LEGAL SUFFICIENCY

Proving Education Inadequacy Without the Test Score Trap

By Harry Feder, FairTest · Published October 2026

WHAT DOES THE CURRENT SYSTEM ASSUME ABOUT LEGAL SUFFICIENCY?

That standardized test score gaps are the proof: to show a court that a state is failing its students, advocates must point to scores. The paper argues test scores are neither necessary nor sufficient to prove an education is inadequate and can hamper remedies that most benefit impacted students and communities.

THE KEY POINTS IN BRIEF

- **The test score trap.** Since No Child Left Behind, school funding suits have leaned on test score disparities. That pulls plaintiffs into expert battles over whether more money moves scores, and into a narrow idea of what the state owes students.
- **Inputs are essential.** Deficits in what schools actually have to work with generally track score deficits, and they give courts a clearer, more actionable basis for ordering relief.
- **Witness stories and evidence of post-graduate outcomes are most persuasive.** Witness testimony and consequential outcomes, such as graduation, college enrollment, need for remediation, degree attainment, and future earnings are important to judicial determinations.
- **Adequacy should reflect the graduate profile.** At least 22 states have adopted Portraits of a Graduate that define expectations of a state system and align with many judicial definitions. Performance assessments, capstones and portfolios are stronger indicators of adequacy than a score.
- **Better remedies follow.** Targeting inputs needed for opportunities to learn and outcomes beyond test scores can produce remedies aimed at what communities and impacted students actually need to flourish.

READ THE FULL PAPER

eduaccountability.org/legal-sufficiency.html

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

If you're a parent or caregiver

- Does my child's school have the basics for a real chance to learn?
- Would a test score gap tell the whole story of what my school lacks?
- What would I want a decision-maker to hear about my community's schools?

If you're a student

- What do I need at school to have a real opportunity to learn?
- Beyond test scores, what should count as proof my school prepared me for work, college, and citizenship?
- If my school were short on resources, who would listen to my story?

If you're an educator

- What do my students lack that no test score captures?
- Could their portfolios and capstones show what scores can't?
- Have I ever been asked to describe the conditions in my school to someone with power to change them?

If you're a policy maker

- Are we judging adequacy by what schools have and broad outcomes, or by scores alone?
- If a court ordered a remedy tomorrow, who would help design it?
- Does our graduate profile match what our funding actually provides?