

WICKS: Yes, yes. So this fall we decided about every two years is the right cadence to have enough fresh data. Yesterday we got a big drop which is exciting that we'll add to the tool. So this fall, the fall of 2018, we'll have a refreshed version of all the data sets, everything that's come up that's new that we can add to the tool, and we'll continue to add the spotlight sections like we have on chronic absenteeism and college and career readiness to help cities and states get their hands around really complicated topics and to see some case studies of cities or states who have taken this on to try to accelerate people's learning as they're trying to implement some partnerships and solutions.

PITA: Do you see this as a particular place for the role of a nonprofit world where you've got a bunch of researchers who are like, "Hey, I'll look at your data for your and tell you what my findings are," where a lot of states may feel like they're already stretched thin. They may not have data analysts, or enough data analysts working in their boards of education or would you rather see the departments of education staff-up their people rather than rely on outside --

BAUER: Both/and --

PITA: Both/and?

WICKS: Yeah. I don't know that one's better. I just think research is great. (laughter)

BAUER: And these data tools are great, and I think, you know, one of the things we haven't talked about is that all of these states are going to have report cards where they're going to be providing to parents more information than what they're being held accountable for and it's great for parents if it's well-organized, if it's clear and transparent, if it's in a form where you're not clicking through 8,000 things to figure out what you really want to know, and that's another place where we're going to see the impact of ESSA on schools providing information to parents.

PITA: Well, great. Well, we're about out of time, so I think I'll ask you both if you have any closing thoughts or what you think the most important next steps are in this question of accountability.

BAUER: I think that the most important next step is going to be seeing how some of these oversight processes are going to play out at all the different levels, and, you know, for interested observers, and people who care about public schools and America's children we're going to be watching the watchers, so I would watch that.

PITA: All right.

WICKS: Yes. I think we're paying very close attention to which states lead the way for us and to see who might emerge, so we used some examples earlier about. We're not going to expect a lot from Kentucky, but Kentuckians should not take that as a reason to not try to prove us wrong, (laughter) but I think we're really interested to see which states say, "You know what, we got specific about the data that matters.

This is why it matters to us because we have a vision for our state and all kids in our state and here is what we've learned, the good, bad, and the ugly so that we can all learn from what they're doing. This is a real opportunity for if a state, a governor, a state chief, funders, whoever in a location want to lead, this is their moment.

PITA: All right. I'm glad you ended on that because I think what I really took away from both the papers that you both have worked on and the work that you both have been doing is about, you both really harped on why this question of accountability matters, that it's about how are we doing in educating our children and making sure that all of our children are being educated, so I really wanted to commend you both for not losing sight of that and bringing that out to any of your other readers who are out there.

I'm going to remind our listeners that they can find the work that you both have done including a really fun little video that you did, Lauren, with Jenga Blocks talking about absenteeism.

That's all going to be in the show notes, so keep on the lookout for that and don't forget to follow us at Policy Podcasts on Twitter for more great educational and other policy-related content. Thank you both for being here today.

BAUER: Thank you.

WICKS: Thank you.