

Linking Early Childhood Student Information Through the Workforce

Most State Education Agencies have begun building and maintaining longitudinal student data systems housing student level data at the state level. For the first time, states have the necessary data to increase academic achievement on an individual basis. Access to longitudinal data also creates the opportunity to answer many other questions that are critical to the health of the state. This brief was written by EIMAC's Longitudinal Student Data Systems Task Force following a lengthy discussion on P-20 data linkages at their August, 2007 meeting.

Scenarios to "Make the Case" for Data Linkages

The Case for Early Childhood

Upon leaving their respective pre-k programs, John and Sarah began kindergarten as "at risk" students. By chance, John attended a school with a full-day kindergarten program which also provided extra services in reading and math through grade 4. Also by chance, Sarah attended a school offering a half-day kindergarten program that provided no additional services until she did not meet state content standards. Today, John is in grade 8 and continues to meet state standards in core content areas. Sarah repeated grade 6 and continues to struggle academically. *What if access to early childhood data could allow elementary school educators to mitigate "education by chance" ?*

The Case for Higher Education

Have you ever wondered whether students are really ready for college based on the education provided in K-12? What if you knew, for example, that 82% of all students taking Math I, II, III instead of Algebra require remedial math when they get to college? *What could your state do with the expected savings from a reduction in remedial courses if your students altered their course taking patterns?*

The Case for Business

A Fortune 500 company commits to relocating to your state if there are enough students graduating with strong math and science skills to satisfy their expected staffing needs. Graduation requirements for students have been shared with the company but executives want to know exactly how competent students are in higher level math and science. They have further questions about how well students scoring above a specific threshold on college placement exams fare in college. *What if you could answer these questions definitively? How many more companies could your state attract?*

How Can We Answer These Questions?

The answers to questions like those above could be readily available if information across early childhood services, K-12, higher education and workforce systems were merged and different agencies no longer worked in isolation. Think of the implications for evaluating programs that are providing services to students or the impact that such information may imply for the economic development of a region or state. What if the education field could identify programs that consistently demonstrate that student participation would yield higher achievement as students progress through their K-12 experience?

Answers to these types of questions as well as countless others would be available if a jurisdiction were able to track individual students from early childhood through higher education. The policy implications are huge -- so are the issues that must be resolved along the way.

What does P-20 or P-16 really mean? In most cases these acronyms denote longitudinal student information systems that track students before they enter a public kindergarten through postsecondary education and entry into the workforce. In order to capture the full experience of individuals, connections to

other agencies besides education are critical – agencies such as corrections, health and social services, human services, military, and higher education. Parties are interested because they see value in being able to:

- Evaluate programs and offerings at all agencies
- Change programs based on best practices
- Provide continuity of programs
- Place value on quality educational services
- Eliminate redundancy in data submission and reporting
- Leverage services
- Provide services based on the history of students

Linking information across agencies is not easy. Legal ramifications for each agency and necessary agreements have to be discussed, resolved, and enacted. There are many policy issues to address as a group – issues such as:

- Why should agencies share data?
- How can the agencies ensure that accurate and timely information will be shared?
- What data fields or elements will be shared? What is the purpose of such a system? What questions should this system answer?
- How will the individual records be matched? How will the ID be matched when going from one system to another?
- How will individual privacy be established and maintained?
- Which system will “house” the information?
- Who will take the lead in updating the information and how often will the information be updated?
- Who will pay for the system and who will make sure that there is an annual budget allocation to support the system?
- How will agencies ensure the use of common data fields and codes?
- How will the system be governed? Who is in charge?
- How will information be communicated and used?
- Who makes sure that the system is “secure” from hackers?

To begin to address these questions and identify other issues and potential roadblocks, a group consisting of all stakeholders should be established. The stakeholder group should have the authority to make critical decisions or at the very least have a way to bring critical issues directly to a policy making group. The stakeholder group should also begin identifying the requirements of the system and determining how the data will be communicated and shared.

Resources

More information and resources on this topic can be found at The Data Quality Campaign (www.dataqualitycampaign.org) and the Education Commission on the States (www.ecs.org/clearinghouse) websites.

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