

Gaps in Perspective: Who Should Be Responsible for Tracking Student Progress Across Education Institutions?

Part one in the series:

California Education Policy, Student Data, and the Quest to Improve Student Progress

By Colleen Moore, Brock Grubb, and Camille Esch

Gaps in Perspective

Conventional wisdom suggests that local educators tend to be wary of efforts by the state to gather more information from their institutions, due to the burdens that such requests often entail. But California's current education landscape, with its shift from state to local control of funding and accountability in the K-12 system, its massive educational experiments underway, and its highly localized and autonomous higher education systems, may represent a departure from the conventional. The local educators we interviewed as part of a research project expressed the need for—and a readiness to participate in—a state-level data system to gather and track information about student progress in and across educational institutions. The state officials we spoke with, on the other hand, were not convinced that gathering and sharing this information should be a top priority for the state and they were doubtful that such a system would provide enough benefits to justify its implementation costs.

These observations are drawn from conversations with education leaders at the local and regional levels, as well as with state-level policymakers, undertaken as part of a three-year project by the Education Insights Center (EdInsights) to understand barriers to increasing postsecondary attainment. The project's ultimate goal is to identify opportunities to improve policies in support of student progress throughout the education pipeline—from K-12 schools, into and through community colleges and universities, and into the workforce. This brief is the first in a series that will explore California's approach to tracking, sharing, and using longitudinal data about student progress throughout the state's education systems (see About this Series).

About this Series

California Education Policy, Student Data, and the Quest to Improve Student Progress

This brief is the first in a series that will examine California's approach to gathering and sharing longitudinal data about students' progress through the state's education systems. The series will include four briefs.

- This first brief provides an overview and explores the perspectives of state and local leaders on who should be responsible for gathering and sharing data about students' progress.
- The second will provide a summary of current education data collection and reporting in California, and past efforts to develop a more comprehensive data system.
- The third will describe local and regional efforts to share data across institutions and systems, including the benefits and challenges of participating in a regional collaborative.
- The final brief will summarize efforts in other states to improve data systems for use in reforming education policy and practice, with emphasis on lessons that are relevant for California.

This first brief draws on conversations with five education policy staff members working in the state Capitol and seven higher education leaders in two regions of the state; our earlier research on regional education partnerships;¹ as well as our observations of the evolving policy discussions on education data occurring in recent years in the California State Legislature, State Board of Education, Department of Education, California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, and among various education stakeholder groups.

Currently, California does not have a statewide longitudinal data system that tracks and provides information to educators about patterns of student progress within and across schools and colleges—such as college and career readiness in high school, college participation, college persistence, college success, and participation in the labor market. Understanding patterns of student progress across systems can help educators assess and improve the effectiveness of their programs. In the absence of a statewide data system, some of the local educators we interviewed said that they had developed workarounds—that is, temporary local databases or other data exchanges—with institutions in their region to collect and share approximations of this kind of information. Not all educators, school districts, or colleges, however, have access to these kinds of regional solutions. In addition, the local educators said that these work-arounds can be costly and burdensome to develop and maintain, and they depend on ad hoc relationships across institutions, which can change over time. The state policy staff we spoke with agreed that sharing and using cross-institutional data about student progress is important for program improvement, but they said that local and regional entities, rather than the state, are better positioned to gather and share this information. This brief explores the context and implications of these differences in perspective.

Increasing Focus on Collaboration in Education Policy

A student's journey to a postsecondary credential requires, at minimum, enrollment in a K-12 school district and a postsecondary institution, such as a community college or university. Today, however, it is common for students to swirl among multiple institutions—that is, to take college classes while in high school, or to take classes in more than one community college, or to transfer among universities, or to enroll in one institution, take time off to work or raise a family, and then enroll in a different college or university program later. A study by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found that 40 percent of California students who enrolled in college for the first time in fall 2008 enrolled at a different institution at some point over the next six years.² Students' goals are not necessarily to progress through the state's education systems—K-12 school districts, the California Community Colleges (CCC), the California State University (CSU), or the University of California (UC)—but, rather, to obtain a certificate or a degree. Through its K-12 schools, its comparatively low-cost colleges, and its grants to students from low- and middle-income families, California invests substantial resources in supporting student educational goals—thereby investing in efforts to raise the share of residents with a certificate or degree to ensure an educated citizenry and a competitive workforce, and to strengthen the social and economic health of communities and the state.

In pursuit of this purpose, state policymakers appear to recognize a need to facilitate student transitions across the state's education systems. For example, they are trying to strengthen pathways with a focus on incentivizing collaboration across K-12 and higher education systems:

- The Career Technical Education (CTE) Pathways Program (and the earlier Career Pathways Trust Program) provides \$48 million in funding to improve linkages and CTE pathways between high schools and community colleges, with a goal of increasing students' access to and success in programs preparing them for high-demand jobs in the state's economy.



- The Awards for Innovation in Higher Education target \$25 million in funding toward recognizing the efforts of public colleges and universities to use innovative models to improve student outcomes, particularly where those practices ease student progress through the state’s education systems to facilitate timely completion of degrees.
- The Adult Basic Education Block Grant program restructured \$500 million in Proposition 98 funding toward regional consortia of community colleges and K-12 local education agencies (LEAs).

As policymakers and the state’s education systems work to strengthen student transitions through these collaborative efforts, they may be hard pressed to evaluate the impact of their work. California does not have the kinds of statewide student data systems that many other states are developing to track student progress through K-12 and higher education and into the workforce.³ Numerous educators, policy advocates, and researchers have suggested that the state should take steps to gather and centralize cross-sector data for understanding student progress and outcomes.⁴ The Legislative Analyst’s Office recently recommended that the California Legislature adopt a statewide, streamlined data-linking approach for all workforce education programs, suggesting that current agency-to-agency data-sharing efforts are burdensome and inefficient.⁵ But not everyone shares the view that a statewide data system is needed. In a recent commentary, the president of the State Board of Education, Dr. Michael Kirst, noted that Governor Brown’s administration prioritizes locally-generated data efforts:

“The state’s new educational initiatives, including the Local Control Funding Formula, recognize that improvement happens locally, so there has been an intentional focus on access and use of data locally for improvement efforts. This theory of action runs counter to a long-held belief by researchers that education data must be closely controlled by, and flow from, the state. The truth is California’s reliance on multilevel data systems have profound implications not only for researchers, but also for policymakers and the public seeking information about educational progress.”⁶

Local Education Leaders Express Need for More and Better Data

The local education leaders we interviewed expressed a desire for better state-level mechanisms to link data across educational systems. They provided several examples of how such data could help them improve student success:

- Data linking students’ K-12 education records to their postsecondary education records could help K-12 teachers and administrators understand how their students fared in postsecondary education, and how students’ enrollment in particular courses or participation in certain programs may have had an impact on their progression in higher education and their time to degree. Such knowledge helps to evaluate and improve local curriculum and programs, and align standards and curriculum to ensure more students enroll in postsecondary education prepared for college-level coursework.
- Data linking student records across the state’s public postsecondary education systems (CCC, CSU and UC) could help educators better understand and track students’ increasingly complex college attendance patterns, including enrollment in multiple institutions simultaneously and transfer from a community college to a university or from one university to another, or “reverse transfer” from a university to a community college. Understanding these patterns could help educators develop better-aligned programs across institutions to facilitate student mobility and program completion.
- Data linking K-12 and postsecondary education records to the state’s workforce data systems could help educators understand their students’ labor market outcomes, and could support institutions’ efforts to ensure they are providing the kinds of education and training that are needed in the state’s economy and valued by employers.



A number of school districts and postsecondary institutions participate in Cal-PASS Plus, a voluntary system of student-level data aimed at helping institutions track their students' success along the education pipeline to inform instruction and improve transitions.⁷ Researchers at member institutions can download student-level data for partner institutions in their region according to established memoranda of understanding. While educators acknowledged the efforts and important contributions of Cal-PASS Plus, interviewees noted that, because it is voluntary, it lacks coverage within the K-12 and university sectors in some regions (all community colleges participate), and the time period over which data are available varies, creating information gaps. Several educators mentioned the growing use of data collected and maintained by the National Student Clearinghouse, including information on students' enrollment in college and completion of degrees and certificates.⁸ As with Cal-PASS Plus, those interviewed noted that the Clearinghouse data present challenges, particularly in the lack of transcript-level information on students' coursework and other enrollment behaviors that can inform program improvement efforts. Some regions pursue informal methods for sharing data, but interviewees noted that these arrangements are volatile in that they are often developed and maintained via relationships between individuals rather than institutions and are therefore subject to change with changes in personnel.

Interviewees suggested that by prioritizing better data – including high-value information about a student's trajectory across systems – the state could help relieve some of the current pressures that local institutions are feeling to provide more data. Several interviewees from higher education institutions described current state-mandated data reporting requirements as too time-consuming, overly focused on compliance, and disconnected from a broader framework or set of statewide goals for educational achievement. As an alternative to this model, educators argued that a statewide system of cross-sector, student-level data would provide a more comprehensive and valuable understanding of students' paths and progress through the education system.

While acknowledging that current data reporting requirements can be onerous, local education leaders noted that they yield valuable information because the data are standardized across institutions, allowing them to compare their own students' outcomes to those of students in similar institutions. However, the value of existing data is limited by the fact that they cover a single system (e.g., data community college campuses report to the CCC Chancellor's Office), and the time lag between institutions reporting the data and their

“If we had a single student ID issued for the entire [community college] system...that would be a lot easier to track people as they move throughout the system. An even bigger vision would be to have a single education ID for Californians, so that coming from kindergarten on up through university, it's much easier to track people's movement and success.”

– *Local higher education leader*

“[Current reporting] is not based on any state policy goals for higher education. This is just a set of metrics somebody said we should report on every year, but nobody seems to know what we're supposed to do with it so we don't treat it very seriously. They do not become a planning framework for us and there's no accountability tied to them.”

– *Local higher education leader*



availability for analysis. Despite some concerns, the education leaders we interviewed believed that having access to a more comprehensive statewide data system, tracking students through the K-12 and higher education systems and into the workforce, could better support their efforts to evaluate and improve their programs. Acknowledging that a shift to such a system may be challenging, one leader suggested a more pragmatic approach that the state might take that would not require new legislation – doing more to encourage data sharing across sectors in an effort to improve cross-sector coordination and decision making in a regional setting.

State Policy Community is Skeptical about Data as a State-Level Priority

The state-level policy staff with whom we spoke have heard the calls for the state to develop a comprehensive student-level data system, but not all are convinced that such an investment should be a top priority. To some of those we interviewed, the most significant problem related to understanding student progress and outcomes is not the absence of data, but the lack of a framework to interpret the data that are already available, including appropriate benchmarks to provide context. They noted that policymakers receive a lot of reports from the various education systems and from outside research and advocacy organizations, and that their primary challenge is how to interpret the data in order to understand student progress, to evaluate the impact of education reform efforts, and to decide what goals and expectations for improved student outcomes would be reasonable for policymakers to expect.

State policy staff consistently noted the lack of a shared understanding at the state level about “what matters” in the information that is currently available, and lamented the lack of an entity to assist them in such determinations. There was no consensus, however, about what kind of structure is needed to provide such assistance. Some believed that California needs to create a new state entity to replace the now-defunct California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC; see page 6) with a state agency that would collect, analyze, and interpret data from the various education systems to assist state policymakers. Others believed that policymakers and their staff just need better processes for consulting with independent research and policy analysis organizations who have the expertise and capacity needed to make use of existing data. All agreed that having to rely on the education systems themselves for access to and interpretation of data is problematic,

“There are data in place that the CSU collects, community colleges collect, K-12 collects, that if we just made it easier to share that data and incentivize the sharing of that data, we could get further ahead without having any major overhaul of state law. And I think that’s where some long-view approaches in the state capital would be helpful to think about this issue and to really incentivize that collaboration.”

– Local higher education leader

“It’s not a lack of data itself that is the biggest problem. The more fundamental thing missing is a shared sense of what we should be looking for in the data. For example, some benchmarks around remediation, progression, etc. You can look at data on these, but they are hard to interpret. You can’t tell if what you’re seeing is good or bad. When data become part of a shared narrative, that’s when they begin to drive policy more.”

– State policy staff



due to the perception that systems are often not transparent about their challenges and the reality that many of the big questions facing the state require data from multiple systems.

Some state policy staff recognize the potential benefits of a comprehensive statewide data system, but they offered a number of explanations for the lack of movement on the issue in California.

- **Bad timing.** Some staff perceive that the governor’s administration is skeptical about the value of a statewide data system for improving education policy and prefers to invest in locally determined education priorities, a view supported by the recent statements of the president of the State Board of Education, cited earlier. Under this governor, they believe, development of a new statewide data system is not possible. Other staff noted the failure of several recent legislative efforts to replace CPEC as additional evidence that movement on issues related to statewide capacity for data and analysis is unlikely in the near term.⁹
- **Workable alternatives.** Some staff are not sure how great the need is, given examples of workarounds at the local and regional levels, either through Cal-PASS Plus or linking data across institutions through locally-developed agreements. A few stated that if these endeavors are effective in some places, then others should be able to engage in similar efforts at current resource levels. One staff person thought that a federated approach could work, with each of the education systems maintaining its own data but matching records across systems as needed for particular purposes.

“We are too reliant on the segments for data interpretation. Also, when you criticize completion numbers, the segments will say that data as currently reported are misleading. I prefer getting analysis from third parties when possible. The importance of data [in policy-making] really depends on the reliability of the data and the degree to which there is consensus on what it means.”

– State policy staff

The California Postsecondary Education Commission

The California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) was born out of the state’s 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education. The agency collected data from the state’s community colleges and universities, provided analysis and advice on higher education policy to the governor, and conducted studies on the need for new facilities and programs across the state’s public higher education institutions. While the Master Plan recommended the creation of a coordinating board to oversee the state’s three segments of higher education – California Community Colleges, California State University, and University of California – CPEC had little actual authority over the segments and its advice to policymakers was often ignored. Perhaps the agency’s most significant role was in aggregating student data from the three systems and making them available through its website. The funding for CPEC was eliminated by Governor Jerry Brown in 2011, who said in his veto message that the agency had been ineffective, and that the segments of higher education and other stakeholders should “explore alternative ways to more effectively improve coordination and development of higher education policy.” To date, no alternative structure for such coordination has emerged.



- **Technical and management challenges.**

Some staff expressed doubts about the state’s ability to engineer an effective data system that would actually meet the kinds of needs expressed by local educators, given substantial problems with prior efforts related to large information technology systems. For example, an effort to develop an integrated payroll system for state employees (known as the 21st Century Project, or MyCalPAYS) had to be terminated when extensive problems with incorrect calculations and other issues arose during a pilot implementation.¹⁰ An effort to update data systems in the Department of Motor Vehicles was also terminated after delays and disagreements with the contractor over staffing needs to complete the project.¹¹

“Locals always say they need the state to link data, but that doesn’t strike me as the best solution, or the only solution. What makes the state inherently able to do this well? Is there potentially another structure that would make more sense, such as a third party solution like Cal-PASS [Plus]? We can have a statewide solution that isn’t necessarily a ‘state’ solution. I think people underestimate what it will take to get a state system operational.”

– State policy staff

Finally, one staff person expressed certainty that a statewide longitudinal data system would be valuable, particularly in understanding issues related to student transitions across education systems and regions, but noted that it is a challenge to get legislators interested in the issue. This person said, “It’s hard for members [of the Legislature] to get passionate about getting a better toolkit when it’s not tied to a specific problem or issue.”

Consensus Needed to Ensure Access to Essential Information

Through our interviews with local education leaders and state policy staff, we found indications of a significant disparity in views on the need for a state-level comprehensive data system to track students’ education records over time and across institutions. Education leaders at the local level indicated that regional data sharing efforts across institutions fail to provide an adequate understanding of patterns of college readiness, attendance and success for California’s mobile student population, and they can be costly, burdensome, and too dependent on relationships to provide a stable solution. They saw systems like Cal-PASS Plus and the National Student Clearinghouse as having value, but falling short of being a complete solution to the need for access to information to evaluate and improve their programs. If the state’s position is to leave localities on their own to share cross-segment data, they would like better guidance and perhaps some dedicated funding from the state. State policy staff argued that, while there’s a need for more help to interpret them, current data are mostly adequate to inform policy-making at the state level. They viewed current data sharing efforts at the local level as effective and a good option for addressing educators’ needs for program evaluation and improvement.

This disconnect in views at the state and local/regional levels raises questions for additional research:

- Are the data currently collected at the state and system levels adequate to address needs related to state policy decisions and local program improvement efforts? What questions can be answered? What questions cannot be answered?
- Are current efforts to develop local/regional alternatives to a statewide data system effective and efficient, and is it feasible to scale such efforts across California’s disparate regions? Are there specific investments that could improve these alternatives and facilitate their spread?



- What can be learned from other states that have chosen to develop more comprehensive data systems? Are there important questions they can answer that California cannot, and are these states making better progress as a result?

In the coming year, EdInsights will be learning more about these issues through additional research, and facilitating dialogue on these questions among educators and the policy community. We plan to produce three additional policy briefs that:

1. Summarize the current status of education data collection and reporting in California, analyze past efforts to develop a more comprehensive data system, and explore why these efforts have not been successful;
2. Describe examples of local innovations to work around current data gaps, including any benefits described by local educators and challenges they encountered; and
3. Analyze the national context and what California might learn from other states' efforts to improve their data systems and make better use of data to reform education policy and practice. This final brief will take into account California's unique context and identify some practical steps that state leaders can take to begin to improve the transparency and utility of information in the state.

California has enacted a raft of new policies and practices in both K-12 and higher education in recent years, including the Common Core State Standards and the Local Control Funding Formula in the K-12 system, the Student Success and Support Program and the Associate Degree for Transfer in the community colleges, and the CSU's Graduation Initiative 2025. As noted earlier, the state has created a number of mechanisms to encourage cross-sector collaboration in the pursuit of better educational outcomes. It is imperative for the state to be able to evaluate the success of these reforms and initiatives, and it is equally important that local educators are able to assess and improve their programs. Both state and local stakeholders need access to adequate information and the analytical capacity to carry out their roles to support student learning, progression, and success, thereby helping to ensure the social and economic well-being of individuals and of the state.

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Endnotes

- 1 Moore, C., Venezia, A., Lewis, J., & Lefkowitz, B. (2015). *Organizing for success: California's regional education partnerships*. Sacramento, CA: Education Insights Center.
- 2 Shapiro, D., Dunder, A., Wakhungu, P.K., Yuan, X., & Harrell, A. (2015). *Transfer and mobility: A national view of student movement in postsecondary institutions, fall 2008 cohort*. Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.
- 3 For a recent summary of state activity to create data systems, see *50-State Comparison: Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems*, a resource by Education Commission of the States, available at <http://www.ecs.org/state-longitudinal-data-systems/>.
- 4 For example, see: California EDGE Coalition (2016). *Data to serve policy, programs, and people: Reinventing California's education and workforce data systems*. Sacramento, CA: Author; Workforce Data Quality Campaign (2015). *Mastering the blueprint: State progress on workforce data*. Washington, DC: Author; Warren, P. & Hough, H. (2013). *Increasing the usefulness of California's education data*. San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California; Vernez, G., Krop, C., Vuollo, M., & Hansen, J.S. (2008). *Toward a K-20 student unit record data system for California*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- 5 Legislative Analyst's Office (2016). *Improving workforce education and training data in California*. Sacramento, CA: Author.
- 6 Kirst, Michael (2016, October 9). Strong, locally generated data key to school improvement strategies. *EdSource*. Retrieved from <https://edsources.org/2016/strong-locally-generated-data-key-to-californias-school-improvement-strategies/570340>.
- 7 For more information about Cal-PASS Plus, see <https://www.calpassplus.org/CalPASS/Home.aspx>.
- 8 For more information about the National Student Clearinghouse, see <http://www.studentclearinghouse.org/>.
- 9 The most recent example of such legislation was SB 42 (Liu, 2015), which would have created an Office of Higher Education Performance and Accountability. The bill was passed by the Legislature but was vetoed by Governor Brown in October 2015. Several earlier bills did not make it out of various committees (SB 1196, Liu, 2014; AB 1348, Perez, 2014; AB 2190, Perez, 2012).
- 10 Stewart, A. (2013, March 6). California puts MyCalPAYS project on hold. *Government Technology*. Retrieved from <http://www.govtech.com/e-government/California-Puts-MyCalPays-Project-on-Hold.html>.
- 11 See a summary by the Legislative Analyst's Office at <http://www.lao.ca.gov/laoapp/budgetlist/PublicSearch.aspx?Yr=2013&KeyCol=743>.