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When it comes to the quality of education, there is a lot we can learn from basic data on students and schools.

The right information, or reported data, can tell a parent how his or her child is doing in the classroom. It can tell a teacher how his or her class is doing on a particular lesson, or an administrator how the teacher is performing.

If done correctly, parent and community-centered reporting measures can provide a window to the issues that inform many decisions on individual learning.

Better and more accessible data can help chart a new course in American education for every principal, teacher and student. Through better transparency and accountability — buzz words in the education debate — parents are able to stay more closely connected to a child's development and have the right information to make responsible choices.

The process of reforming No Child Left Behind is under way in Congress, and there is no shortage of criticism directed toward the current law. Most of the complaints from states, school districts and parents are justified, and there is bipartisan consensus that reform is long overdue.

One problem with current law is the 100 percent proficiency requirement for student groups by 2014. Even so, the existence of newly reported performance data has been a valuable tool in determining where attention is needed. In fact, one of the few crowning achievements of NCLB was the disaggregation of that performance data by student subgroups. States and school districts have begun using this data to improve classroom instruction and provide families and communities transparent information with which they can hold their schools accountable.

With reform now on the doorstep, the importance of these capabilities is illustrated by new research from the University of Washington's Center for Education Data & Research, indicating

that academic progress in public schools can be traced to a teacher's own academic career and course load. It's a simple concept with practical application.

More often than not, students are only as good as their teachers. Having effective teachers — a derivative of both good training and experience — is an essential part of what makes excellent learners. Thirty-five states currently have the means to trace teacher development, according to the Data Quality Campaign, and others are beginning to move in the same direction.

Teacher quality is not the only measurement worth taking, but it represents an important starting point for more effectively mapping student achievement.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan agrees. Earlier this month, a new initiative was announced to identify the best teacher-preparation programs through student test scores and encourage others to strive for improvement. The responsibility here should ultimately fall to states, but the decision rightly elevates the discussion to a higher level.

It's important that the conversation on the value of data continues against the backdrop of the ongoing reform debate. The federal government has a track record of making too many bad decisions in education, and the House is doing its part by re-examining the federal footprint in education policy. What's certain, after more than a year of hearings and oversight, is that learning is best directed by those who are most closely connected to the student.

With the right information available, parents will have a clearer and much needed line of sight into the education and development of their children.