

WHITE PAPER

How post-COVID norm shifts change the meaning of MAP Growth metrics for school accountability

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Table of contents

3	Introduction
5	Screening students for intervention
7	Teacher evaluation and performance-based compensation
9	Charter school authorization and school accreditation
11	Conclusion
12	Author

Introduction

This paper examines how the 2025 update to NWEA®'s MAP® Growth™ national norms changes the interpretation and use of key norm referenced metrics in school accountability contexts. We show how shifts in post COVID achievement and growth patterns and the introduction of NWEA's enhanced item selection algorithm (EISA), call for careful review of commonly used metrics such as achievement percentiles, conditional growth percentiles (CGPs), and projected proficiency. These changes have important implications for how educators, system leaders, and authorizers interpret school performance and make decisions.

Every three to five years, NWEA updates its national norms to ensure MAP Growth continues to provide timely, relevant, and accurate information to its partner districts and states. The [2025 norms update](#) was particularly consequential. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, national patterns of [student achievement and growth have fallen substantially below prepandemic trends](#), requiring a recalibration of the national reference group against which student performance is interpreted.

The updated norms reflect the realities of today's classrooms where achievement patterns, student demographics, and instructional conditions have shifted in lasting ways, and incorporate key enhancements to MAP Growth. Most notably, the update aligns norms to the EISA, which strengthens alignment of MAP Growth to grade level content.

This paper is written for state and district leaders, charter authorizers, accreditors, and school administrators who use MAP Growth data in accountability, evaluation, or improvement efforts. First, we illustrate how the 2025 norms have shifted reading and math achievement and growth patterns, and how these shifts affect commonly used MAP Growth metrics. We then examine the implications across three accountability contexts where norm referenced measures play a central role:

1. Screening and identification of students for intervention,
2. Teacher evaluation and performance based compensation,
3. Charter school authorization and school accreditation.

Across each context, we highlight why revisiting how metrics are interpreted matters, where misinterpretation is most likely, and what leaders can do. By offering practical guidance on the use of norm referenced metrics under updated norms, this paper aims to support MAP Growth partners in making accurate, fair, and instructionally meaningful accountability decisions in a post COVID landscape.

What's new in the 2025 norms—and why it matters for interpreting results in accountability contexts.

When norms change, the meaning of norm referenced (comparative) metrics changes as well. Measures such as achievement percentiles and conditional growth percentiles (CGPs), describe student and school performance *relative to national peers*. As those peers shift in what kinds of achievement and growth are “typical”, the same RIT score—or the same amount of growth—can yield different percentile rankings than in prior years. Table 1 summarizes what commonly used MAP Growth metrics tell us about student achievement.

Table 1. What MAP Growth metrics tell you

Metric	What it tells you
RIT score	Student test scores on the NWEA MAP Growth assessments, which range from 100 to 350
RIT score gain	Student gains in RIT scores over time (e.g., fall to spring)
Achievement percentile	Relative ranking of a student's RIT score within a given term and grade compared to students in the same grade, subject area, and with the same instructional weeks in the 2025 NWEA MAP Growth norms
Conditional growth percentile (CGP)	Relative ranking of a student's RIT score gain between testing events compared to students with the same starting achievement level, grade, subject area, and instructional weeks in the 2025 NWEA MAP Growth norms
Projected proficiency	If a student is more likely than not to score proficient on the state summative assessment, based on their projected growth and expected spring RIT score under the 2025 NWEA MAP Growth norms

The 2025 MAP Growth norms reflect substantial changes in the national achievement landscape following the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as technical improvements to the assessment itself. The table below illustrates how the interpretation of commonly used MAP Growth metrics in reading and math changes under the 2025 norms, including how the same performance may yield different percentile rankings or projections.

Table 2. How MAP Growth metrics shift under the 2025 norms: reading vs. math

Metric	Reading	Math
Achievement percentiles	Same RIT score can rank higher due to national declines in achievement.	For lower achieving students, the same RIT score can rank higher due to declines at the lower end of the national distribution.
Conditional growth percentiles (CGPs)	Same RIT gain can rank higher due to lower national growth.	For higher-growth students, same RIT gain can rank lower due to higher national growth.
Projected proficiency	For the same starting performance and growth, projected proficiency is lower due to reduced growth expectations.	Mixed: Higher growth expectations can increase projected proficiency, but higher proficiency thresholds due to EISA can make proficiency harder to reach.

For additional technical documentation on the 2025 norms, including methodology and detailed growth patterns, see NWEA's 2025 [MAP Growth Norms Technical Manual](#) and [Norms Toolkit](#). See the [MAP Growth EISA overview](#) and [EISA research brief](#) for guidance on the EISA algorithm.

For leaders using MAP Growth data in accountability decisions, understanding what changed in the norms can be helpful to ensure that interpretations of performance remain aligned with actual student progress and accountability goals. As national achievement and growth distributions shift, comparisons over time and fixed thresholds used in prior accountability systems no longer carry the same meaning. Without careful interpretation, updated norms can make student performance appear better or worse even when underlying test scores have remained stable. Accountability systems that do not carefully review the use of norm-based metrics risk becoming misaligned with the learning outcomes they aim to monitor and improve.

The sections that follow illustrate how shifting norm referenced metrics can shape accountability decisions across key use cases, highlighting where misinterpretation is most likely and how leaders can respond.

Screening students for intervention

States and districts increasingly rely on MAP Growth data to screen students for academic risk and to guide intervention through policies such as Read by Grade 3 and Multi Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). These systems often use norm referenced cut points to identify students who may need additional support.

Why recalibration to 2025 norms matters

Norm referenced metrics remain valuable for understanding students' performance relative to national peers. However, when norms shift, fixed percentile cut points no longer represent the same level of academic risk. Applying the same percentile thresholds from prior norm sets, without adjustment, can lead districts to under identify students who remain below grade level, even as their relative standing appears stronger.

Where misinterpretation is most likely when

- Static percentile cut points (e.g., below the 40th percentile) are used for screening *across* norm sets.
- Percentiles are interpreted as signals of grade-level proficiency, rather than relative standing.
- Screening decisions rely on a single norm referenced indicator without considering data on student progress toward grade level expectations.

In these cases, apparent improvements in percentiles may reflect changes in the national comparison group, not changes in student achievement or academic progress.

How this plays out in practice

A third-grade student scores at the 40th achievement percentile in reading under the 2025 norms. Under the 2020 norms, that same level of performance would have ranked closer to the 35th percentile. If a district maintains a screening threshold of “below the 40th percentile,” this student may no longer qualify for intervention despite demonstrating essentially the same level of reading and remaining below grade level expectations.

What leaders can do

Leaders generally face two viable approaches to screening under updated norms. The key is to choose intentionally and to apply the choice consistently.

Option A: Anchor screening to grade-level proficiency risk

Use MAP Growth norms to understand what is typical for students with similar starting points, but ground identification decisions in data on whether students are on track to meet grade-level expectations.



Benefits: Better aligned to grade level expectations and proficiency targets, and reduces risk of under identifying struggling students.



Risks: Requires more local decision making and calibration.



Best used when: Screening is tied to high stakes outcomes (e.g., mandatory intervention or grade retention).

Option B: Preserve relative percentile benchmarks

Continue using established percentile thresholds for screening, with explicit recognition that these cut points now represent a different level of academic risk than before.



Benefits: Easier continuity over time and simpler to communicate and operationalize.



Risks: May unintentionally weaken the rigor of identification.



Best used when: Percentiles are paired with additional evidence of proficiency risk.

Successful example

In one district, leaders continued using a 40th achievement percentile cutoff to identify students for reading support. Under the 2025 norms, fewer students met that threshold, even though many showed RIT scores and projected proficiency results that suggested they were unlikely to reach grade-level expectations by end of the year. Noticing this decline in eligible students, leaders revisited their approach. They supplemented achievement percentiles with projected proficiency data, allowing them to flag students above the cutoff who were still off track. This shift helped direct support to students based on their risk of not meeting grade level expectations.

Bottom line

Achievement percentiles and CGPs remain valuable for understanding students' relative progress, but under post-COVID norms, screening decisions can be strengthened by pairing norm referenced metrics with evidence of whether students are on track to meet grade level expectations.

Teacher evaluation and performance-based compensation

Teacher evaluation and performance based compensation systems are designed to recognize effective instruction, motivate improvement, and support the recruitment and retention of strong educators. Many evaluation systems incorporate norm referenced indicators, such as CGPs, as evidence of teacher effectiveness.

Why recalibration to 2025 norms matters

Because CGPs reflect students' growth relative to national peers with similar starting points, shifts in national growth distributions can affect teachers' evaluation outcomes independently of instructional quality. Without intentional recalibration, re-norming can make teacher performance appear to improve or decline simply because the national comparison group has changed, and not because teaching has become stronger or weaker.

Where misinterpretation is most likely when

- CGPs are used as fixed thresholds (e.g., “median CGP $\geq$ 50”) across norm sets.
- Changes in percentile based results are interpreted as changes in teaching effectiveness.
- Evaluation results are compared across years without acknowledging that the benchmarks themselves have shifted.

These risks are pronounced when evaluation stakes are high and results directly affect decisions on compensation, tenure, or career advancement.

How this plays out in practice

Subject specific norm shifts can produce divergent evaluation outcomes:

- **Reading:** Lower national growth among lower achieving readers can raise CGPs for teachers whose students start far behind, even when absolute RIT gains are unchanged. For example, a sixth-grade student with a fall RIT score of 200 who grows 3 points by spring would place at the 19th percentile for CGP under 2020 norms, but under the 2025 norms, that same RIT score gain corresponds to the 22nd percentile.
- **Math:** Higher growth expectations—especially for students closer to or above typical performance—can lower CGPs for teachers of higher performing classes despite strong instruction and consistent RIT gains. For example, a sixth-grade student with a fall RIT score of 240 who grows 8 points by spring would place at the 50th percentile under the prior, 2020 norms. But under the 2025 norms, the same RIT score gain only corresponds to a CGP of the 34th percentile.

In both cases, shifts in evaluation results reflect changes in the national comparison group rather than actual changes in student achievement growth.

What leaders can do

When using MAP Growth in teacher evaluation, leaders must decide whether evaluation ratings are intended to reflect instructional impact as reflected in student achievement gains or progress toward proficiency, or relative standing compared to national peers.

Option A: Anchor evaluation to grade-level learning expectations

Use CGPs diagnostically to understand how students are growing relative to national peers, but anchor evaluation judgments in absolute RIT gains, progress toward proficiency, or other evidence of student progress to grade-level expectations.

-  **Benefits:** More directly aligned with instructional goals and proficiency targets, and reduces the risk of evaluative swings driven by national shifts in student achievement growth.
-  **Risks:** Requires more local decision-making and calibration.
-  **Best used when:** Evaluation results carry high stakes for compensation or tenure. In these contexts, anchoring judgments in students' progress toward grade level expectations helps ensure that decisions reflect instructional impact rather than shifts in national growth trends.

Option B: Preserve relative growth benchmarks

Maintain existing CGP based thresholds while explicitly acknowledging that these benchmarks now represent a different amount of underlying achievement growth than under prior norms.

-  **Benefits:** Easier continuity and comparability within the evaluation system and familiar to educators and administrators.
-  **Risks:** May yield different evaluative consequences for teachers with similar instructional effectiveness.
-  **Best used when:** CGPs are paired and equally weighted against other valid measures of student performance. In these contexts, shifts in national growth trends reflected in CGPs are interpreted alongside additional evidence of teacher quality, supporting more balanced decision making and consequences.

Across both approaches, leaders should be explicit about what constitutes meaningful growth. Under Option A, districts define meaningful growth by identifying RIT gains that represent progress toward proficiency for students with similar starting points and by setting differentiated expectations by subject, grade, and starting achievement levels. Under Option B, leaders retain percentile based benchmarks while explicitly reviewing how much achievement growth those thresholds now represent under the current norms, particularly where growth expectations differ by subject.

Successful example

In a prior evaluation cycle, Teacher Lopez earned a top rating after their students posted strong RIT gains alongside high CGPs in math. The following year, their students grew by similar amounts in achievement, but their median student CGP dropped, and their teacher evaluation rating declined. The change did not reflect weaker instruction. Rather, national growth expectations in math had increased, which lowered their students' relative standing.

When the leadership team reviewed the results for Teacher Lopez, they looked beyond CGPs to absolute RIT gains and student progress toward proficiency. Taken together, the evidence pointed to consistent instructional impact, and Teacher Lopez's evaluation was adjusted accordingly.

Bottom line

Under updated norms, changes in CGPs may reflect shifts in national growth expectations rather than changes in teaching quality, making it important to review how these results are interpreted in evaluation decisions.

Charter school authorization and school accreditation

Charter school authorization and school accreditation both rely on external review processes to evaluate school performance and guide high-stakes decisions, including renewal, expansion or accreditation status. While these systems differ in purpose, with charter school authorization emphasizing performance-based accountability and school accreditation emphasizing continuous improvement, they rely on similar evidence, including norm-referenced MAP Growth indicators.

Why recalibration to 2025 norms matters

Because norm referenced metrics describe performance relative to national peers, shifts in the national comparison group can affect outcomes independently of changes in school quality or student learning. Without recalibration, updated norms can make some schools appear to improve and others appear to decline even when underlying conditions remain stable. Without careful interpretation, school authorization and accreditation reviews risk conflating changes in a school's comparative standing with changes in educational quality.

Where misinterpretation is most likely when

- Achievement percentiles and CGPs are compared directly across norm sets.
- Fixed benchmarks (e.g., “median CGP $\geq$ 50”) are applied without adjustment or without confirmation that they still fulfill the original purpose.
- Changes in norm referenced indicators are treated as changes in school effectiveness.
- Reviews rely heavily on norm-based metrics without triangulation with other evidence.

These risks are amplified in high-stakes decisions where judgments may hinge on a small number of aggregated indicators.

How this plays out in practice:

Norm shifts can affect schools differently depending on subject and student population.

- **Reading:** National declines concentrated among lower achieving students can raise median achievement percentiles and CGPs for schools serving struggling readers, even when RIT gains are unchanged or weaker and projected proficiency rates decline. For example, a third-grade spring RIT score of 180 in reading would place at the 15th achievement percentile under prior 2020 norms, but at the 22nd percentile under the 2025 norms.
- **Math:** Achievement declines at the lower end can raise percentiles for struggling students. For example, a third-grade spring RIT score of 188 in math would place at the 20th achievement percentile under prior 2020 norms, but at the 28th percentile under 2025 norms. In contrast, higher growth expectations can lower CGPs for students closer to or above typical growth (see teacher evaluation for an example of this).

In both cases, differences in reported performance may reflect changes in the national comparison group rather than changes in school effectiveness.

What leaders can do

Across both charter school authorization and school accreditation, leaders face two defensible approaches. As with other accountability contexts, the key is to choose intentionally and make the choice explicit.

Option A: Anchor accountability to grade-level expectations

Use CGPs and achievement percentiles to understand national context, but ground evaluations in data on student progress toward grade-level expectations.



Benefits: Stronger alignment with grade level expectations and proficiency targets, and greater stability in accountability judgments across norm updates.



Risks: Requires more upfront work to define meaningful learning targets.



Best used when: Decisions prioritize progress toward proficiency and long term academic outcomes.

Option B: Preserve relative performance benchmarks

Maintain existing percentile based targets (e.g., median student CGP ≥ 60) while explicitly recognizing that they reflect a different level of learning under updated norms.



Benefits: Continuity with existing accountability frameworks and easier comparison within the same norm set.



Risks: Rigor of authorizing and accreditation decisions may unintentionally increase or decrease, depending on subject.



Best used when: Relative standing is an explicit policy goal and benchmarks are reviewed regularly.

Regardless of approach, authorizers and accreditors should define meaningful growth relative to grade level expectations, starting levels of achievement, and the time horizon of decisions. As with teacher evaluation, this involves either anchoring targets to grade-level expectations (Option A) or retaining percentile benchmarks while reassessing their interpretation under updated norms (Option B). Explicit documentation keeps expectations transparent and aligned with student learning.

Successful example

During its annual review, Monrovia Charter School reported higher median CGPs in third-grade reading. At the same time, fewer students were projected to reach proficiency.

Leaders took a closer look and found that national growth in reading had declined, resulting in similar RIT score gains now producing higher CGPs. Monrovia students were outperforming their peers, but still not advancing quickly enough toward grade level expectations. In response, the authorizer incorporated both perspectives into its review. CGPs were used to contextualize performance nationally, while renewal decisions and guidance for school improvement were anchored in students' progress toward proficiency and longer term outcomes.

Bottom line

Norm referenced metrics remain valuable for situating school performance in national context, but under post-COVID norms, they require careful interpretation in high stakes accountability settings to ensure that decisions about school quality, renewal, or accreditation remain aligned with evidence of student achievement and progress.

Conclusion

Re-norming is a routine and necessary practice across assessment systems to ensure results remain accurate and relevant over time. The 2025 MAP Growth norms update—prompted by post-COVID shifts in student achievement and the introduction of EISA—recalibrates the meaning of several metrics commonly used in accountability systems. These metrics remain valuable, but their interpretation now requires greater clarity and intentionality.

As illustrated across accountability contexts in this paper, leaders must be explicit about whether accountability goals are intended to signal relative standing or grade-level learning, revisit thresholds and comparisons over time, and pair norm referenced indicators with additional evidence of student progress toward grade-level expectations. When used and communicated transparently and in combination with other measures, MAP Growth metrics can continue to support fair, rigorous, and instructionally meaningful decisions even as the national learning landscape evolves.

Author

Dr. Ayesha K. Hashim is a lead research scientist at NWEA. She draws on interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research designs to study the impacts of district-level school policies on student learning, as well as the leadership, organizational, and implementation conditions that can explain observed results. Her research covers a range of topics including the integration of technology with standards-based instruction, school choice and accountability, teacher professional development, and COVID recovery. Prior to joining NWEA, Dr. Hashim was an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She completed her PhD in education policy, MA in economics, and master's in public policy at the University of Southern California.





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