

The Importance of Improved Data Access in Texas

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I thank you for the opportunity to discuss the current state of access to educational data in Texas. My testimony today comes from two vantage points – that of an active participant in decision making at the Education Research Center at the University of Texas at Dallas and that of an education researcher and policy analyst.

The single point that I want to make is that this is an important time where policy actions will determine whether or not Texas moves forward in developing an analytical infrastructure that is capable of driving school improvement. The future of the children of Texas quite literally depends on the quality of policy decisions being made today in Austin and throughout the districts of the State. The current state of policy-relevant information is simply insufficient to ensure a world class education for Texas students.

But I don't want to paint an ivory tower picture of reaching Valhalla where we know precisely how to educate every citizen. I want to focus on a much simpler and much more achievable goal – instituting a process that provides reliable feedback on what is and is not working in the schools. This is a vision of continuous improvement that is driven by objective, empirical information.

Why is this a particularly important time?

First, Texas has taken the bold step of creating three Educational Research Centers to provide analysis and evaluation. This step conceptually puts Texas at the forefront of the nation in attracting researchers to focus on improvement of the state's schools.

Second, the confusion and ambiguity of the legal requirements for granting data access while preserving confidentiality have been effectively eliminated by new regulations of the US

Department of Education, by a very specific advisory letter from the office that oversees FERPA, and by the fact that Texas moved forward with the ERC's.

Third, the ERC's are yet to be fully functional, because the implementation of data access agreements and protocols has been delayed.

Fourth, Texas is losing, if it has not lost, its "competitive advantage" in attracting research and evaluation of its schools. The idea behind the ERC's was to establish the institution with some initial infrastructure funding and then to allow them to find other support for any of the actual research and evaluation. This latter movement has yet to happen and, as time passes, is increasingly less likely to happen in the future. In simplest terms, researchers cannot fund nonexistent data and projects, and both researchers and their funding will simply go elsewhere to states that have managed to provide access.

While I can expand on each of those points, it is perhaps best to describe some of the steps that could and, in my opinion, should be taken immediately.

1. *Provide current and past data on student performance linked to schools and programs.* The analytical power (and the attractiveness of working with Texas) is the wealth of historical data on student performance that is available. We suspect, for example, that many of the academic problems of our high school students actually begin in elementary school – but we have difficulty confirming that and pinpointing the problems without following students over their entire schooling career. Or, as a second example, evaluating the effectiveness of charter schools requires data on each school's historic achievement patterns. Longitudinal data with sufficient history are not

currently available, and there is no publicly-available schedule for its accomplishment.

2. *Link elementary and secondary data with higher education.* Achieving the goals of a “college-ready Texas”, at least as I saw from membership on the CCRT, are unlikely to be met without providing the detailed data and analysis that links the entire system. This includes not only links of primary and secondary school outcomes to applications and admissions at Texas public schools but also information linked to prior scores (AP, SAT, ACT) and to out-of-state and private college attendance.
3. *Relate a complete picture of success to the schools.* In order to see the impact of school programs and school outcomes on students, it is necessary to follow them into the world outside of education – i.e., to link them to outcomes observed in the workforce, military, criminal justice system, and the like – not just to colleges or other education institutions.
4. *Provide encouragement of outside analysis and evaluation.* To attract researchers – and it really is a competitive market – the process must be streamlined to keep up with other states. Today Texas is not competitive, and it is falling farther from other states. For example, the process by which research projects are certified has yet even to be made public. No information is available about the timeliness of this, how it will interact with external funding, etc. Instead of being a barrier, Texas should be able to develop a system that brings in researchers rather than drives them to other places –

Florida, North Carolina, New York City, the District of Columbia, and others who are actively seeking research partners.

5. *Support development of better data infrastructure.* To date, 27 states have received federal grants (totaling some \$115 million) to improve their state longitudinal data systems, and a large number of these will be available to the nation's researchers. Texas has yet to apply for such a grant. At the same time, Texas has not fully appreciated the funding difficulties for providing basic research infrastructure at the ERC's. These two could, I believe, be dealt with together by application to the Institute for Education Sciences for a state data development grant and by joining the ERC's in this development and funding. Additionally, the State must evaluate its own support of the ERC's.

There are specifics to each of these points that can be discussed. My point is a simple one: This is an important time that will decide whether or not Texas moves forward in developing an analytical infrastructure that is capable of driving school improvement. We need a commitment not only to the concepts behind the ERC's and data access in general but also to the quick and decisive implementation of steps that determine the reality.

This is not a pitch for data access per se but for what improved data access might do for the children of Texas and, by implication, for the future health of the Texas economy.