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Quality Data is Key to Improving Education

Data Quality Campaign

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Measuring and understanding success in education is critical to all stakeholders. Parents, teachers, policymakers, and other stakeholders are too often forced to make decisions based on anecdote and hunch because they do not have access to high-quality information. In every other sector, stakeholders demand and use data differently to make informed decisions. We can no longer afford not to use data in education. Effective data use will have a positive, long-term impact on transparency, efficiency, system performance, and student outcomes.

This is why the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) was launched in 2005: to champion state policymakers' efforts to support effective data use in education. It is no surprise that DQC's first home was in Texas, also the home of the Journal of Applied Research on Children and CHILDEN AT RISK. The National Center for Educational Achievement, which at the time was housed at The University of Texas at Austin, founded the Data Quality Campaign and continues to serve as a critical DQC partner. Texas has long been a leader in building and using state longitudinal data systems. Most recently, Texas[1] developed the Texas Student Data System,[2] which DQC highlights as an example of the value that states can provide to districts.[3]

In the last seven years, every state has joined Texas in making great progress on building statewide longitudinal data systems, and states are now positioned to support effective data use. Effective statewide longitudinal data systems consist of the DQC's 10 Essential Elements[4] of a Statewide Longitudinal Data System, which have since been reflected in federal policy.[5] The 10 Essential Elements provide a roadmap for state policymakers as they build statewide longitudinal data systems designed to collect, store, and use longitudinal data to improve student achievement and outcomes. State policymakers are also making significant progress implementing DQC's 10 State Actions[6] to Support Effective Data Use, which encourage states to expand the ability of SLDS to link across the P-20 education pipeline and across state agencies; ensure that data can be accessed, analyzed, and used; and build the capacity of all stakeholders to use longitudinal data. In combination, the 10 Elements and 10 Actions help state policymakers to create a culture in which quality data are not only collected but also used to increase student achievement.

Yet, the 10 Essential Elements and 10 State Actions are not enough. Looking ahead, states will only ensure effective data use for continuous improvement when they build capacity in critical areas. The time is now to build and transform data capacity to data use and empower all education stakeholders, from parents to policymakers, with the quality data that states have worked so hard to collect.[6]

Effective data use for continuous improvement will only come to fruition when there is a system-wide focus on building capacity in three key areas: first, policymakers and decision makers at every level will benefit from continued investment in the data infrastructure and technology to ensure that this infrastructure is able to keep up with the increasing policy and practical demands for information and analysis. This will require sustained, stable investments to support this work. Second, rethinking the roles and relationships between the state, districts and agencies across the entire P-20/W spectrum will help to ensure that information flows seamlessly, efficiently and effectively to meet users' needs. Ultimately, stakeholders who need data to do their job do not care which system—state, district, municipal, CBO—the data come from, but rather that those data meet their needs. Third, a renewed focus on investing in people—including parents, educators, and school and district leaders—by ensuring that stakeholders at every level have the knowledge, training, resources and time to use data effectively, will meet the increasing demand of end-user access.

There is an excellent opportunity for states and the research community to collaborate to leverage our investments in data systems.[7] It is critical that states work to develop purposeful research agendas with universities and other external groups, as well as develop a process by which outside researchers can propose their own studies in compliance with federal and state privacy laws. However, to make full use of the longitudinal data states are collecting, states also need access to individuals with high-level analytical skills and research training to mine the data and answer the multitude of policy and evaluation questions. Through the formation of strategic partnerships with universities and other organizations that conduct educational research and/or serve as advocacy organizations, researchers can be important partners to states as they seek to turn data into useful information and analysis that could inform decision-making and improve student and system performance.[7]

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