Envisioning Equity

How a New Story of Assessment Can Help Transform Education

A Strategic Brief from the FrameWorks Institute

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Contents

Introduction

The recent global pandemic brought into focus the extent to which education in the United States is characterized by disparities of access, opportunity, and outcomes. More recently, new changes to education policy will likely have an adverse effect on the opportunities and access for certain communities of students in US schools.[1] Historically, educational instruction and assessment in the US have reflected and reinforced the dominant culture. They have not typically been designed in ways that recognize the full diversity of student experiences, or that connect these different experiences with intended learning goals. As a result of this, students with disabilities, English language learners, students of color, and others are disproportionately placed in segregated and stratified educational settings.[2] Achieving more equitable education, therefore, is connected to how assessment is envisioned and practiced.

To support those who advocate for equitable assessment and equity in education, this report delves into two areas of research. One is focused on the field itself, covering what aligned organizations (including educational assessment nonprofits, civil rights organizations, teachers' unions, and testing companies) aspire to communicate, and what they are currently saying in their communications. The other is focused on the public, revealing the deeply ingrained assumptions and patterns of thinking—or cultural mindsets—that shape how people think about assessment. Mindsets are important because they affect what the public expects, and policymakers are hyper-attuned to this. As many moments in history have shown, durable social change depends on public thinking.[3] To generate public support for equitable assessment practices, and for greater equity in education broadly, we must first examine the mindsets that people draw upon.

Our research shows that the public generally thinks of assessment as a necessary and fair measure of how well the educational system functions now, but they rarely see assessment as a tool to help the system function better. The public generally believes that education is failing, driven by a broader sense that society is in moral decline. Broader patterns of thinking about education like these can serve as a barrier for communicating about the need to transform assessment. Despite these challenges, our research also finds that there are existing public mindsets that communicators can build upon to promote more equitable assessment, as well as greater value placed on it. For example, the public does acknowledge that there are students who deserve personalized instruction and assessment tailored to their needs. There is also a general awareness that everyone learns differently, and that people come from different backgrounds, all of which affect their learning and academic achievement.

In this report we explore patterns of public thinking about educational equity and assessment, along with the ideas of those advocating for change. We identify how these public mindsets both create barriers to and offer pathways for achieving more equitable assessment practices. Then, drawing on our analysis of the field's current communications, we offer six preliminary recommendations for how communicators can navigate this cultural terrain and advance a new narrative about assessment's role in the pursuit of educational equity:

1. Expand public understanding of the education system beyond teachers, students, and parents.
2. Focus on how equitable education and assessment is important for everyone in society.
3. Be explicit about why we should shift how we do assessment and how equitable assessment helps us achieve our educational goals.
4. Provide examples of where equitable assessments have already worked.
5. Talk explicitly about how systemic factors, especially racism, create educational inequities.
6. Focus on assessment as an integral part of the learning process rather than being simply a documentation of what has been learned.

Below are a set of key definitions, used by those who advocate for equitable education and assessment, that have guided the design of this research and serve as a reference for this report.

- **Equity in education** is when every student has access to opportunities and resources that are appropriate for their needs and that allow them to achieve their potential.4
- **Assessment in education** is the systematic gathering and interpreting of data about the attainment of learning goals and objectives.
- **Equitable assessment** refers to designing and implementing assessment practices that ensure all students have a fair and meaningful opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and growth. It recognizes and addresses systemic inequities, diverse learning needs, and varied cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Below is the structure that this report follows in laying out our findings and recommendations:

- **What does the field want to communicate?** A summary of the three target ideas that those advocating for greater equity in assessment are trying to communicate.
- **How do members of the US public think about educational equity and assessment?** An analysis of existing cultural mindsets about education, equity, learning, and assessment.
- **How is the field communicating?** A deep dive into trends in how advocates are currently talking about equity in education and assessment.
- **Emerging recommendations:** A summary of what this research means for advocates trying to use assessment to advance educational equity.

What Are Cultural Mindsets And Why Do They Matter?

Mindsets are deep, durable patterns of thinking that shape how we think, feel, and act. Cultural mindsets are those patterns of thought that are broadly available to people living within a shared context, like US society.

Cultural mindsets can lead us to take for granted or call into question the status quo. For example, a mindset like *Health Individualism*, which holds that people's health results from lifestyle choices, like diet and exercise, leads people to place responsibility for health on individuals, not society. By contrast, more systemic mindsets about health, which understand health as a result of the environments and systems we live in, lead people to ask how society needs to change in order to support health for everyone.

An important feature of cultural mindsets is that we all hold multiple, sometimes competing mindsets. Members of the US public have access to *both* individualistic *and* systemic mindsets about health at the same time. What matters is the relative strength of these mindsets, and how they are brought to bear on the issue at hand. Framing efforts are often about bringing a helpful existing mindset to the fore—for instance, in offering explanations that strengthen and extend systemic thinking about health.

While not everyone in US society endorses the same mindsets to the same degree, we can identify a mindset as shared when we have evidence that it is accessible to people across our national culture. We focus particularly on mindsets that emerge from common social practices and institutions. It is important to note, however, that different people and groups will engage with common mindsets in different ways. A mindset can be more frequently drawn upon by one group than another. Further, cultural subgroups within US society also have access to distinctive mindsets that emerge from institutions and practices specific to these groups. Our 2020 report on mindset shifts contains more on what cultural mindsets are and why they matter.[5]

How does cultural mindsets research differ from public opinion research?

Public opinion research examines the explicit attitudes and preferences that people hold about specific issues. Cultural mindsets research explores the deeper, underlying ways of thinking that shape and explain these patterns. Where public opinion research examines *what* people think, cultural mindsets research examines *how* people think. For example, public opinion research might demonstrate that people support health education programs more than policies that increase access to healthy housing. Cultural mindsets research explains *why* this is. For instance, by showing that people embrace these programs because they see individuals as ultimately responsible for their own health, we can understand why education is viewed as the way to change individual attitudes and behaviors.

Our Methods

Below, we briefly describe the methods we used for this report. For more detail, see the Methods Supplement accompanying this report.

1. **Interviews with leaders in the field.** A total of 15 interviews with a range of leaders in the field who are communicating about educational equity and assessment. This includes academics, policy experts, and education advocates. These one-on-one interviews were between 60 and 90 minutes and conducted over Zoom.
2. **Literature review.** A review of academic and gray literature to support our understanding of current problems and policy solutions.
3. **Field frame analysis.** An analysis of communication materials from 15 organizations focused on assessment and other education issues, including equity.
4. **In-depth cultural models interviews.** We conducted 20 interviews with members of the public in June and July 2023, 10 of which were with classroom teachers. Additionally, we reanalyzed 10 interviews that were conducted in 2012 on assessment for the FrameWorks Institute's Core Story of Education project. We analyzed these 30 interviews together to identify the cultural mindsets people use to think about educational equity and assessment. For the sample from 2023, we selected participants to resemble a cross-section of the general public, with particular attention to achieving broadly representative quotas across income levels, racial identity, political ideology, gender identity, and level of education.
5. **Descriptive surveys.** Following analysis of the interviews, we designed and ran a descriptive survey with a total of 2,083 participants. These surveys measured how much people "endorse" the mindsets we identified in the interviews (i.e., how strongly people agree or disagree with statements that articulate the mindset). We used these surveys to investigate how some of the different groups vary in their endorsement of the mindsets. We also mapped the relationships of mindsets to each other and to target outcomes, including a range of policies on educational equity and assessment.

Target Ideas: What The Field Wants To Communicate

A set of three target ideas about equitable assessment emerged from our interviews with people working in the field and through a review of academic and gray literature. These are the ideas that the field believes need to be communicated to members of the public. They are not framing recommendations, but rather the target content that a reframing strategy will ultimately be designed to carry.

TARGET IDEA #1:

Equitable assessment should be appropriate for student needs and iterative.

For the field, equity in education is when every student has access to opportunities and resources that are developmentally appropriate and that allow them to achieve their potential. Equitable assessment means that assessment is used to provide ongoing and iterative feedback to instructors, students, parents, administrators, district leaders, and curriculum developers, with the goal of improving instruction and learning together. This approach to assessment helps to promote resources that are appropriate to support specific learning needs and create supportive learning environments.

TARGET IDEA #2:

Equitable assessment should be culturally relevant and responsive.

Equitable assessment should acknowledge diverse cultural knowledge, experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles. Because assessment practices have historically followed the norms of dominant culture, they have reinforced the historic power structures and inequities of US society. Assessment practice influences instructional, disciplinary, curricular, and funding decisions and contributes to perpetuating inequities in the educational system and in society. An approach to assessment that is responsive to the cultural diversity of its population can advance equity by making learning more relevant to and effective for all students.

TARGET IDEA #3:

Equitable assessment should be community-based.

An equitable approach to assessment should include local collaborations and partnerships to innovate student assessment. To address some of the historical inequities that assessment has perpetuated and reinforced, it is important to engage the communities who are most affected by the outcomes of assessment processes. Engagement with local communities in developing assessments helps improve access for marginalized students and builds better understanding of assessment among community members.

How Does the Public Think about Educational Equity and Assessment

In this section, we lay out a series of research insights from our analysis that help us to understand how the US public thinks about educational equity and assessment, and why. For each insight, we include the cultural mindsets that drive this public thinking and offer analysis on how these mindsets help or hinder efforts to communicate the target ideas described above.

INSIGHT #1:

People think of educational outcomes as tied to wealth.

People have the understanding that, in the United States, money is what allows people to have access to a good education, and a lack of money most often results in a lower quality of education. More so than any other factor, wealth differences across individuals, families, and communities were seen as important in shaping learning opportunities and educational outcomes.

The *Money Moves Everything* mindset.

People understand learning and education, broadly, as being intimately connected to economic conditions and the financial resources available for education. People reason that resource disparities are what drive disparities in educational outcomes. That is to say, people with more money are thought to have better outcomes in education than people with less money, and, likewise, schools with more money achieve better results across their student population. Disparities in education are, therefore, understood to be very closely tied to the money available to a given individual or community.

There are two distinct variants of this mindset—one focusing on the wealth of individuals, and the other on the level of government funding for local education.

- ***Money Moves Everything: Personal Wealth.*** People reason that if a person has more money, they have better access to educational resources (such as private tutors, enrichment programs, and access to technology) and thus better educational outcomes. People connect a person's or family's wealth to the stability and support at home that children need for educational success. This could mean, for instance, that parents or caregivers have more time to help students with homework, or that the home environment is comfortable and conducive to studying.

  As shown in the quote below, wealth is often seen as the most important aspect of a person's background when it comes to the education they receive:

> *Researcher: Would you say that there's a relationship between someone's background and the education they receive in the United States?*
>
> *Participant: Yes, for sure. Wealthier people on average are more likely to have higher advanced education than people in lower socioeconomic brackets.*
>
> **Female, white, 31**

- ***Money Moves Everything: Government Funding.*** People reason that the amount of money from the government that a school receives, and how this funding is spent, impacts the quality of education at that school. The money the local government provides for a school is understood to be determined by the property taxes where someone lives. People, thus, associate the income level of a geographical area with the educational opportunities and quality of education available in that area. This localized understanding is generalized to the public educational system as a whole, because people understand this system of government funding to exist throughout the United States.

> *So, my understanding of education is that it comes from tax dollars that a community pays, right? So, if a community is very wealthy then they have a lot more tax dollars that are gonna go to that education for that child. If you're in an area where a lot of people are on assistance and there isn't a lot of income, then there isn't gonna be that kind of value-added service for their schools, it's just not gonna be there.*
>
> **Female, Hispanic, 42**

In quantitative research, we find high endorsement—regardless of race, political affiliation, parental status, or teaching experience—of both the *Government Funding* and *Personal Wealth* variants of the *Money Moves Everything* cultural mindset.[6] We see moderately strong relationships between the two variations of this mindset.[7] This relationship suggests that, regardless of the form it takes, people do relate the importance of money in education to the quality of education in the United States.

How do these mindsets shape people's thinking about educational equity and assessment?

These public mindsets around money and education represent a challenge for communicators who are trying to promote equity in education and assessment. Both variants of the *Money Moves Everything* mindset can lead people to the simple conclusion that more money is better for educational outcomes. However, this mindset does not necessarily lead people to rethink the inequitable system for funding education, or the role that assessment plays in how education is funded. There are, however, some ways that these mindsets around money and wealth can be leveraged to productively shift public thinking.

Communicators can appeal to and build on people's sense that the way education is funded is unfair and point people to solutions that revolve around assessment. In doing this, it is necessary to point to the role of assessment in creating disparities in education. For example, people already understand school funding to be closely tied to assessments like state standardized tests. Communicators can draw on this understanding but refocus the conversation to be about solutions:

If assessments become more equitable, that means funding could in turn become more equitable, which is more likely to result in more equitable educational outcomes.

The key here is to keep people's thinking about money and educational disparities at the structural level, focusing on factors outside an individual that shape how much money they and their local schools have—for instance, government policy or institutional bias.[8] Strengthening a more structural lens could allow communicators to draw attention to other structural factors that intersect with wealth, such as race, gender, and ability. For this to be successful in connection with assessment, however, assessment must also be framed as part of the system that affects equity in education, which will be discussed more later in this report.

INSIGHT #2:
People think of the education system as a narrow set of actors.

Members of the public think of the US education system narrowly as teachers, students, and parents, and see these three actors as primarily responsible for educational outcomes—a mindset we call the *Tangible Triad*.[9] Advocates, on the other hand, envision a wide array of actors that make up the education system, including administrators, school board members, policymakers, and textbook publishers, among others.

Below we outline a series of mindsets related to the *Tangible Triad*.

The *Motivated Student* mindset. People put the most responsibility for educational outcomes on students themselves. They assume that student motivation is the factor that most directly shapes learning. In the context of the *Tangible Triad*, students are viewed as the principal drivers of their own learning. As we found in previous research, "students are measured by their ability to exert willpower and discipline in the pursuit of education which is defined as 'hard.'"[10]

> *So, you have to want to learn something. If you don't want to, then you certainly aren't going to learn it.*
>
> **Female, white, 55**

In our quantitative work, we see high endorsement of the *Motivated Student* mindset across the whole sample, indicating that, generally, people agree that if students work hard enough and have enough motivation, they can learn anything.[11] This assumption shapes how people think about educational outcomes: If a student hasn't learned, it's because they are not interested in learning. This blocks people's ability to see that creating more equitable conditions will address disparities in learning outcomes.

The *Exceptional Teacher* mindset. Because of the assumption that learning is the product of motivation, people look to teachers for their role in helping build this motivation. Inspiring students is seen as the core task for teachers. As much as being instructors of content, teachers are expected to motivate students in order to get the best outcomes out of them. Just as a "good" teacher is key to increasing motivation and improving learning, a "bad" *teacher* is understood as a drainer of motivation and an obstacle to learning. The quote below illustrates an ideal of teachers as innate nurturers whose individual role in society is that of a higher calling.

> *They have the power to unlock creativity, a gift in the student that they may not even get at home. So, it's like they're so important, and I don't think they realize that it's not just like a job. Like, you actually have something that is going to change lives, that's going to set the trajectory for future generations based on what you are teaching them, and based on how you see those students.*
>
> **Female, Hispanic, 37**

In our quantitative work, participants across the sample highly endorsed the *Exceptional Teacher* mindset.[12] Endorsement of this mindset is strongly related to endorsement of the *Motivated Student* mindset (see Table 1), providing further evidence that people generally tend to associate "good" teachers with motivated students.

***It Starts at Home* mindset.** A child's upbringing is understood to affect their learning by instilling a work ethic, cultivating habits, and creating a home environment that either helps or hinders learning. In this mindset, educational outcomes are fundamentally understood to be shaped by the way children are raised and cared for. In the case where a student is not meeting learning goals, parents—and the family more broadly—are blamed for not providing the right upbringing, as well as being seen as the solution to improving educational outcomes.

Like the other mindsets in the *Tangible Triad*, the *It Starts at Home* mindset is highly endorsed by participants.[13] The quote below shows how the home environment is seen as a crucial site of learning.

> *Do they have space where they feel they can get learning done? Where they can read? Where they can [...] If you've got 10 people in your house and everybody's watching TV and you can't focus, then how are you supposed to study?*
>
> **Female, Hispanic, 42**

Each of the mindsets that compose the *Tangible Triad* are correlated with each other, as illustrated in Table 1. This means that as agreement with one mindset increases, agreement with the other mindsets also increases. The close relationship between these mindsets gives further support to the dominance of the *Tangible Triad* as a way that people think about the outcomes of the educational system.

Table 1: Correlations between the mindsets of the *Tangible Triad*

	It Starts at Home	*Motivated Student*
Motivated Student	r = .43**	
Exceptional Teacher	r = .36**	r = .52**

Key:
Blue: Positive, statistically significant correlation[14]
Red: Negative, statistically significant correlation[15]
** = p < .01

0.10–0.29 = small correlation
0.30–0.49 = moderate correlation
0.50+ = large correlation

How do these mindsets shape people's thinking about educational equity and assessment?

When people are thinking about these three identifiable individual actors, rather than the wider education system, it's hard to see how the system is inequitable. Instead, it becomes about whether the people involved are good or bad, and the solutions that people imagine are about behavior change, rather than systems change. If a student doesn't want to learn, if teachers are throwing up their hands, or if parents no longer put a value on their child's education, then there is nothing that can be done apart from hoping that the student, teacher, or parent will change. This makes it easy for people to arrive at the conclusion that equitable education is a lost cause, an issue that society can't fix. The key for communicators is to offer a systemic solution, in the form of equitable assessment, that does not solely hinge on these individual actors changing their behavior on their own.

The narrow focus on the three actors also means that people are not thinking about the ways in which the design and implementation of assessment have effects on society more broadly. For example, schools across the country use assessments of student behavior that often lead to disciplinary measures that push students, especially male students of color, out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system at disproportionate rates.[16] By connecting assessment to contexts beyond the classroom, communicators can illustrate how assessment in educational settings can affect a community. This can help to expand people's understanding of education as something that is shared by all, in terms of both influence and impact. Looking beyond the *Tangible Triad*, communicators can promote a more inclusive and holistic assessment process that includes the community most affected by the educational outcomes of their students.

INSIGHT #3:

People attribute poor educational outcomes to the moral failings of a culture, rather than to systemic failings.

People think that moral values are the key to a good education. Below we outline two important mindsets that rely on this assumption in different ways. With one, people reason that moral standards in US society are dropping and pulling the educational system into decline. With the other, people reason that a person's particular cultural environment within US society—for instance, based on race, religion, or nationality—instills certain values that affect their educational outcomes. In both of these mindsets, the emphasis is on how people value education, rather than on structural issues within the educational system itself.

The *Social Decline* mindset. People reason that society's value on education and, thus, the quality of the educational system has diminished over time due to lower moral standards in society. Values such as self-discipline, responsibility, and accountability are perceived to be lacking or absent in the communities, families, and individuals that form society. More specifically, the sense of educational decline is associated with perceived moral failure of the individual actors in the *Tangible Triad*: students, teachers, and parents/families. Below is an example of a teacher explaining how a lack of morals in society contributes to a lack of discipline in students.

> *There's no interest, there's no behavior modification. It's just do what you want, you can't get in trouble, and then there's that person they don't like, the lack of discipline. That's a big thing, lack of discipline. And that also goes back to morals these days. And that's why it's hard for a lot of those kids to get jobs in the future, and even interview, even to show up on time. That's in middle school and high school, and just progresses into adulthood.*
>
> **Male teacher, Hispanic, 34**

This connection between the *Social Decline* mindset and the mindsets of the *Tangible Triad* is evident in our quantitative work. The more people endorse *Social Decline* thinking, the more likely they are to also embrace the mindsets of the *Tangible Triad* (see Table 2). Though the relationships between these mindsets are somewhat weak, they are significant. A common thread in these mindsets is the idea that values and motivation shape education. This applies to both the values of the individual actors involved (parents, students, teachers), and also the prevailing values of one's cultural background.

Table 2: Correlations between *Social Decline* and the *Tangible Triad* Mindsets

	Motivated Student	*Exceptional Teacher*	*Starts at Home*
Social Decline	r = .18**	r = .10**	r = .22**

Key:
Blue: Positive, statistically significant correlation
Red: Negative, statistically significant correlation
** = p < .01

0.10–0.29 = small correlation
0.30–0.49 = moderate correlation
0.50+ = large correlation

The *Cultural Essentialism* mindset. People reason that the cultural environment in which a person is raised has a great influence on how well students learn and behave. When drawing on this mindset, people assume that there are certain essential traits and qualities that people from the same cultural background are likely to share. With regard to educational outcomes, people use this mindset to reason that a student's success or failure comes down to the moral values of their culture, rather than problems in the educational system. Culture as understood in this mindset is usually connected to a person's country of origin, race, ethnicity, or class, rather than US culture in general. As such, it can load derogatory, often racist, stereotypes, as illustrated in the quote below.

> *At home if you have a very traditional, let's say Mexican background, you know, your dad's not involved in your learning, it's just your mom. You know, your dad's at work all the time, you never see him. Mom's there, but maybe isn't very educated because she's only become a mom, that's all that she understands, you know? So, I think that absolutely race has a lot to do with education. Because I think it all, again, breaks down to, how are we being supported at home so we can heal up to learn?*
>
> **Female, Hispanic, 42**

In our quantitative work, we see differences by racial group in the endorsement of the *Cultural Essentialism* mindset. We measured this by asking for people's level of agreement with a series of

statements that encapsulate the mindset, such as, "If some cultural groups don't do well in school, it is because of the difference in how these groups value education." We found that Black participants endorsed this mindset the least of all racial groups. Moreover, Black participants endorsed this model significantly less than white participants (see Figure 1).[17] However, it is also important to note that the mindset is still moderately endorsed *across* racial groups, which indicates that it will be a challenge for communicators to bear in mind, regardless of the racial identities of their audiences.

Our quantitative work also shows that the *Social Decline* and *Cultural Essentialism* mindsets are either not associated or only weakly associated with a strong embrace of equity. There is no relationship between the *Social Decline* mindset and support for equitable assessment, as measured by such statements such as "Learning assessments should be designed to meet the unique learning needs of each student." However, there is a very weak—though significant—relationship between *Cultural Essentialism* and support for equitable assessment (see Table 3). This indicates that people can rely on unhelpful cultural stereotypes to explain why there are differences between students, but at the same time embrace the need to adapt assessments to these differences.

Table 3: Correlations between Support for Equitable Assessment, the Mindset of *Social Decline,* and the Mindset of *Cultural Essentialism*

	Social decline	Cultural essentialism
Support for equitable assessment	r = .02	r = .09**

Key:
Blue: Positive, statistically significant correlation
Red: Negative, statistically significant correlation
** = p < .01

0.10–0.29 = small correlation
0.30–0.49 = moderate correlation
0.50+ = large correlation

How do these mindsets shape people's thinking about educational equity and assessment?

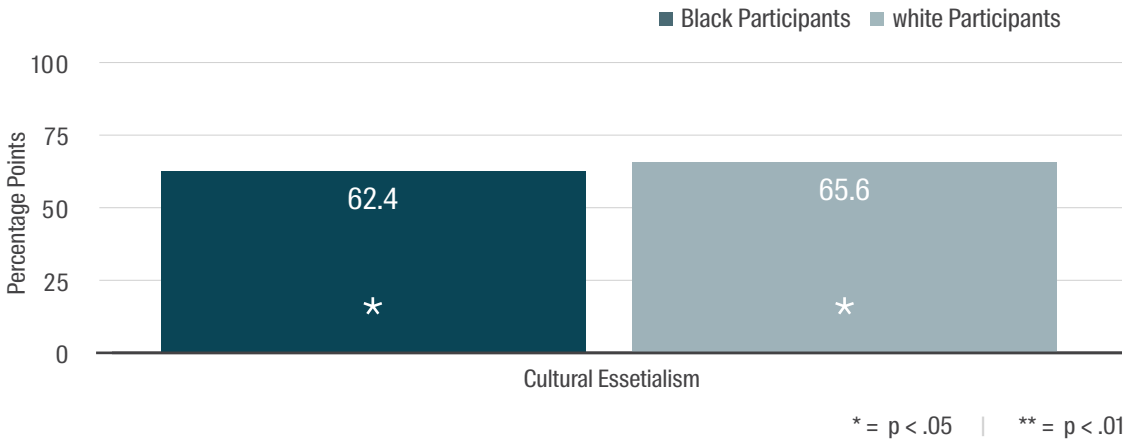
When drawing on either of these mindsets, people tend to attribute problems in education to the perceived moral failures of a particular culture or society. In both cases, these mindsets obscure the problems that exist in how the system is inequitably designed.

Both of these mindsets also carry a risk of producing a sense of fatalism or hopelessness about change, which might present a barrier when trying to communicate about a vision of equitable assessment. In the case of the *Social Decline* mindset, the downward trajectory is often seen as something inevitable or hard to turn around. When people use the *Cultural Essentialism* mindset, moral failings are seen as belonging to the essential nature of groups of people, which is not something that can be addressed by changes to assessment.

Importantly, communicators will need to be careful to share visions of equitable assessment without accidentally activating unhelpful cultural essentialist thinking. Promoting culturally

relevant assessment could unwittingly activate, for some, stereotypes about the perceived moral shortcomings of certain racial groups. For example, asking for assessments that meet the diverse needs of students whose first language is not English might bring up whatever prejudices people have toward immigrants. The field needs to find ways of conveying the concepts of "culturally relevant" and "culturally responsive" alongside other efforts to explain the role of structural factors such as racism in leading to disparities in learning outcomes.

Figure 1: Mean Endorsement of *Cultural Essentialism* between Black and white Participants



INSIGHT #4:

People often explain away systemic racism as a factor in educational outcomes and assessment.

Members of the public do understand that wealth disparities can drive disparities in educational outcomes. However, people rarely consider how today's resource disparities are linked to historic inequities and structural discrimination within the education system. Instead, discrimination is often thought of as being a phenomenon that plays out between individuals, in the form of racist or sexist behavior. For example, people can see individual teachers as racist, but it's harder for them to see the education system as racist. Following this pattern, there are also several mindsets that members of the public use to explain away the role that systemic racism might play in educational outcomes and assessment.

The ***Discrimination Is Personal*** **mindset.** In the interviews, people tended to view discrimination and exclusion in its various forms as personal and interpersonal problems, not as systemic problems. The understanding is that people discriminate, and they do so because they, as individuals, hold discriminatory views. In the context of education, this mindset prepares people to rely on more individualized ways of thinking about *why* the educational system or assessment is not equitable. Using this mindset, people reason that any disparities in educational outcomes for students across race, gender, class, or disability come from the beliefs and actions of prejudiced individuals within

the educational system, not the system itself.

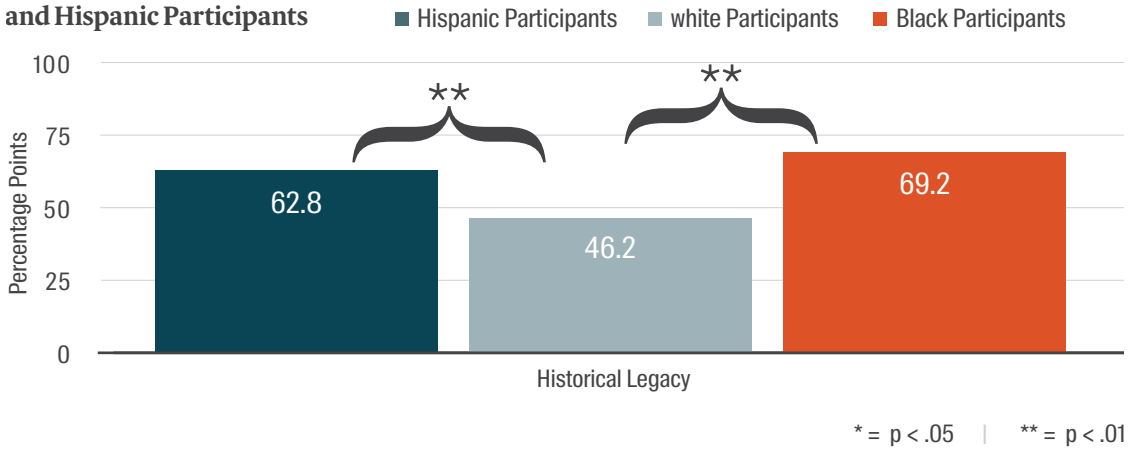
> *Researcher: Are there some ways that assessing student learning harms students? Or not so much?*
>
> *Participant: I don't think so. I think the only way it could really harm them is if … uh, a teacher or a person that was assessing them like used those weaknesses against them.*
>
> **Female, Black, 42**

The ***Historical Legacy of Racism*** **mindset**. When thinking with this mindset, racism is understood as the product of a cultural legacy passed down from one generation to the next. Using this logic, an individual teacher might be racist because their parents were racist, or an African American student might have a disadvantage because of the historical legacy of racism in US society. The negative impact of past laws and policies, such as slavery, school segregation, and redlining, are thought to still factor today into the quality of schools in Black and Brown neighborhoods. In short, this mindset attributes current educational disparities among racial groups to the lingering effects of the racist history of the United States. While this mindset is productive overall for understanding systemic factors in educational outcomes, its emphasis on the past means that it can be leveraged to minimize racism as a factor today.

> *Now, I wouldn't necessarily say now you receive a worse education because you're Black or because you're Hispanic or whatever, but it does tend to be now because there's been so much disenfranchisement through the history of the United States and wealth has been concentrated in more white areas, especially the white Flight after World War II. It has led certain school districts in areas [to] be poor and have very bad school districts because of lack of money and resources. […] The Greatest Generation after World War II, white people had access to all these houses, loans, and stuff, and redlining caused Black G.I.s not to be able to get the same benefits that white G.I.s did. So, because of that, it created this sort of culture of wealth—what is it, generational wealth in white communities, but then Black people couldn't own their homes and they were always renting. […] It was institutionalized racism from the federal government. It was a lot of it, and just general racism, lack of opportunity. It all combined that over time, it's created problems, but I would say access to homeownership has been the basis of most of it.*
>
> **Female, white, 31**

In our quantitative work, survey participants tended to be neutral about the *Historical Legacy* mindset, neither agreeing nor disagreeing on average.[18] However, there are significant differences by racial groups. White participants were significantly less likely to endorse this mindset when compared to Black and Hispanic participants (see Figure 2).[19] These quantitative findings suggest that white participants are less likely to factor in historical racism when reflecting on educational disparities.

Figure 2: Mean Endorsement of *Historical Legacy* between white, Black, and Hispanic Participants



Note: Statistical analysis indicates significant differences in the outcomes between white and Hispanic participants and between white and Black participants. However, no significant difference was found between Black and Hispanic participants.

The difference we see in the quantitative data can be partially explained by how white participants apply the *Historical Legacy* mindset. For example, in the interviews, even when some white participants recognize institutional racism as a historical factor in creating educational disparities, they are more skeptical than Black and Hispanic participants that institutional racism is still a significant factor in educational outcomes today. White participants are more likely to use this mindset in a way that consigns racism to the past. Keeping racism in the past opens the door for people to explain current educational disparities with reference to other factors, like wealth disparities, rather than ongoing institutional racism.

The *Class Not Race* mindset. Sometimes, people make the case that disadvantage in education is more connected to class than it is to race. This mindset is often used to diminish or deny the impacts of racism in educational outcomes. It provides a mental framework for people to explain the relationship between race and education not as a question of racism, but rather as a result of income disparities, which are intimately tied to how people understand education.

As we have seen in our past research from the Core Story of Education project, Class Not Race is a dominant mindset in which race is reduced to class. With that assumption in place, the public defaults to a limited, but associated, mindset for thinking about how wealth influences school performance.[20] Considering the mindset discussed earlier in this report that connects personal wealth to quality of education, the implications are powerful. If educational inequities primarily come down to money and are understood as an issue of class over race, then racism can be diminished, or even erased, as a factor. Using this logic, some reason that if you have enough money, your race does not factor into the quality of education you can receive, and therefore it should not affect your educational outcomes.

> *Researcher: Would you say that there's a relationship between someone's race and the education they receive in the United States?*
>
> *Participant: I wouldn't necessarily say race. I would say "socioeconomic backgrounds" would be, in my opinion, being a Mexican person that's been adopted into a really wealthy family, but starting out super poor, I can absolutely tell you that.*
>
> **Female, Hispanic, 42**

In our quantitative work, participants somewhat agree with the *Class Not Race* mindset.[21] Perhaps unsurprisingly, we also see a strong relationship between the *Class Not Race* mindset and the *Personal Wealth* variation of the *Money Moves Everything* mindset.[22] This relationship holds across race, political affiliation, teaching experience, and whether someone has children. This indicates that as people agree more with the idea that greater personal wealth results in better educational outcomes, so too do they agree that education inequities are a matter of class, not race. So, while the *Personal Wealth* mindset may help understand class-based educational inequities more broadly, it is also related to an unproductive mindset that explains away racial inequities in education, specifically.

How do these mindsets shape people's thinking about educational equity and assessment?

Each of these mindsets points to a major challenge for communicators, which is that there is no widespread or consistent understanding of how structural racism shapes educational disparities today, or how this relates to assessment. Instead, people often draw on reasoning that serves to deny or diminish the role of structural racism in educational outcomes and assessment. This means that when communicators simply make the claim that racism shapes disparities in education, it might not make sense to the public, and it may be dismissed.

When racism in education is envisioned as the actions or beliefs of a single person, it can make it difficult to propose changes to assessment, beyond training individual teachers to correct their own personal biases. Similarly, when economic disparities are viewed as the problem, rather than racism, it can be difficult to address the embedded racial bias in systems of assessment and in the educational system broadly. Communicators, therefore, must help people to liken the differences in wealth to racial disparities in education in a systemic way so that they cannot simply dismiss them as simply as matter of whether a person has money.

The *Historical Legacy of Racism* mindset can be productively leveraged if communicators take care to spell out how structural racism continues to be a problem in education today. In our quantitative work we can see this potential in the strong relationship between the *Historical Legacy* mindset and the idea that instruction, assessment, and resources should meet the needs of all students' cultural backgrounds.[23] This indicates that there is room for communicators to connect the history of racism in US education to the present-day need for equitable education.

Communicators need to consistently show that racism is an important factor today in the US educational system and systems of assessment and does not simply live in the past. Additionally, communications must explicitly talk about why the underfunded schools in the US are often the

schools that serve—or fail to serve—communities of color. Once racism is understood as a systemic factor in educational outcomes, and not just as individual discrimination, then equitable approaches to assessment can be proposed as a systemic solution.

INSIGHT #5:

People value assessment as an objective way to hold educators accountable.

As people tend to hold students, teachers, and parents responsible for the outcomes of education, assessments are often thought of as a way to gather data on whether these actors are upholding their responsibilities. With this function in mind, members of the public generally understand assessment as objective, necessary, and fair.

The *Assessment Is Meeting Standards* mindset. People often view assessment to be an objective reflection of whether the standards for education and learning are being met. Standards are created for what students must learn, and then teachers measure their skills and knowledge against those standards through various forms of assessment. People generally think it's fair to hold everyone to the same standard. Our quantitative work shows that this is a strong and shared understanding of assessment across demographic groups, regardless of race, political affiliation, whether someone has children, or teaching experience.[24] As the quote below illustrates, this understanding can lead to thinking that runs contrary to a needs-based vision of equitable assessment, because it is seen as "unbiased" to hold everyone to the same standards.

> *Researcher: What would it take to make assessment more equitable?*
>
> *Participant: I don't know. Assessment, to me, should be unbiased. I don't think you can change assessment per person. The point of the assessment is can you reach the necessary requirements. Can you meet those requirements, can you meet those standards?*
>
> **Male, Asian, 29**

When thinking with this mindset, people see assessment as leading to an objective conclusion: If a student is meeting standards, then they are learning, and if they are not meeting standards, then they are not learning.[25]

The *Assessment Is Evidence of Learning* mindset. People understand the purpose of assessment as producing evidence that the intended learning is happening. Simply put, assessment is viewed as evidence of academic performance, i.e., whether a person is progressing in their learning as expected, or in relation to the levels that have been previously measured.

> *Assessments are necessary because they demonstrate what you've learned.*
>
> **Female teacher, Black Hispanic, 32**

The idea that assessment provides us with evidence of performance is also considered something normal and constant in the context of employment. Using this mindset, people tend to transfer thinking about job performance evaluation in the workplace to their understanding of assessment at school. Like the *Assessment Is Meeting Standards* mindset, this mindset is strongly endorsed in our quantitative work: People tend to agree with the *Assessment Is Evidence* mindset.[26]

SURVEY EVIDENCE: HOW MINDSETS OF ASSESSMENT RELATE TO THE *TANGIBLE TRIAD*

We find a consistent and significant relationship between these two mindsets of assessment and the mindsets of the *Tangible Triad* (see Table 4). This suggests that people who believe assessments are a tool used to measure whether students are meeting state learning standards also tend to agree with the idea that good teaching, supportive home environments, and student motivation all play roles in educational outcomes. Notably, for teachers, the correlation between *Assessment Is Evidence* and the *Motivated Student* mindset is stronger compared to the overall sample.[27] This higher correlation among teachers may reflect their direct involvement in applying assessments and observing the impact of students being motivated on their educational outcomes.

Table 4: Correlation between Assessment Measures and the *Tangible Triad* Mindsets

	It Starts at Home	*Exceptional Student*	*Motivated Student*
Assessment Is Meeting Standards	r = .31**	r = .32**	r = .32**
Assessment Is Evidence	r = .38**	r = .39**	r = .41**

Key:
Blue: Positive, statistically significant correlation
Red: Negative, statistically significant correlation
** = p < .01

0.10–0.29 = small correlation
0.30–0.49 = moderate correlation
0.50+ = large correlation

The *Stakes of Assessment* mindset. People understand that educational assessment can have an impact on educational outcomes and that there are different things at stake for the different people involved. For example, assessments like grades and state standards exams can affect a student's ability to pursue future educational and employment opportunities.

> *When you get to the 10th grade, depending on how you did on the MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System] scores [...] is going to determine if you're eligible for a scholarship [...] at the public universities or state universities within Massachusetts. [...] It changes the outcome of your life.*
>
> **Female, Boston, 2012**

The stakes of assessment for students are also assumed to affect parents, who are concerned about their child's future opportunities. With regard to teachers, members of the public tend to reason that assessments, and especially state standardized testing, are primarily—if not exclusively—a tool to hold teachers accountable for doing their jobs effectively. Teachers themselves tend to focus on the stakes of assessment for their own job security, and for the funding of their schools.

How do these mindsets shape people's thinking about educational equity and assessment?

With the shared assumption that assessment is fair, objective, and necessary, these three mindsets can obscure the need for change. They can lead people to focus on the outputs (test scores, grades) of students to indicate learning. This can make it difficult for people to understand assessment as a process that is integral to the overall learning process, which could make it harder to promote more equitable assessment practices. This could also make it more difficult for communicators to create a public conversation in which assessment is much more than simply a mechanism for holding the educational system, and specifically teachers, accountable.

When people think of assessment as objective and standardized outputs that are used to hold educators accountable, it can serve to further foreground standardized testing as the primary or only form of assessment in people's minds. This can make it harder to promote a vision of education in which teachers and students are seen as partners in an assessment process of iterative feedback to create more equitable practices and outcomes. There is also the risk that this way of thinking can lead to people to reject what advocates in the field would deem to be equitable changes as being unfair and inequitable.

Communicators, thus, must clearly explain the importance of assessment as an integral and ongoing part of the learning process, not simply as evidence of outcomes. Then assessment can be presented as a way to create more equitable educational outcomes. If communicators do not focus on first shifting how people understand the form and purpose of assessment within the learning process, then it will continue to be an uphill battle to achieve more equitable assessment practices.

INSIGHT #6:

People can imagine a needs-based approach to assessment, but they primarily apply this to students with disabilities.

Our research found that people can imagine a needs-based approach to education and do agree that assessments can help create an education system that meets the needs of all students.[28] However, we also know that the meaning of "meeting everyone's needs" is not always clear to people, so it will be the job of communicators to help people substantiate that positive association by building greater understanding of equity. The mindsets that are available to the public for understanding equitable assessment are unevenly, and narrowly, applied.

The *People Learn Differently* mindset. Fundamentally, people tend to understand that every human being is different and therefore they reason that everyone must learn differently and have access to different types of knowledge. While people tend to apply this mindset to the process of learning, rather than assessment, it does open the door for thinking about more personalized instruction, intervention, and assessment. The idea that people learn differently can allow people to see assessment as a tool for identifying and adjusting instruction to be more appropriate for each student's needs; that is to say, more equitable.[29]

> *So, I think that there's no one-size-fits-all for when it comes to learning. You can have a classroom full of students and you can't treat everybody as if like they're all going to learn the same way and get the same information out of whatever you're trying to teach.*
>
> **Female, Hispanic, 37**

The *Disability Exception* mindset. People tend to envision needs-based education as possible and desirable for people who have a learning difference or neurodivergence. Indeed, it is often understood as the *only* way to teach and assess people with disabilities.

People believe that students living with disabilities cannot learn to their potential if simply given the same conditions as every other student. However, when applied to any context outside of disability, people have a harder time viewing assessment as a way to achieve a student-focused, needs-based approach to education.

> *A bad education to me is one where, let's say, I have a learning disability and people know that. And I don't receive the resources that will help me to be a better person or help me to figure out how to manage it and still be a functioning member of society.*
>
> **Female, Black, 33**

The *Cultural Background* mindset. People also recognize that someone's cultural background can influence how a person learns and therefore should be taken into account in how their learning is assessed. When using this mindset, people reason that culturally sensitive instruction and assessment can help students with specific cultural backgrounds to learn more effectively. Students should be assessed with their specific cultural knowledge in mind in order to most effectively assess their learning. Relatedly, if a student's cultural background is not considered, it is understood that this can exclude them from the learning process.

> *I'm not [an] expert, but critical race theory at least allows those different stories to be told, and acknowledges that there's different ways of learning and different knowledge out there that we don't even know about or don't have access to because of, you know, things that have happened in history.*
>
> **Female teacher, Hispanic, 39**

HOW THE MINDSETS OF *DISABILITY EXCEPTION* AND *CULTURAL BACKGROUND* RELATE TO THE FIELD'S VISION OF EQUITY IN ASSESSMENT

In our quantitative work, participants agreed with both the *Disability Exception* and *Cultural Background* mindsets regardless of race, parental status, or teaching experience. However, agreement with the *Disability Exception* mindset was much higher, at an average score of 80.7 out of 100, compared to 60.3 on the *Cultural Background* mindset. This indicates that disability is far and away the most dominant way of thinking about needs-based assessment.

Further, we looked at how these mindsets relate to several aspects of the field's vision of equitable assessment. For instance, we measured how much people agreed with including social and emotional learning in evaluations and using assessment to foster collaborative efforts between students and teachers to address learning needs (see Table 5). Importantly, we didn't directly mention tailoring assessment to the needs of particular groups in this measure. That allowed us to see how latent mindsets on needs-based assessment (*Disability Exception* and *Cultural Background*) were related to other aspects of the field's vision of equity.

Table 5: Correlations between Attitudes Toward the Field's Vision of Equity, the Mindset of *Disability Exception*, and the Mindset of *Cultural Background*

	Disability Exception	*Cultural Background*
Support of The Field's Vision of Equitable Assessment	r = .41**	r = .27**

Key:
Blue: Positive, statistically significant correlation
Red: Negative, statistically significant correlation
** = p < .01

0.10–0.29 = small correlation
0.30–0.49 = moderate correlation
0.50+ = large correlation

While both mindsets are significantly correlated with support for the field's vision, it is the *Disability Exception* that has a notably stronger relationship. As agreement with the *Disability Exception* mindset goes up, so too does agreement with a range of statements about the field's vision of equitable assessment. This suggests that the view of tailoring assessment to accommodate disabilities is currently more closely resonant with the field's vision of equitable assessment than the view of adapting assessment to meet the diverse cultural background of students. However, the latter is very important to advocates. The challenge communicators face, then, is in widening understanding of equitable assessment beyond accommodating disability to more firmly include a range of other factors, including culture.

How do these mindsets shape people's thinking about educational equity and assessment?

As we have seen in this report, the dominant public thinking around learning is that students will learn if they want to. However, people do think that individuals learn in different ways, and that some groups of people (namely disabled students) need extra attention and resources to support their learning. The problem is that people have a hard time applying this thinking to needs-based assessment in any context apart from disability.

In the context of disability, educational disparities are viewed to be out of the individual student's control but also able to be resolved at the individual level by making accommodations for that particular student. This can make it difficult for people to support policies that try to address disparities where the person is seen to have more control over their situation, such as income. It can also be hard for people to support a needs-based approach when the disparities are perceived as impossible to address at the individual level, such as with issues of race or gender. This reasoning can make it easier for people to resist educational innovations informed by anti-racist or feminist pedagogies.

The challenge for communicators is to widen the public's support of student-centered and needs-based assessments beyond disability. The mindsets that people learn differently and that cultural background affects learning could be leveraged to help generate support for moving away from a "one-size-fits-all" approach to assessment and toward a more dynamic, needs-based approach to assessment. Tapping into these mindsets around differences in learning could potentially expand people's understanding of how assessment can be done equitably and how that can transform education in this country.

Summary of Insights

Below, we have organized in a table the research insights that have been presented in this section of the report alongside the mindsets that drive that thinking. In this way, Table 6 is an attempt to make the connections clear visually and to simplify the explanations that are in the analysis that we have covered in more detail above.

Table 6: Explanation of the Research Insights and Corresponding Mindsets

Insight	Explanation	Cultural Mindset	Main Assumption
1. People understand educational outcomes as tied to wealth.	*People see financial resources as the primary determinant of educational success.*	**Money Moves Everything: Personal Wealth**	*Wealthier individuals can afford better educational resources, leading to better outcomes.*
		Exceptional Teacher	*School quality depends on government funding, which is linked to local wealth.*
2. People view the education system as limited to students, teachers, and parents.	*The broader education system is overlooked, and responsibility is placed on individual actors.*	**Motivated Student**	*Students are responsible for their own success through effort and motivation.*
		Exceptional Teacher	*Good teachers inspire and drive student success, while bad teachers hinder it.*
		It Starts at Home	*Parents and home environments determine a child's educational success.*
3. People attribute poor educational outcomes to the moral failings of society or culture.	*Education is often linked to declining societal values rather than systemic issues.*	**Social Decline**	*The belief that diminishing moral standards in society lead to declining education.*
		Cultural Essentialism	*The idea that certain cultural groups value education differently, affecting outcomes.*
4. People tend to dismiss systemic racism as a major factor in educational inequities.	*Disparities are often attributed to class rather than race, or viewed as past issues.*	**Discrimination Is Personal**	*Racism in education is seen as an individual issue rather than a systemic problem.*
		Historical Legacy of Racism	*Racial disparities are acknowledged but seen as historical, not current issues.*
		Class Not Race	*Inequalities in education are explained as economic rather than racial disparities.*
5. People see assessment as objective, necessary, and fair.	*Assessments are understood as neutral tools for measuring success and accountability.*	**Assessment Is Meeting Standards**	*Assessment ensures students meet predetermined educational benchmarks.*
		Assessment Is Evidence of Learning	*Assessment is seen as a way to track and validate student progress.*
		The Stakes of Assessment	*Assessment results determine students' opportunities and teachers' effectiveness.*
6. People can imagine a needs-based approach to instruction and assessment but mostly for students with disabilities.	*There is limited recognition of broader needs-based assessments beyond disability.*	**People Learn Differently**	*Everyone has unique learning styles that should be considered in education.*
		Disability Exception	*Needs-based education is widely accepted for students with disabilities.*
		Cultural Background	*Cultural context affects learning and should be factored into assessment.*

How Is The Field Communicating Now?

Understanding public thinking on equitable assessment requires exploring broader mindsets related to education, learning, and equity because these larger patterns in thinking shape how assessments are perceived and valued. By engaging with these broader patterns, readers can gain insights into the underlying factors that influence the way the public thinks about assessment.

As part of our research, we conducted a narrative scan and analysis of public-facing communications materials—webpages, reports, press releases, position statements, blog posts—from 15 organizations in the education field that are communicating about educational equity and assessment. These organizations represented a range of areas within the education field, including nonprofit education organizations, policy advocacy groups, educational assessment nonprofits, civil rights organizations, teachers' unions, nonprofit research organizations, philanthropic foundations, and testing companies. The process of analyzing how the field is currently communicating included qualitative analysis to identify themes, trends, and patterns of meaning in the data and interpretation of those findings against the backdrop of the public's mindsets about education, learning, equity, and assessment and the core ideas that the field wants to communicate to the public.

The focused analysis on field communications presented in this section provides a deep dive into how current practices in communicating about assessment specifically are shaped by and interact with these broader educational and equity-related mindsets, as well as mindsets related specifically to assessment. This helps readers understand not just the content of the communications, but also the context in which they occur, offering a more nuanced view of the challenges and opportunities in promoting equitable assessment practices. Our analysis revealed five trends in framing practice across organizations' communications materials, as described below.

TREND #1:

The field is advancing a broad, equitable vision of *what* we should assess but isn't always providing a consistent story about *why* equitable assessment practice is necessary.

What the field is saying:

In the materials reviewed, organizations are putting forth a broad array of equitable assessment approaches that should be prioritized. Encouragingly, many of the proposed assessment approaches are efforts to reform current assessment policy and practice toward the field's vision for educational equity while also positioning assessment as a proactive tool in achieving equity:

> *Performance assessments have been identified as a key tool for promoting students' deeper learning and mastery of higher-order thinking skills.*
>
> **Education advocacy organization**

> *Assessment for learning doesn't just assess students, it assesses the learning environment, giving teachers more actionable information on how to create inclusive classrooms and schools.*
>
> **Assessment-focused organization**

> *Formative assessment is a process that actively involves both students and teachers collecting evidence about student learning to make decisions about next instructional or learning steps.*
>
> **Testing company**

However, many organizational communications often overlook a crucial step: establishing *why* equitable assessment is essential for achieving equity in education and society. This step is vital because the public typically views assessment narrowly, as an objective tool to hold students and teachers accountable for what students know at a point in time. Moreover, they are generally unaware of the flaws in current assessment practices within our education system. If our communications are not expanding these mindsets and deepening understanding of *why* equitable assessment matters, the approaches the field proposes may either fail to make logical sense to the public or, at best, not be seen as priorities.

Some groups are providing a comprehensive, new explanation for *why* equitable assessment approaches are important, disrupting the default ways of thinking about assessment as simply useful for holding students and teachers accountable:

> *An assessment system encompasses formal and informal practices, activities and procedures [...], resulting in data and information that is used regularly by education professionals, students and their families, and sometimes by policymakers to diagnose student learning needs and make decisions about students' education and educational opportunities*
>
> **Education union**

> *Data on multiple measures, including school climate, student access to resources and opportunities, and student learning outcomes, are essential tools to address systemic inequities in our education system, as well as to gauge the quality of instruction and support offered.*
>
> **Civil rights organization**

> *With the right mix of assessments, students can be engaged in exciting learning that will prepare them for their futures without being over-tested. Teachers can have data that informs them about how students are learning as well as what they know. Districts and states can have data about how different groups of students are doing in different areas of the curriculum, so they can invest wisely in curriculum development, professional learning, and instructional supports.*
>
> **Education union**

Implications for communicators:

Organizations in the field are proposing equity-focused strategies and innovative assessment approaches in their communications. This is critical for broadening public awareness about the diverse forms assessment can take and a step toward building demand for more effective, equitable assessment practice. As the excerpts above indicate, the field is doing a good job of presenting the *who, what, where,* and *how* of different equitable assessment approaches, as well as explaining *why* specific approaches matter.

Before jumping into the details of specific assessment methods, it is important to explain why equitable assessment matters to our education system and society. Research shows the public often doesn't see this bigger picture. They mostly think of assessments as tools to measure student achievement and hold teachers accountable. If we don't challenge this limited view by offering a clearer and more powerful explanation of what equitable assessment is for, people may not understand why it's so important.

Starting communications with a clear, compelling justification for equitable assessment might help push the public away from prevailing, less useful ways of thinking about why assessment matters, and toward a more equitable vision for assessment that better supports the field's goals. Doing so may also help guide audiences along a logical progression, gradually building their understanding of the issue. Future framing research will explore and test strategies for effectively communicating the importance of equitable assessment that can be tailored to the diverse advocacy needs of the field.

TREND #2:

The field faces a tension between emphasizing the importance of standardized assessments for uncovering inequities and guiding decisions, while also acknowledging the flaws and unfairness in these assessments.

What the field is saying:

Many of the communications materials analyzed were explaining the importance of assessment for uncovering inequity but were often not also talking about how standardized assessments in particular can have negative impacts and can in fact perpetuate inequity.

In the following examples, organizations are emphasizing the importance of standardized assessment for uncovering inequity:

> *From a civil rights perspective, annual standardized assessments can help to reveal long-standing and continuing disparities in academic opportunity for students of color [and] students from low-income backgrounds.*
>
> **Civil rights organization**

> *Addressing inequities in the educational outcomes—particularly for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds—cannot happen without comparable data from statewide summative assessments.*
>
> **Education advocacy organization**

> *Statewide assessment results help schools and district leaders target state and local resources to the students and schools with the greatest need and track whether these resources are impacting student achievement.*
>
> **Education advocacy organization**

However, our analysis of field communications indicates that the organizations in the sample are often not talking about the negative impacts of standardized assessments in ways that can build the public's understanding of why changes are necessary.

Here are example communications where organizations are calling attention to this:

> *The decades-long focus on standards, high-stakes testing, and accountability has shined a bright light on the achievement gap. But these strategies have done little to address the underlying opportunity gaps that cause low-income students, students of color, English language learners, and students with disabilities to perform less well on standardized tests.*
>
> **Assessment-focused organization**

> *Measurement holds promise to lift the veil on disparities in educational outcomes. But what exactly are we measuring, and how are we ensuring these metrics don't unintentionally exacerbate existing inequities?*
>
> **Education funder**

> *Everyone involved in the assessment development process—from the local, district and state officials who decide which ones to use to those who create them—should acknowledge the flaws of the current system.*
>
> **Assessment-focused organization**

Implications for communicators:

Organizations in the field face a challenging communications task: They must emphasize the importance of standardized assessments for identifying inequities, while also advocating for changes to address the underlying unfairness these assessments can perpetuate. By omitting explanations of the flaws in assessments, communicators may be trying to avoid nuances that they think could erode trust in these assessments as a crucial tool for identifying inequity.

However, without explaining the problem we are addressing, our solutions often won't make sense to people. Additionally, our research has shown that the public generally thinks of assessments as standardized tests and thinks they are generally positive, fair, and necessary, and without recognizing the negative impacts and inherent unfairness of standardized assessments.

This suggests that advocates may not need to overemphasize the importance of standardized tests at the expense of honesty about their inherent biases and unfairness. The public already sees these tests as important; what they generally do not understand is that standardized assessments can be flawed and not objective. Therefore, it may be beneficial to explicitly point out the unfairness in standardized assessments and build public understanding of the problems that proposed approaches to improving assessment systems and practice seek to address.

Yet balancing the importance of standardized assessments as part of the picture for addressing inequities in the education system with a call for the removal of bias and unfairness in standardized assessment systems remains a tricky needle to thread. Future framing research will seek to identify ways of articulating the flaws in current standardized assessment practices in ways that build both understanding and a sense of efficacy for changing those policies and practices.

DEFINE AND EXPLAIN EQUITY, INEQUITY, AND EQUITABLE SOLUTIONS EARLY AND OFTEN

In our analysis of current field communications, we observed that while the term "equity" was frequently used by organizations, it was not always defined. Our research indicates that the general public often lacks a clear understanding of what "equity" means, which hinders effective communication on the topic. Many people, upon hearing the term "equity," first think of "home equity," in the context of mortgage finances and property value. When prompted, they often mistakenly equate equity with equality. These are two different concepts that are often conflated.

Since 2021, conservative activists have increasingly targeted the word "equity," mischaracterizing it as a signal of efforts to indoctrinate children with a leftist, anti-white ideology, or suggesting it represents paternalistic approaches to addressing the needs of people of color.

Given these challenges, it is crucial to consistently define, explain, and provide examples of terms like "equity," "inequity," and "equitable solutions." Additionally, it is important to clarify how equity differs from equality.

TREND #3:

When field communications do acknowledge that assessments can fuel inequity, they often fail to explain exactly how these assessments contribute to it.

What the field is saying:

At times, the field acknowledges that current assessment systems can fuel inequity, but is stopping short of explaining how in plain-spoken ways:

> *[Standardized assessments] have been misused and overused for diagnostic, formative and summative purposes in US public schools since the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the testing expansions that occurred during the period of federal Race to the Top grants in the 2010s.*
>
> **Education union**

> *In a word, we are stuck with a set of old ideas about testing that are holding back much more productive approaches. Everyone involved in the assessment development process—from the local, district and state officials who decide which ones to use to those who create them—should acknowledge the flaws of the current system.*
>
> **Assessment-focused organization**

While the field is sometimes acknowledging that assessments can fuel inequity, it is often not doing the necessary explanatory work to invite people in to understanding some of the complexity in how these things work or don't work and why certain solutions are appropriate.

Implications for communicators:

Our research has shown that members of the public see assessment as an objective observer and reporter of how the education system is or isn't working. If the public does not understand how assessment can fuel inequity and not just report on it, then they are unlikely to see the need to make our assessment systems and practices more equitable and fair. What's more, our research suggests that if we don't challenge the fairness of assessment practices and explain why they can be inequitable, the public may mistakenly perceive efforts to make them more equitable as unfair, as they generally think assessments should reinforce the same standards for everyone without exceptions.

If the field does not explain the ways assessment can perpetuate inequity, the public may continue to believe that educational disparities are due to individual failings of certain groups of students. Communicators should emphasize that these disparities stem from systemic challenges, not individual shortcomings, to help the public understand the necessity of systemic solutions. Including explanations of how assessment can perpetuate and even drive racial inequities, in particular, may be important for shifting the public's thinking about racism as a relic of the past and for challenging the tendency in public thinking to reduce racial inequities to economic disparities.

TREND #4:

When the field discusses assessment approaches, solutions, and alternatives, they don't usually provide examples.

What the field is saying:

Across the communications materials analyzed, organizations are providing a robust sense of solutions to create more equitable assessment systems. However, they are not always providing real-world examples of how these solutions work. Oftentimes, new approaches are named and may remain abstract or overly technical to members of the public:

> *Importantly, practical measures don't work in isolation—they need to be embedded in a culture and routine of inquiry-based improvement.*
>
> **Education funder**

> *Authentic engagement and consultation of historically marginalized groups in the assessment process can be a viable step to addressing this issue.*
>
> **Civil rights organization**

> *We recognize that assessments should be improved to address shortcomings, including to become more culturally relevant and inclusive and to deliver more easily usable information.*
>
> **Education advocacy organization**

In some instances organizations are providing these examples, enhancing their explanations of the changes they are advocating for:

> *Example from the field: The Iowa Department of Education, as part of its obligations under the Every Student Succeeds Act, requires that all third through 12th graders participate in a school climate survey, the Conditions for Learning. Optional teacher and parent surveys are in process. These surveys will allow triangulation of the data to illuminate gaps in perception so schools can identify key areas of need and better understand the context of the social-emotional landscape of their school.*
>
> **Education advocacy organization**

> *Take, for example, New Mexico—where Tribal and community leaders, nonprofit organizations, foundations, and policymakers are developing an approach to education where students succeed "because of, not in spite of, who they are and where they come from." Innovation Zone schools develop customized graduate profiles that incorporate each community's input on the knowledge and skills young adults need today in addition to academic proficiency—from teamwork and critical thinking to strengths that reflect their cultural and linguistic identities.*
>
> **Education funder**

Implications for communicators:

Examples are an important explanatory tool that can help unlock understanding, dislodge unproductive assumptions, and point people toward solutions. It's crucial to use examples to make education-related solutions more accessible to the public. Our research has shown that the public tends to gravitate toward individual solutions to challenges in education, like expecting teachers to do more or urging parents to be more involved. Understanding how to redesign the education system to achieve better outcomes can be challenging for people because collective, systemic policies are complex to grasp, which is why clear examples are essential for public comprehension.

This is especially true for solutions related to assessment, since many of the proposed approaches to equitable assessment involve specialized language. Offering concrete, real-world examples that illustrate what these concepts look like in practice will likely help increase understanding among the public.

TREND #5:

The field names shortcomings in using data to inform decisions as a problem, but specific solutions remain unclear.

What the field is saying:

While many of the field communications materials analyzed acknowledge and explain that once assessment data is collected there can be issues with how it gets used, we did not see organizations naming concrete, specific solutions that would help address that issue.

Many organizations are identifying this as a common issue within our current assessment landscape:

> *Both proponents and opponents of our current testing system want educational assessments that can better guide decision-making and better inform classroom instruction and student progress.*
>
> **Education advocacy organization**

> *Decades of using assessment as a neutral observer of inequity—measuring and monitoring achievement gaps—has done little to actually create more equitable learning environments.*
>
> **Assessment-focused organization**

> *Regardless of how fair or valid an assessment, it will not play a role in fostering equity if results are not used appropriately to inform stakeholder action.*
>
> **Testing company**

Some organizations are more specifically attributing the problem to flaws in how education systems allocate resources using data:

> *All stakeholder groups said that they would like to see better follow-through on resource allocation. They noted that education systems often fall short when it comes to using assessment systems to allocate resources and supports to the schools that need them most.*
>
> **Education advocacy organization**

Others emphasize the lack of timeliness or the information not getting to the right interested parties:

> *But we know that in too many communities, those who most need information to help the students they care about do not have it. That needs to change.*
>
> **Education advocacy organization**

> *Annual lagging data, such as standardized test scores and graduation rates, were too infrequent and too broad to be helpful as timely and specific feedback.*
>
> **Education funder**

By and large, the trend across the sample was that organizations were not being specific about solutions to the challenge of assessment data not being used effectively and in a timely manner. However, some organizations did provide specific solutions to that challenge:

> *Support states in developing robust data systems to give families, educators, and other decision-makers access to valuable information on student performance and achievement over time.*
>
> **Education advocacy organization**

Implications for communicators:

When we talk about pressing problems and leave out solutions, we risk cuing fatalism in the public, which disadvantages our advocacy goals because it leads to people disengaging. We have to be especially careful about leaving our audiences feeling fatalistic because the public already has fatalistic tendencies; they understand our education system as being dysfunctional and embedded within a dysfunctional society, as noted in the cultural mindsets section above. When we are identifying problems, like our education system's shortcomings in using data to inform decisions, but not providing some sense of what a solution might be, we miss an opportunity to bring people together around solutions that we think are important. We also miss an opportunity to attribute this issue to systems and potentially shift people's default thinking away from blaming the *Tangible Triad* of students, teachers, and parents/families, mentioned in the previous section.

Building the public's understanding about the process of going from assessment to decisions can also help the public see how exactly assessment can further inequities. We also want to couple that explanation with ideas for how that process can work better and give people the sense that change is possible.

Summary of Trends in Field Communications

Below, we have organized into a table the trends and issues in field communications that have been discussed in this section of the report, as well as the recommendations and relevant mindsets for each trend (see Table 7).

Table 7: Key Trends in the Field's Framing of Equitable Assessment

Trend	Key Issue	Recommendation
Trend #1: Broad vision, inconsistent justification	Field promotes equitable assessment but often fails to explain why it is necessary.	Clearly communicate why equitable assessment is essential before detailing approaches.
Trend #2: Tension between standardized testing and equity	Field highlights the importance of standardized testing for equity but does not fully address its flaws.	Acknowledge both the value and biases of standardized testing to foster trust and understanding.
Trend #3: Acknowledging inequity without clear explanation	Field recognizes assessment fuels inequity but does not explain how it happens.	Explain how assessment can drive inequity to help the public see the need for change.
Trend #4: Lack of real-world examples	Field suggests solutions but lacks real-world examples to illustrate effectiveness.	Provide concrete, real-world examples to make solutions more tangible.
Trend #5: Data issues without concrete solutions	Field identifies challenges in using assessment data but does not propose specific solutions.	Offer specific solutions for how assessment data can be used effectively and equitably.

Emerging Recommendations

Throughout this report we have explored how the public thinks and how the field communicates about educational equity and assessment currently. While there is much more research left to do before we can come to a more concrete set of empirically tested reframing recommendations, from this first phase of research there are some things we can recommend to communicators. In this final section of the report, we lay out some preliminary, big-picture recommendations based on the research that has been discussed in this report.

RECOMMENDATION #1:

Expand public understanding of the education system beyond teachers, students, and parents.

One way to refocus people's understanding of education as something that is shared by all is to expand the public's vision of the education system as more than just students, teachers, and parents. When viewed so narrowly, people have a hard time seeing the full system of actors, institutions, and communities that influence educational decisions and learning environments and tend to place the burden on these individual actors. If people can become connected with the educational system as the vast network that it is, they will be more likely to view it as a more shared responsibility that involves more members of a community. This may help to promote a more inclusive and equitable vision of education, as well as a vision for assessment that shifts away from the job performance model that holds teachers and schools largely accountable.

RECOMMENDATION # 2:

Focus on how equitable education and assessment is collectively important for everyone in society.

The mindsets of education as a matter of money feed a sense of individualism, either because you need money to get an education or because education is a vehicle to earn money. This does not allow for a very robust understanding of what equity in education would look like, or why it would be desirable. But the public does understand education to be foundational for any society, and in the United States, educational instruction and funding is understood to be local. If communications emphasize that education is crucial for local communities, as well as society more broadly, then the public may be able to think beyond individual achievement and cultural orientations. This could help boost public understanding that the benefits of equity in education and equitable assessment extend to everyone in society. When education is viewed as a vital resource that strengthens the fabric of our society, we may be able to build broader support for equitable and inclusive educational practices that benefit all members of society.

RECOMMENDATION #3:

Be explicit about why we should shift how we do assessment and how equitable assessment helps us to achieve our educational goals.

Communicators should consider taking a step back in communications to first explain the importance of equitable assessment and why it is important for advancing educational equity. The field acknowledges that assessments can fuel inequities in education, but it doesn't do as good a job of explaining exactly *how* they do that. This can create tension, because the field is offering assessment as a solution to a problem that is perpetuated, at least in part, by assessments themselves. By acknowledging the flaws in assessment, and appropriately linking them to the historical legacy of assessments perpetuating the inequities of society, we provide people with context and with cause for the problems that need solutions. If people understand how assessments contribute to inequities in education, then they will be better equipped to see that the power of the assessment lies in the systemic power it is measuring and evaluating. This may allow them to also see assessment as a solution that can create equity.

RECOMMENDATION #4:

Provide examples of where equitable assessments already have worked.

Our analysis of field communications revealed that when the field discusses approaches, alternatives, and solutions around assessment, they do not normally provide examples. We also see that when the field does provide examples, it results in clearer articulations of what the field is advocating for and hoping to achieve. Examples help people to cut through jargon and the complexity of systemic policy changes and help to give real clarity to abstract concepts like "equity." As we saw in our qualitative interviews and survey, descriptive language that shows people what equitable education looks like can help them to imagine what equity is even if they don't understand the term. In the case of equitable assessment, the mindset that the public holds around students living with disability provides an already existing model of equitable assessment that could help people imagine what it looks like and why we might want to achieve it. Communicators might be able to leverage the public understanding that people do learn differently and are assessed according to their learning needs to promote assessment as a tool for creating equity in education, beyond the context of disability. It is important to remind people that it is possible, and a great way to do this is to highlight examples of it being done, while also providing them with a clear picture of what it is that needs to be done.

RECOMMENDATION #5:

Talk explicitly about systemic factors, especially racism, that exist in creating educational inequities.

As we saw in this first phase of research, people have difficulty thinking systemically about educational disparities. Specifically, members of the public tend to avoid talking about racial inequities in education. Racial inequities tend to get explained away as primarily or exclusively wealth disparities, unrelated to race. One way to deal with this is to explicitly talk about the historical legacy of structural racism as an important factor in creating wealth disparities, which is the most prominent way that people understand educational disparities. This may help people understand that it is not an accident that the underfunded schools in the US are often the schools that serve communities of color, which will provide important context for how assessment reproduces these inequities.

RECOMMENDATION #6:

Focus on assessment as an integrated part of the learning process rather than only as evidence of it.

One of the main obstacles to envisioning assessment is the public's mindset of assessment as an objective indicator of learning, rather than as a natural part of the learning process itself. For example, large-scale standardized tests are not designed to be incorporated as part of the learning process, whereas in-classroom assessments are designed explicitly as part of the learning process. In our research, we observed that when people have a mindset in which assessment is understood as an output of the learning process, like in the case of large-scale standardized tests, the focus is often placed on the individuals who produce those outputs, rather than the systems their design reinforces. To shift this, communicators can frame assessment as a process instead of output and foreground systems instead of people. This should help move away from the mindset where assessment is primarily a way to evaluate a teacher's job performance and expand people's understanding of what assessment consists of and how it can be used to create equity. This can help people to think of assessment, including standardized testing, differently and this could have the potential of helping them to envision an interactive and collaborative process between teachers, students, parents, community members, and other actors in the educational system.

Questions For Future Research

Below are some of the key questions that have emerged from this phase of research, and that we will try to address in the next phase of research. The next steps in this research process will be to design and test specific framing strategies that can help shift public thinking about learning, the education system, and assessment, and build support for assessment policies that promote equity.

1. How can the public's general acceptance of assessment as necessary and good be leveraged to generate support for assessment as a tool to create equity in education?
2. How can we expand the public's understanding of assessment from testing and grades to social and emotional learning and behavioral learning, and from individual learners to learning environments and contexts?
3. How can the idea of cultural background be used more effectively in communications to foreground the importance of cultural relevance in assessment, but also avoid racialized ideas of cultural essentialism that pin the blame on an individual's cultural background?
4. How can the existing public's mindsets about student-centered and needs-based assessment help to broaden and deepen understanding of equity in education and equitable assessment?
5. How can we help people go beyond the *Tangible Triad* to see the role that local communities can and should play in education, including assessment?

Acknowledgement

This project was guided by an advisory board of advocates, scholars, and other leaders in the field, to whom we are grateful.

Endnotes

1. Cochran, L. L. (2025, January 31). Department of Education undoes Biden's Title IX rules on gender. *The Hill*. https://thehill.com/homenews/education/5118925-trump-biden-title-ix-education-gender-lgbtq/

2. For example, Black students represent 16 percent of elementary school enrollment, but only 9 percent of students in gifted and talented programs (EdTrust. [2020, January 9]. *Black and Latino students shut out of advanced coursework opportunities.* https://edtrust.org/press-room/black-and-latino-students-shut-out-of-advanced-coursework-opportunities/). Another example is the use of the Stanford-Binet test to assess New York City's school children in 1913 that resulted in the classification of over 15,000 as "feeble-minded" and recommended them for sterilization (Reddy, A. [2008]. The eugenic origins of IQ testing: Implications for post-Atkins litigation. *DePaul Law Review, 57*[3]: 667–670.)

3. FrameWorks Institute. (2021). *Moving mindsets: the public imperative for policy change*. FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2021/03/Moving-mindsets_public-imperative.pdf

4. Equity in education is different from equality in education, where students have access to the same resources in the same way, regardless of their different needs. Equity, on the other hand, takes into consideration that students have varying learning needs, cultural backgrounds, and abilities; accounts for the entire learner; and provides appropriate support for their specific development. This is different from equality, which requires the same approach to assessing and instructing all students without considering cultural backgrounds or learning differences.

5. FrameWorks Institute. (2021). *Moving mindsets: the public imperative for policy change*. FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2021/03/Moving-mindsets_public-imperative.pdf

6. Mean endorsement o*f Government Funding* $M = 74.8$ (out of 100); mean endorsement of *Personal Wealth* $M = 77.7$ (out of 100). Mean scores have been transformed to a 100-point scale, with 50 representing the midpoint of the scale ("neither agree nor disagree"). Scores approaching zero signify a stronger rejection of the mindset, while those nearing 100 indicate a stronger endorsement of the mindset.

7. Correlation between *Personal Wealth* and *Government Funding* ($r = .47$, $p < .001$)

8. Institutional bias is defined as "a tendency for the procedures and practices of particular institutions to operate in ways which result in certain social groups being advantaged or favoured and others being disadvantaged or devalued. This need not be the result of any conscious prejudice or discrimination but rather of the majority simply following existing rules or norms. Institutional racism and institutional sexism are the most common examples." (Oxford Reference. [2025]. *Institutional bias.* https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100005347)

9. FrameWorks Institute. (2012). *Mapping the gaps on skills and learning: A Core Story of Education report.* FrameWorks Institute; FrameWorks Institute. (2014). *Putting it back together again: Reframing education using a core story approach.* FrameWorks Institute.

10. FrameWorks Institute. (2014). *Putting it back together again: Reframing education using a core story approach.* FrameWorks Institute.

11. Mean endorsement of *Motivated Student* mindset *M* = 78.3 (out of 100).
12. Mean endorsement of *Exceptional Teacher* mindset *M* = 79.7 (out of 100).
13. Mean endorsement of *It Starts at Home M* = 79.1 (out of 100).
14. A positive correlation indicates that as one variable increases, the other variable increases as well.
15. A negative correlation indicates that as one variable increases, the other variable decreases.
16. During the 2015–16 school year, Black students only made up 16 percent of students but also made up 31 percent of students that were arrested in schools or referred to law enforcement by schools (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. [2018]. *2015–16 Civil Rights Data Collection School Climate and Safety)*.
17. On the *Cultural Essentialism* mindset, differences between Black participants (mean endorsement = 62.4) and white participants (mean = 65.6) are significant ($p = .014$, $d = .16$).
18. Mean endorsement of the *Historical Legacy mindset M* = 53.1 (out of 100).
19. On the *Historical Legacy* mindset, differences between white participants (mean endorsement = 46.2) and Black participants (mean = 69.2) are significant ($p < .001$, $d = .85$); differences between white participants and Hispanic participants (means = 62.8) are significant ($p < .001$, $d = .81$).
20. FrameWorks Institute. (2014). *Putting it back together again: Reframing education using a core story approach.* FrameWorks Institute.
21. Mean endorsement of *Class Not Race M* = 63.3 (out of 100).
22. Correlation between *Class Not Race* and *Personal Wealth* ($r = .50$, $p < .001$).
23. Correlation between *Historical Legacy* and the belief that assessment and instruction should be relevant to a student's cultural background ($r = .56$, $p < .001$)
24. Mean endorsement of *Assessment Is Meeting Standards M* = 74.1 (out of 100). For additional details on group means by demographic variables, refer to the Methods Supplement.
25. FrameWorks Institute. (2014). *Putting it back together again: Reframing education using a core story approach.* FrameWorks Institute.
26. Mean endorsement of *Assessment Is Evidence M* = 75.8 (out of 100).
27. In the teacher sample, the correlation between *Assessment Is Evidence* and *Motivated Student* ($r = .55$, $p = .011$) is stronger than the correlation in the overall sample ($r = .41$, $p < .001$).
28. Participants were asked to respond to a forced-choice survey item designed to measure their agreement with one of two contrasting perspectives. The item read: Which perspective more closely aligns with your views? (1) Assessments are a solution for creating an education system that meets the needs of all students. (2) Assessments are not a solution for creating an education system that meets the needs of all students. Sixty-seven percent of participants agreed that assessment can be a solution for creating an education system that meets the needs of all students, while 33% disagreed.
29. Our quantitative findings suggest a similar pattern: Regardless of race, parental status, political affiliation, or teaching experience, participants consistently agree with the mindset that learning is different for each person (*M* = 84.1). Additionally, there is a strong and significant correlation between this mindset and attitudes toward the field's vision of equitable assessment ($r = .51$, $p < .001$). This correlation provides further evidence to suggest that people may rely on the mindset that learning is different for each person to justify why students should be assessed differently.

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FrameWorks Institute. (2025). *Envisioning Equity: How a New Story of Assessment Can Help Transform Education.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

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