

# Linking Education and Social Services Data to Improve Child Welfare<sup>1</sup>

*Cross-agency, data-based decision making benefits children and is currently within our reach.*

*By Elizabeth M Laird, Data Quality Campaign*

IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR EACH STUDENT REQUIRES an increasingly comprehensive picture of student services and outcomes across systems. For example, just one-third of all students receive a regular diploma within four years, and the statistics are even worse for children of color, with just half of black, Hispanic and Native American students graduating from high school on time.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, students in foster care are about half as likely to have graduated from high school by age 20 as are their non-foster care peers. Although social services often target the neediest students, linking information about these services with education data will give decision makers appropriate access to the comprehensive information needed to improve the educational outcomes and welfare every student.

Multiple agencies, including child welfare, health, and early learning, seek to improve child outcomes, but they often pursue these goals in isolation, with little information and few data systems bridging these supportive service systems. For a variety of reasons, including actual or perceived barriers under state and federal privacy laws, agencies often are reluctant to share information needed to improve educational outcomes. But actions taken and benefits reaped by other countries, such as the United Kingdom, that have taken the lead on addressing these obstacles show the power of connecting and analyzing data on factors that influence student learning but lay outside the school building.

By connecting school performance with social services information, states can answer such questions as:

- What is the impact of school mobility on student achievement for children and youth in foster care, and how does it affect success in higher education and the workforce?
- How can services beyond the scope of the classroom—including health care, child welfare, higher education access and public safety—be better tailored to help each student meet academic goals?
- How can initiatives aimed at improving child outcomes be better aligned and coordinated among the education, child welfare and judicial systems to improve outcomes and reduce duplication?
- What practices/programs have demonstrated improved outcomes for students, including not only educational achievement, but also social, health and civic progress?

## **State of the States: Sharing Individual Data Across Systems to Improve Student Achievement**

DQC advocates linking education data with other information systems housed outside the state education agency—such as child welfare, early childhood, higher education and labor— as “next-generation” issues that states need to consider while they design and implement their longitudinal data systems. In building longitudinal child-centered data systems, state agencies should ensure that student records can be transferred easily, student privacy is protected, data definitions and requirements are clear to all concerned, and the data system is organized in ways that facilitate data use and user-friendly reporting. Some states already are addressing these issues, while others have plans to link to social services.

Individual-level data are most often exchanged between state education agencies and human services. However, state education agencies receive data from human services more frequently than they send data to human services. States are increasingly exchanging individual-level data with a variety of other agencies like health, but there is still much work to do.

As interest in sharing data across agencies grows, states must address a variety of political and technical barriers to realize the power of using comprehensive information to improve student achievement. Figure 1 illustrates the capacity of states to share student-level data with other agencies; however, it is not clear if and how these data are used. A culture change is underway in education in which data are no longer used for just compliance purposes but as a tool to inform decisions. This culture of data use must also extend to sharing data across agencies, which will require state leaders to surmount not just technical but political barriers.

### **Linking Data Systems To Improve Student Achievement: Policy and Technical Issues**

When state agencies began to improve their data systems, the systems often were designed to meet the agencies' individual compliance and mandated reporting requirements. As pressure to improve student achievement increases, many states are starting to realize the power of using these systems in tandem with others to better serve each student by considering the individual and his or her needs. Conversations now include linking education to other systems, such as foster care, health and human services, juvenile justice, early childhood, and workforce, to better align programs and services to meet an individual child's needs and, in turn, improve child well-being and academic achievement. But as state leaders pursue creating critical linkages between education and social services, many also are grappling with political and technical challenges.

### **Building the Political Will To Create Critical Linkages**

#### **Promoting Inter-Agency Collaboration**

As a nation, we have a goal of every child reaching academic proficiency by 2014. For the first time, we have data systems that can follow and report on individual student progress toward this goal. Increased collaboration among the major systems involved with young people—especially the education, child welfare and judicial systems—is critical to reach this goal. There are many obstacles to collaboration, including:

- Uncertainty among child welfare, education and judicial staff about what they ethically and legally can share with each other. This uncertainty can block the flow of useful information.
- Lack of information about the role of the other systems and the types of services they provide.
- Incompatible or inconsistent data definitions regarding the current academic status of students.
- Issues of who "owns" which agenda pieces and the hard work of overcoming inherent turf battles.

### **Garnering Leadership Support for Data-Sharing Policies To Improve Child Outcomes**

Without political will and buy-in to promote this collaboration and a formal structure—such as a P-20 council or an interagency task force—coordinated work across agencies often is unsuccessful. Judicial, gubernatorial and/or legislative action—through policy changes or mandates and use of the bully pulpit—are key to creating a culture of sharing responsibility and data.

Often, political rather than technical barriers preclude state agencies from exchanging and analyzing data on child outcomes. Therefore, leadership at the state level can be key to overcoming these barriers by making gathering more comprehensive information a priority, providing funding to enhance state data systems, clarifying student privacy protections, and applying data from diverse systems to answer timely policy questions and improve educational outcomes.

### **Addressing Technical Implementation Issues To Connect Within and Across Public Agencies**

#### **Protecting Student Privacy<sup>4</sup>**

One of the critical concepts that should underscore the development of any longitudinal data system is preserving student privacy. For example, only those with the need for the information should be allowed access to records that are exchanged across agencies, and all individuals should be trained on how to best protect the privacy of students.

In particular, the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) imposes limits on the disclosure, without written parental consent, of student records by educational agencies and institutions that receive funds from the U.S. Department of Education. In the 30 years since FERPA was enacted, the technology and culture around data collection and use have changed and so has the state role in collecting and using data, resulting in some uncertainty about how FERPA relates to state agencies and statewide longitudinal data systems.

Nevertheless, FERPA in its current form can be reasonably interpreted to authorize important disclosures among education, child welfare and other state agencies:

- Anonymous data derived from student education records may be shared if the data are not easily traceable to individual students.
- Personally identifiable information about students may be provided to state longitudinal data systems on the basis that these systems maintain education records for schools or school systems or on the alternative bases of evaluating or auditing federal or state education programs or conducting studies to improve instruction.
- On behalf of schools or school districts (or if this subsequent disclosure is included in the recordation of the initial disclosure to the state data system), the state data system may share these data with postsecondary institutions (or postsecondary data systems) in which the students enroll or intend to enroll or for the purpose of conducting a study to improve instruction.
- Under the U.S. Department of Education's interpretation of FERPA, state education officials may match student records with records from other state agencies (such as state employment or child welfare agencies) for the purpose of evaluating education programs, as long as an education employee or contractor conducts the match. (There also is a reasonable interpretation that officials of other state agencies performing education-related functions, such as job training or administering school-based Medicaid services, may be considered education officials for these purposes and receive the student records to evaluate these programs.)
- In addition, student records may be shared with other state agencies for the purpose of conducting studies to improve instruction for students, whether that instruction is provided by a school or by another state agency. This could include studies to improve instruction for an individual student—not simply studies to improve overall instructional programs. It may reasonably include, for example, a study of a child's social welfare needs in framing an improved instructional program for the child. (The state should have regulatory standards and procedures for authorizing studies to improve instruction.)
- To the extent that a state serves as the parent of students in the welfare system under state law, the state has broad authority under FERPA to authorize disclosures of student education records.
- Student records may be disclosed pursuant to state law to juvenile justice agencies to enable them to serve students whose records are released.
- Student records may be released pursuant to court order if parents are advised of the order and given the opportunity to contest it.

### **Establishing Interoperable Data Systems Within and Across State Agencies<sup>5</sup>**

Many education data systems are not able to share information due to incompatibilities in technology and lack of human capacity, which together inhibit the quantity and quality of longitudinal data. Fortunately, interoperable systems, defined as an environment in which diverse data systems seamlessly exchange information with little or no additional effort, are becoming more prevalent in education and other state agencies. The use of standardized unique identifiers and standardized code sets also are two significant factors that support interoperability.

Benefits of interoperable data systems include:

- Reducing the burden on school staff to enter data;
- Decreasing cycle time to generate and use data; and
- Supporting data-driven decision making.

### Conclusion

Current technology enables state agencies to exchange and analyze data that historically have been housed separately and incompatibly; however, garnering the political will to clarify student privacy protections, establish interoperable data systems and standardize data definitions has proved more difficult. Other countries, as well as select states and districts in this country, already are realizing the benefits of linking their child-focused data systems. Not only will the up-to-date data provide the means for all stakeholders to support individual educational goals, but they also will provide the evidence that policymakers need to make well-informed decisions that improve educational outcomes for every student.

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- 1 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts, 2006. [www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/Downloads/ed/TheSilentEpidemic3-06FINAL.pdf](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/Downloads/ed/TheSilentEpidemic3-06FINAL.pdf).
- 2 C. Smithgall, R. Gladden, E. Howard, R. George and M. Courtney. Educational Experiences of Children in Out-of-Home Care. University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children, Chicago, IL, 2004.
- 3 2008 NCEA Survey of State P-12 Data Collection Issues Related to Longitudinal Analysis, [www.DataQualityCampaign.org/survey\\_results](http://www.DataQualityCampaign.org/survey_results).
- 4 Data Quality Campaign, Maximizing the Power of Education Data while Ensuring Compliance with Federal Student Privacy Laws: A Guide for Policymakers, 2007. [www.DataQualityCampaign.org/files/Publications-FERPA\\_A\\_Guide\\_for\\_State\\_Policymakers.pdf](http://www.DataQualityCampaign.org/files/Publications-FERPA_A_Guide_for_State_Policymakers.pdf).
- 5 Data Quality Campaign, The Right Data to the Right People at the Right Time: How Interoperability Helps America's Students Succeed, 2007. [www.DataQualityCampaign.org/files/Meetings-DQC\\_Quarterly\\_Issue\\_Brief\\_061307.pdf](http://www.DataQualityCampaign.org/files/Meetings-DQC_Quarterly_Issue_Brief_061307.pdf).

## States Addressing Issues of Confidentiality

**Florida**—Creating a model working agreement between the child welfare agency and the Department of Education to address confidentiality of information and to promote information sharing and involving school personnel in the case-planning process.

**Maryland**—Hosting meetings between the Office of the Attorney General and local school attorneys to discuss the barriers foster care case workers face in obtaining education records.

**South Carolina**—Developing and implementing use of the Education and Health Passport for all foster children to help maintain children's records regardless of placement.

**Washington**—Developing interagency agreements that include protocols for effective information sharing.

### Student Privacy Protection Resources

Data Quality Campaign, Maximizing the Power of Education Data While Ensuring Compliance with Federal Student Privacy Laws: A Guide for Policymakers, 2006. [www.DataQualityCampaign.org/files/Publications-FERPA\\_A\\_Guide\\_For\\_State\\_Policymakers.pdf](http://www.DataQualityCampaign.org/files/Publications-FERPA_A_Guide_For_State_Policymakers.pdf)

**Kathleen McNaught**, *ABA Center of Children and the Law, Mythbusting: Breaking Down Confidentiality and Decision-Making Barriers to Meet the Education Needs of Children in Foster Care, 2006.*