



# **Montana Board of Public Education**

## **2025 Public Charter School Legislative Report**

## 2025 Annual Legislative Report

In accordance with 20-6-804, MCA, the Board of Public Education is required to conduct a comprehensive annual review of the performance of Montana's public charter schools. This report represents the first annual assessment of Montana's Public Charter Schools Act and summarizes findings from the 2024-2025 school year.

This report is based on data and narratives submitted by Board of Public Education members and public charter schools, along with student performance data provided by the Office of Public Instruction. It provides a comparative overview of student performance and identifies early patterns of success, persistent challenges, and opportunities for improvement.

Consistent with statutory requirements, the report also includes the Board of Public Education's assessment of the sufficiency of current funding for public charter schools and offers recommended changes in state law or policy to strengthen the system's long-term sustainability and effectiveness. Because this review covers the first year of public charter school implementation in Montana, findings should be interpreted as early indicators that will guide future monitoring, technical assistance, and legislative consideration.

### Academic Performance

The Office of Public Instruction provided baseline academic data for all public charter schools during their first operational year. This information establishes an initial reference point for comparing the performance of public charter school students with academically, ethnically, and economically comparable groups of students in noncharter public schools. Future annual reports will expand this analysis as additional years of performance data become available.

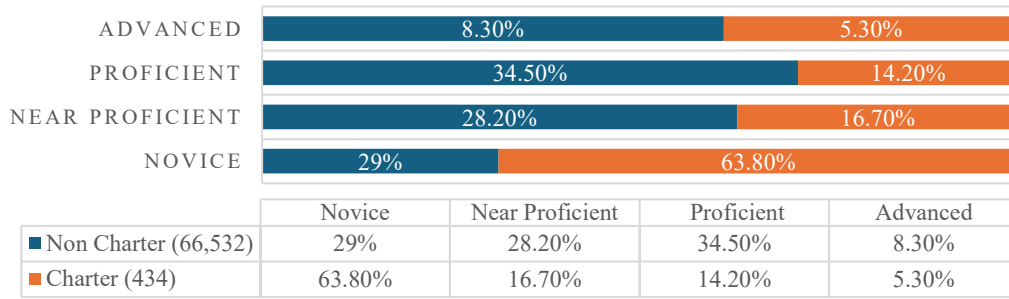
The data below summarizes student proficiency outcomes on required statewide assessments. For elementary and middle schools, English Language Arts (ELA) and math results reflect the percentage of students' scores on the 2024-2025 MAST assessment. High school results are based on the statewide ACT taken in April 2025.

Important notes about this data:

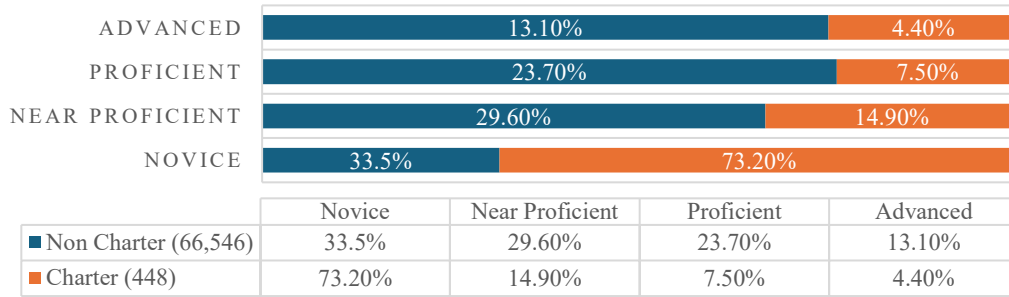
- Primary enrollment determines the school where student test results are reported
- Schools without primary enrollments receive "NA" in the proficiency tables
- Schools or subgroups with fewer than 10 students are not reported publicly
- This data represents public charter schools that opened during the 2024-2025 school year
- Subgroup data include economic status, race, and special education
- Only grades 3-8 and 11 participate in statewide testing

A key point to keep in mind is that many public charter schools are designed with distinct and innovative missions that differ from those of traditional public schools. Because these schools often prioritize unique instructional models, experiential learning, or specialized programs, their goals may not center on maximizing standardized assessment scores. As a result, assessment data alone may not fully capture the effectiveness or intended outcomes of these schools. This underscores the need to consider a broader set of measures when comparing public charter and noncharter school performance.

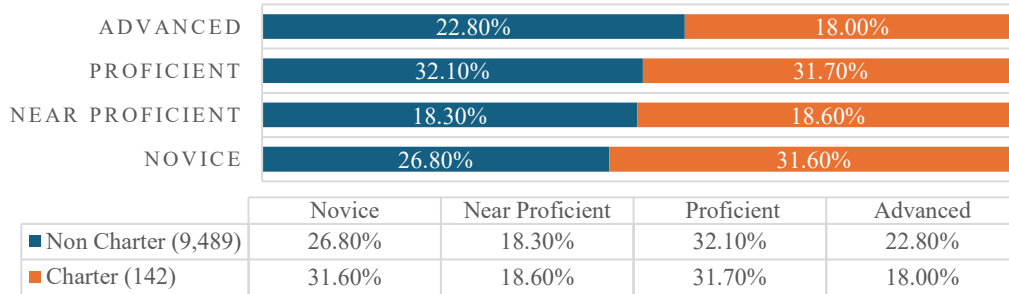
## ELEMENTARY - ELA



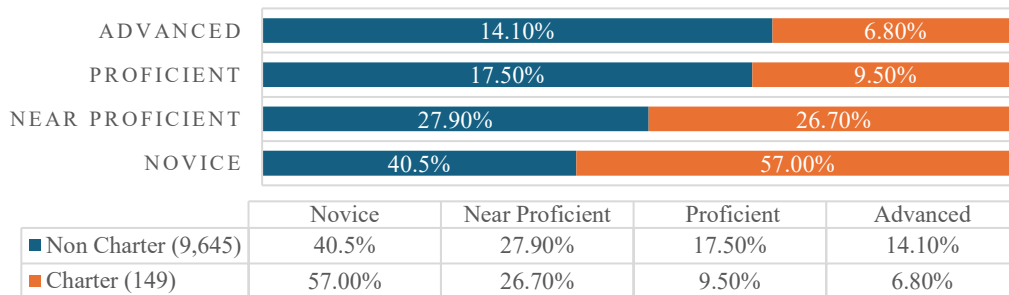
## ELEMENTARY - MATH



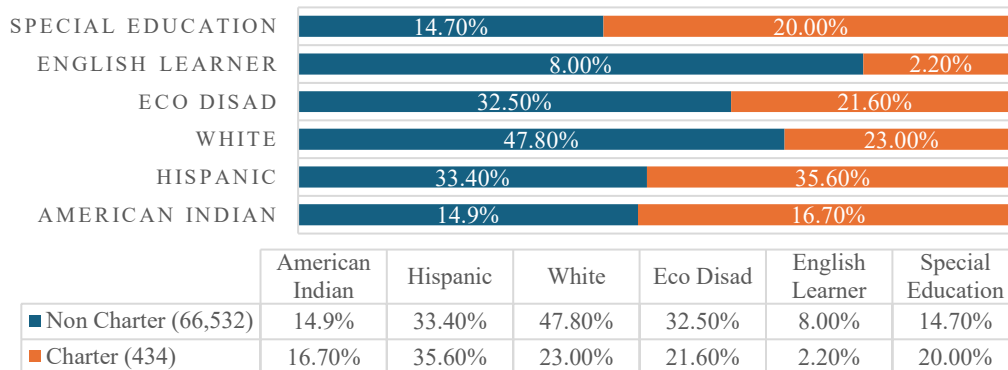
## HIGH SCHOOL - ELA



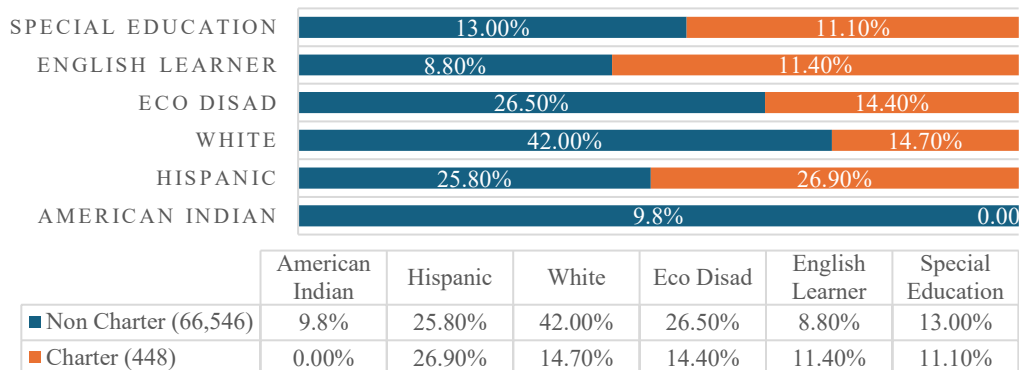
## HIGH SCHOOL - MATH



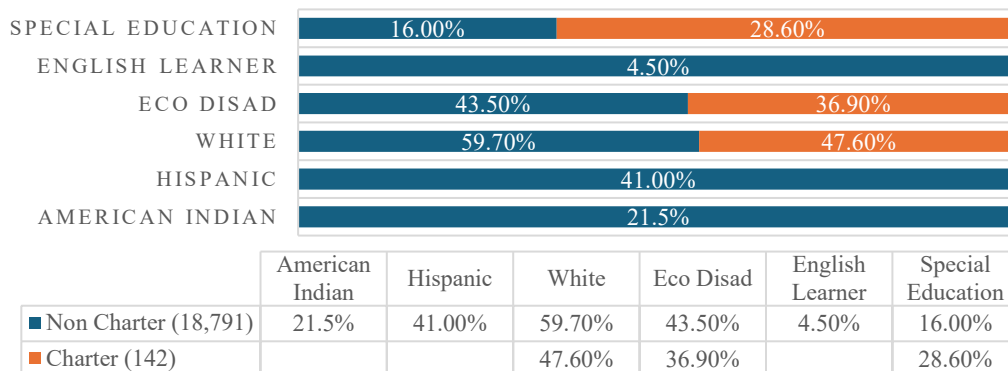
## ELEMENTARY - ELA SUBGROUPS



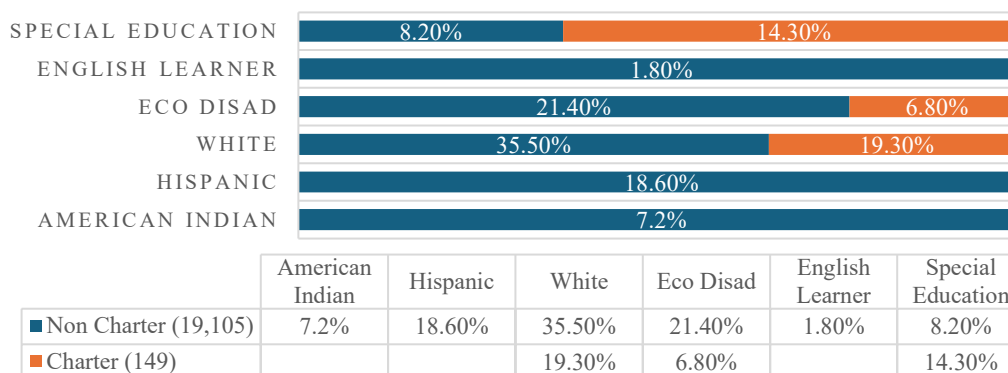
## ELEMENTARY - MATH SUBGROUPS



## HIGH SCHOOL - ELA SUBGROUPS



## HIGH SCHOOL - MATH SUBGROUPS



While the baseline assessment data provides an initial point of comparison, the results must be interpreted with caution. Because these statewide measures capture only a narrow slice of student performance, the data may inadvertently suggest that public charter schools are performing below their noncharter counterparts, particularly in cases where proficiency rates appear lower. However, this interpretation does not account for the fact that many newly opened public charter schools are pursuing distinct and innovative missions that do not place primary emphasis on standardized test outcomes.

Montana's public charter schools' instructional models, program structures, and goals may prioritize outcomes not measured through statewide assessments, such as proficiency-based learning, career exploration, arts instruction, or work-based learning. Looking at one data point is limiting, especially for a new initiative, like the public charter school program. Using multiple data points would increase credibility, validity, and reliability of findings by providing a more complete understanding of the academic performance of public charter schools. By cross-referencing different data sources, methods, or perspectives, public charter schools can confirm patterns, uncover inconsistencies, and overcome the limitations of any single data point. For example, relying solely on the ACT taken at the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade provides only a limited perspective. For these reasons, standardized assessment results alone do not fully reflect the effectiveness of Montana's public charter schools, and a more comprehensive set of measures is needed to accurately evaluate and compare school performance over time.

## **Accomplishments**

Montana's public charter schools have demonstrated measurable progress in advancing the purposes outlined in statute by expanding access to innovative and student-centered educational opportunities. Across the state, public charter schools are reengaging students, promoting innovation, utilizing the flexibility granted in statute to implement new instructional models, encouraging personalized learning, strengthening community partnerships, and enhancing student engagement and achievement. The following accomplishments highlight how these schools are translating autonomy into effective practice, improving outcomes for students, and contributing to the continued development of Montana's public education system.

### **Reengagement**

Public charter schools have exhibited early success in reengaging students who were previously disconnected from traditional learning environments. Board of Public Education members observed that the flexible, student-centered structures of these schools have fostered renewed motivation and a sense of belonging among students, particularly those at risk of dropping out.

Early results show that the diversity of school models from career and technical education programs to Montessori, and proficiency-based approaches are delivering meaningful options for families and evidence that the flexibility intended by statute is working in practice. Throughout communities, families have expressed optimism about the personalized and innovative opportunities now available through Montana's public charter schools.

### **Innovation and Flexibility**

Public charter schools used their autonomy to design programs that respond directly to student and community needs including project-based learning, early college pathways, and career-focused experiences. Several public charter schools implemented flexible scheduling, virtual and hybrid instruction, and competency-based learning approaches that allowed students to progress at their own

pace. These innovations reflect the intent of Montana’s public charter school law to encourage creative solutions that enhance engagement, equity, and educational outcomes for all learners.

Some examples include:

- Bitterroot Polytech: Integrates technical education and real-world projects to prepare students for skilled trades.
- Billings Opportunity School: Uses a personalized, proficiency-based model that combines face-to-face instruction, online learning, and project-based experiences to meet each student's individual needs.
- Rising Wolf Charter School: Offers a flexible block schedule that allows students to take a single three-hour class for twenty-four days before transitioning to a new course, giving them greater focus and control over their learning pace.
- 227 Academy: Provides project-based and STEM-oriented learning where students engage in applied science and technology projects connected to real-world problem-solving.
- Helena Project for Alternative Learning: Offers multiple pathways for students to complete graduation requirements, including individualized credit recovery, competency-based learning, and flexible scheduling.

Together, these approaches demonstrate how public charter schools are leveraging flexibility to increase student engagement and align instruction with workforce and community needs.

### **Personalized Learning**

Public charter schools prioritized personalized learning by tailoring instruction to meet the needs, interests, and goals of individual students. Teachers used flexible grouping, ongoing assessments, and individualized learning plans to monitor progress and adjust instruction in real time. Several public charter schools integrated digital platforms and regular check-ins between teachers and students to help learners take greater responsibility for their education. This approach improved engagement and academic growth, particularly for students who had not thrived in traditional classroom settings.

Some examples include:

- Rise Charter and Distance Learning: Focuses on individual goal setting and flexible pacing to help students catch up or accelerate based on progress.
- Bronc Fast Track: Offers individualized credit recovery and accelerated plans that allow students to graduate early or reengage with school.
- PACE Academy: Develops individualized graduation plans with each student to identify required graduation credits and align coursework with postsecondary and career goals.
- Helena Montessori School: Encourages students to set personal learning goals and work at their own pace under teacher guidance.

Collectively, these efforts show how personalization supports engagement and academic success while encouraging students to take ownership of their learning.

### **Community Partnerships**

Public charter schools built strong relationships with local colleges, businesses, and community organizations to expand learning opportunities beyond the classroom. These collaborations provided students with access to internships, dual enrollment opportunities, and service projects connected to real-world applications. Public charter schools used these partnerships to align education with workforce needs, helping students explore careers while earning academic credit.

Some examples include:

- Billings Early College School: Works with postsecondary partners to offer students the opportunity to earn college credits with the goal of earning both a high school diploma and postsecondary credential upon graduation.
- TEACH Academy: Partners with SPARK Arts to expand professional development for teachers and integrate arts across the curriculum.
- CORE School at Morningside: Collaborates with the University of Montana-Western to embed a teacher preparation program into the school.
- Rise Charter and Pathways Learning: Works with local employers and organizations to provide career exploration and hands-on learning.
- CONNECT Academy: Engages students in community-based projects and career readiness activities that build real-world skills.

These partnerships strengthen community ties, increase student access to diverse learning experiences, and enhance public support for public charter school initiatives.

### **Student Engagement**

Public charter schools reported increased student engagement through smaller learning environments, choice-based reading, and incentive systems that encourage growth and attendance.

Some examples include:

- Billings Multilingual Academy: Engages students through a choice-based reading model, career exploration using RIASEC inventories, and motivational systems like Beable Bucks and monthly contests that keep learning personalized and meaningful.
- Bridger Charter Academy: Focuses on community connections through mentoring, individualized support meetings, and partnerships that help address barriers such as mental health, housing instability, and attendance, creating a supportive path forward towards graduation for each student.
- Mount Ascension Learning Academy: Encourages engagement through individualized support meetings, student choice, and flexible scheduling.

Collectively, these efforts demonstrate how public charter schools are fostering belonging, motivation, and persistence among students who had previously struggled in traditional settings.

## **Challenges**

While early results demonstrate meaningful progress and innovation across Montana's public charter schools, several challenges have also emerged during the first year of implementation. These challenges provide valuable insight into the practical realities of operating new public charter schools and help guide the Board of Public Education's recommendations for improvement and support. These challenges reflect the growing pains of a new system and underscore areas that will require continued attention and support from the Board of Public Education and the Legislature.

### **Community Understanding and Public Awareness**

Many school leaders reported ongoing difficulty helping families and communities understand the purpose and governance of public charter schools. Misconceptions about whether public charter schools are public, private, or community choice programs have complicated enrollment efforts and community engagement. Continued outreach and clear communication about public charter authorization, oversight, and accountability are needed to build broader public confidence. Clearer communication about the role

of public charter schools within the public education system will help build trust and enrollment stability.

### **Regulatory and Statutory Clarity**

Several Board of Public Education members have noted that inconsistencies between new and existing statutes have created confusion for applicants and the public. Ambiguities in law, particularly regarding who may apply for a public charter, how prior provisions interact with the Public Charter School Act, and how to interpret certain application requirements have slowed implementation. Clearer statutory and administrative guidance would help ensure that future applicants, school leaders, and communities understand expectations and processes. The Board of Public Education also noted challenges administering statewide assessments for students enrolled virtually, emphasizing the need for clear guidance to ensure secure and equitable testing conditions for these learners.

### **Start-Up Funding and Capacity Constraints**

New public charter schools continue to face financial strain due to delayed per-pupil allocations and limited start-up resources. Recruiting and retaining certified teachers adds to this challenge, particularly in rural and specialized programs where mentors often carry full teaching loads. Expanding operational resources and sustainable funding will be critical to maintaining institutional quality, support staff stability, and ensure long-term success.

## **Areas for Improvement**

The Board of Public Education identified several areas where continued attention and refinement would strengthen public charter school performance and oversight.

Public awareness remains an area for improvement. Public charter schools should continue building community understanding of public charter school purposes to reduce misconceptions and improve enrollment stability. Clearer communication about the distinction between public charter schools and other school types will help strengthen trust and transparency.

Expanding opportunities for public charter leaders to exchange effective practices and access targeted professional support would strengthen collaboration and improve problem-solving across schools. Continued investment in leadership development and administrator training will help maintain stability and build capacity as new public charter schools grow and mature. In addition, integrating an existing database connected to the Office of Public Instruction would streamline reporting, improve data accuracy, and allow for consistent comparison of performance and fiscal outcomes statewide.

## **Sufficiency of Funding**

Feedback from public charter schools and the Board of Public Education's review indicates that current funding structures present challenges to fully realizing the goals of public charter school innovation outlined in statute. Schools consistently noted that the absence of dedicated startup or planning-year funding creates financial strain during the initial development phase. Limited early resources make it difficult to establish facilities, hire staff, and build the foundational systems needed for long-term success.

Some public charter schools have mitigated these challenges through partnerships and creative use of community resources; however, such measures are temporary and may not provide consistent or equitable support statewide. The Board of Public Education recognizes that additional consideration of



startup and operational funding mechanisms could strengthen stability and promote fair access to opportunities for all public charter schools.

## **Suggested Changes in State Law or Policy**

The recommendations below reflect collective feedback from Board of Public Education members based on the first year of public charter school implementation.

### **Clarify and Streamline Public Charter Law and Application Processes**

The first year of implementation revealed areas of ambiguity in public charter school formation, approval, and statutory interpretation. The Board of Public Education recommends revising and consolidating existing laws to establish clear definitions and a single, transparent pathway for public charter school authorization. A unified and clearly defined process would strengthen public understanding, remove loopholes, and streamline oversight across the system.

During both the 2023 and 2024 application cycles, the Board of Public Education encountered recurring statutory conflicts when evaluating public charter school proposals. These issues highlighted ambiguities in Title 20 that likely impact future proposals as well. Existing statutory definitions, particularly those governing offsite instructional settings, remote instruction eligibility, and district boundary limitations, appear to restrict activities that several applicants had proposed.

These constraints create uncertainty about whether such public charter school applications can be lawfully approved. Because these issues arise from statutory language, the Board of Public Education asserts that the Legislature is the appropriate authority to clarify the intent and application of these provisions. In January 2025, the Board of Public Education asked the House and Senate Education Committees for legislative clarification to guide future decisions and in April 2025, the Board of Public Education formally requested an Attorney General Opinion. Both requests for clarification were unsuccessful.

### **Revise Reporting Metrics**

According to [20-6-804](#), MCA, the Board of Public Education is required to submit this annual report comparing the performance of public charter school students with academically, ethnically, and economically comparable groups of students in noncharter public schools. While “performance” is typically interpreted as student assessment results, many of our public charter schools have distinct goals that may not align directly with standardized test outcomes.

Looking at one data point is limiting. Using three or more data points, or triangulation, is essential to increase credibility, validity, and reliability of findings by providing a more complete and nuanced understanding of the academic performance of public charter schools. By cross-referencing different data sources, methods, or perspectives, we can better confirm patterns, uncover inconsistencies, and overcome the limitations of any single data point.

For these reasons, standardized assessment results alone do not fully reflect the effectiveness of Montana’s public charter schools, and a more comprehensive set of measures is needed to accurately evaluate and compare school performance over time. We recommend considering additional measures or metrics to more accurately compare public charter and noncharter schools or clarify that this statute allows for greater flexibility.

### **Establish Dedicated Start-Up, Facilities, and Transportation Support**

State-funded startup grants could provide essential support for curriculum development, staff training, and community engagement prior to initial enrollment. These grants could take several forms. Zero-year planning grants would give public charter schools the opportunity to build a strong foundation before opening. Tapered funding models would offer additional support in the early years and gradually decrease as public charter schools move toward financial sustainability. A flexible, tiered funding system could also ensure that public charter schools offering specialized programs, or those with necessarily smaller enrollments, receive the resources they need to operate effectively.

Additionally, a dedicated facilities support mechanism, such as a per-pupil allowance or small-scale renovation grant, would help ensure that all students have access to safe, functional learning environments. Transportation remains another significant barrier, particularly for students in rural or low-income communities. Providing transportation assistance, whether through a modest per-pupil supplement or shared service arrangements, would promote equitable access and enable all families to fully participate, regardless of location.

## **Conclusion**

The Board of Public Education appreciates the commitment of Montana’s public charter schools, communities, and educators in launching this new chapter of public education. These early findings provide a foundation for continuous improvement and collaboration among schools, the Board of Public Education, and the Legislature to ensure the public charter school framework remains effective and equitable.

In the coming year, the Board of Public Education will work closely with the Office of Public Instruction to strengthen the depth, accuracy, and consistency of data used to evaluate Montana’s public charter schools. This includes collaborating on the development of clearer reporting protocols, improving access to statewide academic and demographic data, and exploring integration of existing systems to streamline annual submissions. The Board of Public Education also plans to expand the range of performance measures included in future reports, ensuring that data reflects both statutory requirements and the diverse missions of public charter schools.

As implementation continues, the Board of Public Education will monitor outcomes, strengthen accountability, and provide guidance to ensure public charter schools fulfill their statutory purpose of fostering innovation, equity, and improved student achievement. Through continued coordination with the Office of Public Instruction, public charter school leaders, and local communities, the Board of Public Education aims to build a more robust and comprehensive evaluation framework that supports effective oversight, informs legislative decision-making, and enhances transparency for families and the public.