

From Evidence to Ecosystem: Inclusive Measurement as the Infrastructure for School Transformation

Christina Cipriano



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What if we did educational measurements differently?

The political moment has forced the hands of many in educational research and measurement to reevaluate what we measure and why. While the field of educational measurement has grown more sophisticated over time, it has arguably not always grown more useful for school practitioners. The evolution of school-based assessment continues to work against a strong historical current that optimized measurement for accountability and standardization purposes^{1,2} often at the exclusion of actionability for the students, teachers, and school systems.^{3,4,5}

As I like to say, if we want things to be different, we must do something differently.

This case study features a decade-long program of measurement research and tool development from the Education Collaboratory, an independent research-to-impact center I founded at Yale University and recently transitioned to the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Our measurement agenda is organized around the conviction that assessment, when designed well, can function as infrastructure for school transformation.

The Why, What, and How of Educational Measurement at the Education Collaboratory

Our measurement research program is grounded in three commitments: why we measure, what we measure, and how we measure.

Why We Measure. We measure to support students as agents in their own learning, and to help educators see students as they are, rather than as deficit-laden profiles or aggregate scores may suggest them to be. We use assessment as a tool for insight, relationship, and action.

What We Measure. If the purpose of measurement is to support students and help educators to change their actions, then the constructs we choose to measure must be ones that schools can influence. Our measurement program focuses on discrete, malleable, relational constructs such as emotional regulation profiles, educator-student interaction quality, and conditions of learning and belonging. These constructs sit within the causal pathway between school practices and student outcomes.^{6,7,8,9} When educators and the students themselves can see them clearly with data, they can make informed decisions to change them.^{10,12,13}

How We Measure. Even the right constructs, pursued for the right reasons, can fail to produce useful knowledge if the methods of measurement are inaccessible, deficit-oriented, or designed in ways that exclude the very students they are meant to serve. Our measurement program advances four methodological commitments: co-construction with students and educators throughout the development of our tools; strengths-based design that generates profiles rather than single scores; formative logic that produces information usable in real time; and data democratization that returns interpretable, actionable information to the people closest to learning.

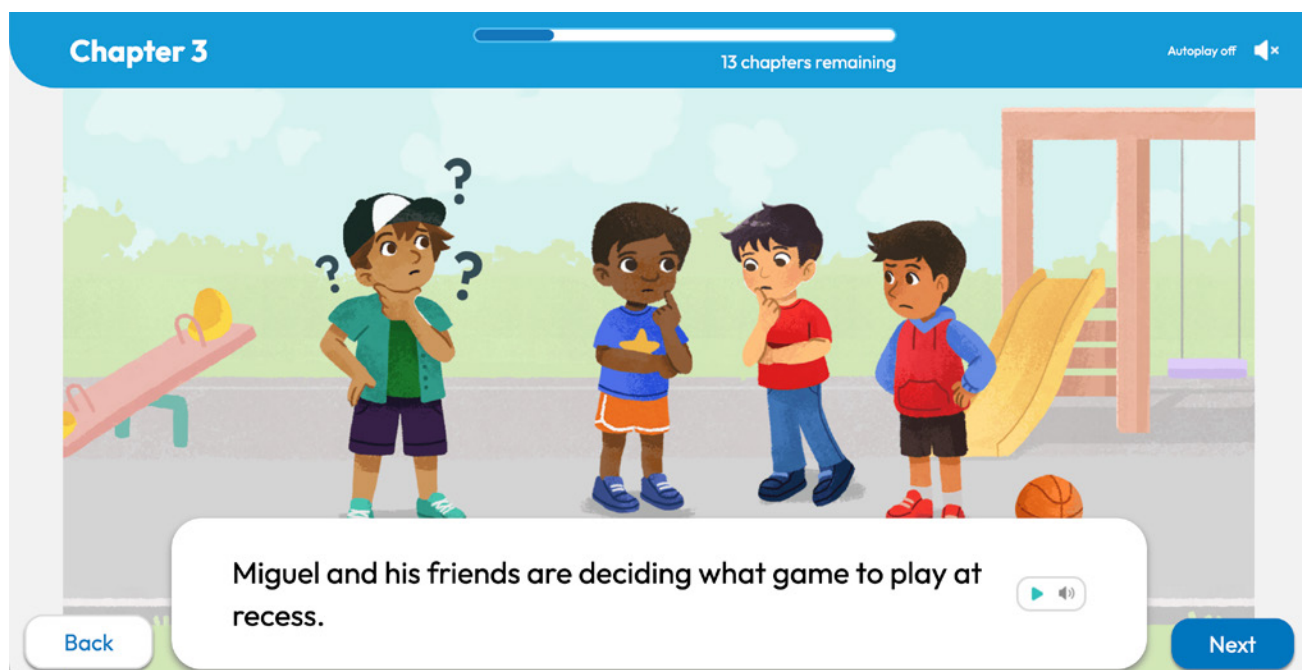
When measurement is organized around this framework, it can function as a tool for efficacy, fairness, and equity. When it is not, it risks reproducing the very exclusions it claims to address.

Building Tools That Embody Our Theory

Over the past decade, I have built a program of research that has generated a suite of validated assessment instruments and school-based implementation supports designed to put this framework into practice. Here I present three tools that illustrate our methodological commitments, each operating at a different level of the school system: the individual student, the classroom, and the school as a whole.

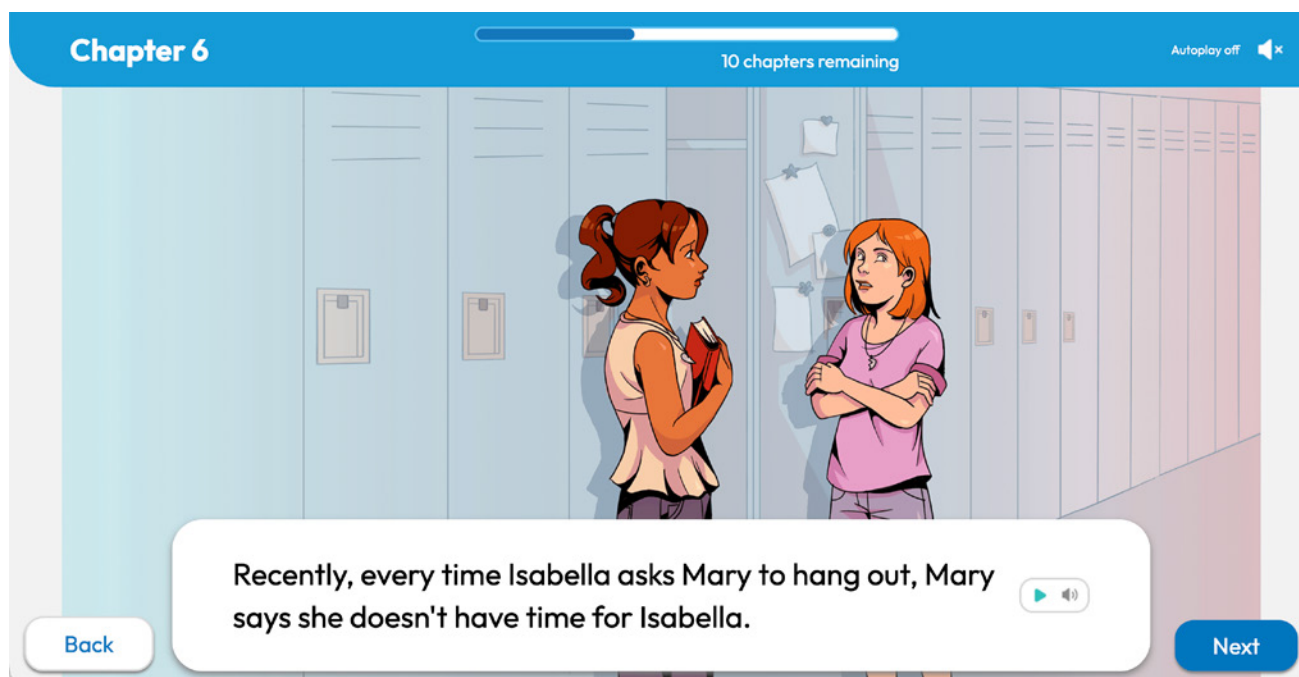
My Emotion Playbook

The Student Emotion Regulation Assessment, available to practitioners beginning fall 2026 as *My Emotion Playbook*, was developed over five years through a co-design process that centered youth and educators as active partners in measurement design. The development process began with a systematic review of the developmental science of emotion regulation, and existing emotion regulation assessments in U.S. schools, which revealed that available tools were largely designed for research utility rather than practitioner use, and that few had been developed with attention to development and how students themselves understand and describe their own regulatory experiences.^{9,14} That gap defined the design question: *what should an evidence-based assessment of emotion regulation in schools look like if it were built to be useful to the student who takes it?*



The answer was a digital, vignette-based tool that presents students with scenarios eliciting common affective experiences drawn from real school life and asks them to identify how they would likely respond. The scenarios were co-developed with students and educators across multiple school years, ensuring that the emotional contexts represented in the tool reflected experiences generalizable to students nationwide across diverse contexts.

Importantly, the assessment does not produce a benchmark of emotion regulation skill or assign a single SEL score. A substantial body of my team's emotion science cautions against treating emotion regulation as a unidimensional construct in which more is always better; strategy selection is highly context-dependent, and what functions as adaptive regulation in one setting may not in another.^{15,14} Instead, *My Emotion Playbook* generates a regulatory profile that maps each student's preferences, strengths, and support needs across five strategy categories: reappraisal, problem-solving, emotional support-seeking, avoidance and escape, and repetitive thinking.^{10,11,12,13} Students and educators receive interpretable, strengths-based information they can use immediately to inform instruction, well-being planning, and individualized support, without requiring a researcher or clinician to translate the data.



My Emotion Playbook is available in primary (grades 1 through 5) and secondary (grades 6 through 12) versions, with validated Spanish-language editions of both. The tool was developed and validated with more than 44,000 students across the United States, with particular attention to measurement invariance across gender, grade level, and race and ethnicity.^{10,11,12,13} Development was supported by the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and scaling now by the Gates Foundation. For practitioner access beginning fall 2026, see <https://www.educationcollaboratory.org/toolsforschools>.

My Classroom Compass

The Compass Checklist for Elementary Schools, available in fall 2026 as *My Classroom Compass*, addresses a long identified gap in SEL - most social and emotional learning research and practice has focused on content, meaning what to teach, while largely neglecting pedagogy, meaning how to teach it.^{16,17,18} Even when districts adopt evidence-based SEL programs, implementation quality varies substantially within and across schools, and practitioners have historically had limited access to tools designed to assess and improve the quality of social and emotional teaching that drives those outcomes.^{19,20} *My Classroom Compass* was developed to address that specific measurement gap.

The development process was federally supported by the Institute of Education Sciences (R305A210262) and unfolded across seven years through four overlapping phases: conceptualization of the theoretical framework, iterative indicator development and field testing, observer training development, and a two-year pilot study. Our team engaged 12 expert advisors and 27 SEL leaders, including district administrators, school principals, counselors, and SEL specialists and coaches, who collectively observed 80 teachers across 29 partner schools in 12 states.²¹ Partner schools reflected national diversity in geography, urbanicity, school size, and student demographics.

A pivotal insight from the early development phases directly shaped the tool's theoretical foundation. Initial observations using a predecessor instrument revealed that the presence of social and emotional content in a lesson is not evidence of effective teaching of that content. That finding prompted a fundamental reorientation from documenting what teachers cover to documenting how they teach it. The resulting Framework for the Pedagogies of Social and Emotional Learning¹⁸ distinguishes between the carriers of SEL instruction, such as storybook read-alouds or structured discussions, and its active ingredients, the discrete, observable teaching behaviors through which social and emotional learning actually occurs. *My Classroom Compass* operationalizes five pedagogies: modeling, practice promotion, transfer promotion, elaboration, and validation.



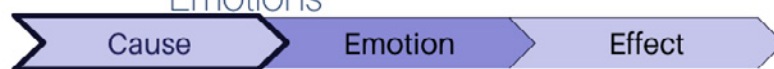
The "What" of SEL
Social and Emotion Content

The "How" of SEL
Teacher Behaviors

How to differentiate
between these indicators

Self-Awareness

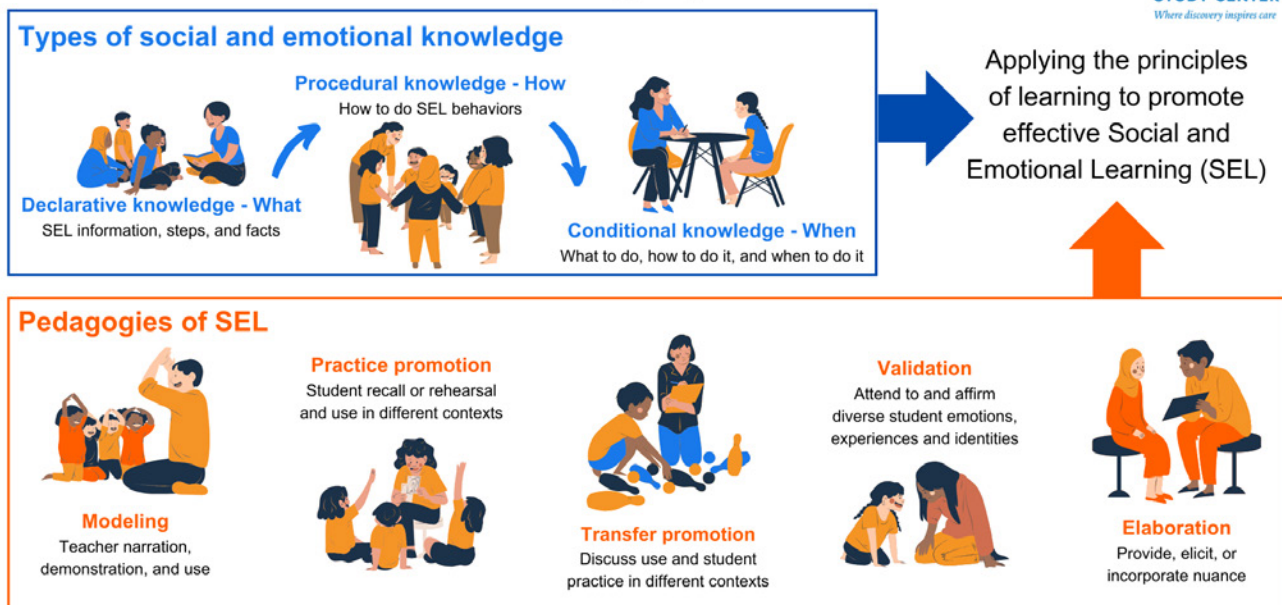
Emotions



The tool is designed for formative use by education leaders, specifically school- and district-based staff who support teachers in SEL implementation. An observer completes the 23-item checklist across structured 15-minute classroom observation intervals, and the resulting data serves as the foundation for strengths-based coaching and professional development. Because the pedagogies are program- and subject-neutral, the tool can be applied across any SEL curriculum or academic subject, making it particularly useful in contexts where SEL instruction is embedded into everyday instruction rather than delivered as a standalone block.

That design decision is more consequential now than at any prior moment in the tool's development. Across the United States, schools are increasingly limiting formal SEL instruction time in response to political opposition, reassigning dedicated SEL blocks to differential academic priorities. *My Classroom Compass* provides the observational infrastructure to make social and emotional teaching visible, regardless of the content block. When school leaders can see and name what effective social and emotional teaching looks like across the full school day, they can support teachers in doing it more intentionally, in math lessons as readily as in morning meetings. Psychometric and validity evidence from the pilot study, including factor structure analyses, a generalizability study, and associations with both proximal classroom quality measures and distal student social and emotional outcomes, will be reported in a forthcoming paper.²²

Framework for the Pedagogies of SEL



Zieher et al., (2024) in Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy

Institute of Education Sciences Grant R305A210262

My Curriculum Partner

My Curriculum Partner began as an investigation to answer a systematically unaddressed question in the contemporary SEL literature: *is Tier 1 SEL accessible to the millions of students with learning differences who sit in general education classrooms and receive most of their instruction there?*^{23,24}

We examined this question over five-years through a three-study investigation funded by the Oak Foundation. The first study analyzed six widely used SEL programs against two complementary frameworks, Universal Design for Learning and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, and identified four categories of accessibility barriers embedded in existing curricula: physical, sensory, and cognitive accessibility; emotional accessibility; language, text, and discourse; and executive functioning.²⁵ The second study validated these barriers with educators across multiple school years.²⁶ The third study went directly to students with learning differences themselves, working through a co-designed protocol to surface what they needed, in their own words, to access and benefit from SEL instruction. Their answers clustered into four themes: honor flow, design for engagement, consider emotional accessibility, and vary the mode of instruction.²⁵

My Curriculum Partner translates this research base into a tool that curriculum developers and educators can use directly. The tool applies the barriers and solutions frameworks to existing materials, flagging where a lesson, worksheet, or activity may present an accessibility barrier and surfacing language patterns that may exclude or stigmatize students with learning differences. The tool functions as both an audit and a language checker: a curriculum developer can run existing materials through it to identify where physical, sensory, emotional, or executive functioning barriers are likely to arise, and where the language of a lesson may not reflect the strengths-based, identity-affirming framing the research base calls for.

What distinguishes *My Curriculum Partner* from extant accessibility checklists is its grounding in what students themselves identified as the conditions for access. The tool asks whether a lesson honors student flow, offers genuine autonomy, attends to the emotional terrain of the classroom, and varies its mode of instruction, the four conditions that students with learning differences named as the difference between a lesson they could access and one they could not.²⁵

Across all of these tools, and our broader program of research, practitioners will find the results of rigorous methods put in the service of actionable, equitable, and humanizing forms of measurement.

Proof of Concept at Scale: Project Flourish

Launched in January 2022 with support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Project Flourish brought together three partner organizations: two community-based school support organizations, Trajectory of Hope and the Urban Assembly, and my research team based at the Yale Child Study Center. Across two full school years, the partnership explored the social, emotional, and behavioral experiences of more than 44,000 students nested in more than 200 schools nationwide, while diving deeply into the everyday implementation of SEL assessment in a smaller set of schools in Los Angeles and New York City. Our work included more than 350 systematic classroom observations, reached more than 1,000 educators, and produced 54 Advise and Design sessions in which students, educators, and school leaders sat together with assessment data and built action plans from it.

What made this scale possible was the structural decision for each partner school to receive a full-time SEL Specialist, embedded on site, often two full days a week, for the duration of the partnership. The assessment toolkit itself included the earlier version of the Student Emotion Regulation Assessment, alongside numerous additional tools. The SEL Specialist's role was to make sure that data became a conversation, identifying and creating what supports were necessary to do so in the school, and leading it.



The data, and the structures built to interpret it, changed what schools did next. At Trajectory of Hope's partner campuses in the Lawndale Elementary School District, assessment findings led directly to a fifth-grade wellness camp and enhanced SEL lessons at F.D. Roosevelt Elementary, the establishment of a Black Student Union and mindfulness stations at Will Rogers Middle School, and advise-and-design sessions focused on advocacy for additional social work support and culturally responsive instructional resources at William Green Elementary and Jane Addams Middle School. At sites where these interventions took hold, school climate data tracked over time showed measurable narrowing of gaps in students' reported experiences of social safety, relationships, and school pride for Black students relative to their peers, gaps that had been clearly present at the start of the partnership.

Trajectory of Hope's work directly reached 2,700 students, 75 Black families, and 300 educators across four campuses, with an estimated indirect reach of more than 8,000 students, 300 Black families, and 600 educators across the district. At the Urban Assembly's eight partner schools, every site administered at least one student-facing or educator-facing assessment, and three-quarters of sites completed two or more, alongside a minimum of three Advise and Design sessions at all but one campus.

The qualitative record behind these numbers is substantial. SEL Specialists generated 652 field notes, including 362 classroom observations and 290 weekly reflections, alongside transcripts from 55 Advise and Design sessions. A team of ten coders, each contributing a positionality statement on how their own identities might shape their interpretation of the data, coded this material to identify common facilitators and challenges to SEL implementation across schools, educators, leadership, students, and systems.

Perhaps the most critical finding did not come from any single assessment, but from what happened after the partnership formally ended. Five of the eight Urban Assembly schools chose to continue SEL services independently into the following school year. In close-out interviews, partner organizations described practices that had, in their words, become part of the school's culture, persisting even after the dedicated SEL Specialists were no longer on site. That persistence is itself a form of evidence and suggests that when measurement is paired with embedded human infrastructure, the resulting practices can outlive the project that introduced them.

These outcomes constitute a new validity argument, demonstrating that when measurement is designed intentionally with schools to meet their needs, and when schools are supported with the structures and staffing to interpret and act on what they find, assessment functions as a driver of meaningful organizational change rather than as a compliance mechanism.



Project Flourish also named a systems problem that could not be solved at the level of individual tools or partnerships. The Urban Assembly's use cases clearly illustrated how even with strong assessment tools, sites without dedicated staff time struggled with delayed rollouts, limited data sharing, and uneven buy-in. The presence of a full-time SEL Specialist made the difference between data that sat unused and data that drove change. Sustained use required infrastructure that did not yet exist at scale: systems for onboarding schools that were new to formative SEL assessment, protocols for data interpretation that did not require a trained researcher in the room, and resources for connecting data to action that schools could access independently of a grant-funded specialist. The work revealed, in other words, that the next frontier was not better tools but a better ecosystem for using tools well.

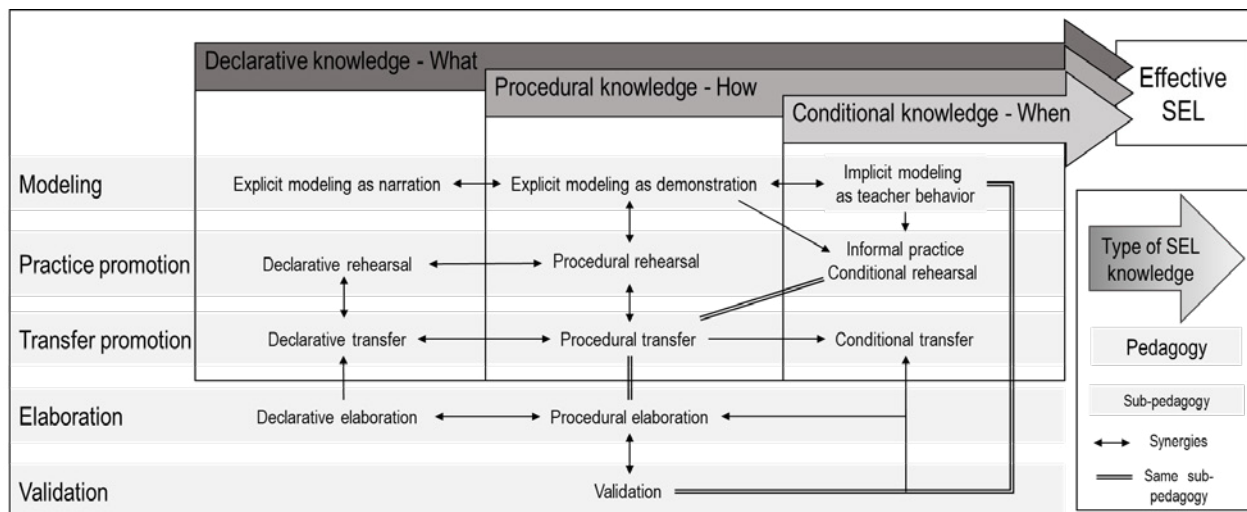
So, this is what we built next.

The Education Collaboratory Tools for Schools

The Education Collaboratory's Tools for Schools hub features more than a dozen distinct tools, protocols, and frameworks organized across five phases of use, spanning the full range of what schools require to move from awareness to sustained, equitable practice. In the Understand phase, the Learning Conditions Landscape gives cross-role school teams a structured diagnostic protocol that generates a personalized starting profile and routes directly into the hub, while the Universal Design for Social and Emotional Learning (UDSEL) Framework Explorer provides an interactive introduction to the Education Collaboratory's research-based model for designing social and emotional learning environments that serve students with and without disabilities.²⁷ The Framework for the Pedagogies of Social and Emotional Learning¹⁸ is also housed here, connecting directly to *My Classroom Compass* for school leaders ready to observe those pedagogies in practice.

In the Measure phase, *My Emotion Playbook* and *My Curriculum Explorer* provide validated tools for assessing student regulatory experience and evaluating the accessibility of instructional materials, respectively.

The Design phase features the Collaboratory for Inclusion, a full school improvement suite grounded in a structured two-phase process of Discovery and Exploration, with tools that support teams in identifying what is not working and for whom before redesigning anything.²⁸ The Improve phase pairs *My Classroom Compass* with a Data Interpretation and Debriefing Protocol, a structured facilitation guide for moving school and district teams from data to interpretation to action without defaulting to deficit framings of students or staff. The Scale phase provides district and system leaders with an Evidence Brief, an Executive Overview, a Tiered Adoption Guide, and a Communication Toolkit designed to support the internal case-making, governance presentations, and staff communications that make building-level implementation sustainable across schools.



Tools for Schools represents a deliberate shift from tool development to ecosystem building. Producing a validated instrument is not the same as constructing the conditions under which schools can use it well, repeatedly, and equitably across diverse contexts. The hub builds those conditions in, at every phase and for every audience, so that the distance between evidence and practice is not left for individual schools to close on their own.

Implications and Future Directions

The work described in this case study demonstrates how when measurement is treated as infrastructure, it can return useful, interpretable, actionable information to transform teaching and learning for students. Current investments supported by the Gates Foundation will extend the measurement program to support school and district improvement at the systems level. The Back-to-School 2026 launch of the Education Collaboratory Tools for Schools at educationcollaboratory.org will make the full ecosystem freely available to schools nationwide, with no licensing fees and no institutional barriers. A forthcoming Implementation Institute for Schools (launching summer 2027) will support national scaling of the measurement ecosystem and deepen research partnerships with school mental health leaders, educational leaders, and state chiefs committed to building the infrastructure that makes improvement possible.

So: what if we did educational measurements differently? This is what differently looks like. It looks like a decade of co-designed tools built with the students and educators they are meant to serve. It looks like proof of concept at scale in more than 200 schools across two coasts. It looks like an ecosystem that meets schools where they are, at no cost, so that the distance between evidence and practice is not something individual educators have to close on their own. And it looks like a field that is willing to ask not only whether our measurements are rigorous, but whether they are useful, equitable, and worthy of the students whose lives they touch.

If we want things to be different, we must do something differently.

Endnotes

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Christina Cipriano, Ph.D., is the inaugural Joseph W. and Alma W. Keilty Endowed Chair and Professor in Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst College of Education, effective fall 2026, and Founder and Director of the Education Collaboratory. Her research advances rigorous, inclusive, and translational science of learning and development, with a focus on educational measurement, evidence synthesis, and implementation science. She is the recipient of the 2025 NCME Exceptional Achievement in Educational Measurement Award, the 2025 AERA Distinguished Contribution to Human Development Education Research Award, and the 2023 National Voice of Change in Public Education Award. She has secured more than \$16 million in extramural funding and published more than 130 papers, commentaries, and reports advancing the science of learning in schools worldwide.

About the Study Group

The Study Group exists to advance the best of artificial intelligence, assessment, and data practice, technology, and policy; uncover future design needs and opportunities for educational systems; and generate recommendations to better meet the needs of students, families, and educators.

About the Education Collaboratory

The Education Collaboratory is a research center that advances the science of learning and social and emotional development. First housed at Yale University, and now established at the University of Massachusetts Amherst College of Education, the Education Collaboratory connects evidence, policy and practice by setting a new standard for rigorous, actionable research built to serve every learner.

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