

# The Case for a Longitudinal Student Data System in California

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## Introduction

In a constantly changing political landscape, education reforms abound. Unfortunately, our ability to evaluate those reforms is severely hindered by a lack of longitudinal data. A state wide longitudinal data system keeping track of individual student performance during each one of the reforms will help us weigh the benefits or lack thereof for every student.

## Tracking Student Progress and Data Collection

Implementing the longitudinal student data system proposed in SB 1453 (EdVoice, 2002, January) would enable policymakers and educators to properly monitor student progress. Under the current system, demographic data provided on the STAR header sheet is not adequately assessed to determine an individual student's progress. The data is made available to school districts by testing companies, but is not maintained electronically in a central repository for comprehensive analysis.

By providing each test taker with a student identifier, officials at the state level will be able to sort by demographic data and analyze students' test results in terms of their ethnicity, gender and home language. The student identifier would also allow for tracking a student's progress when s/he transfers between districts. Types of information that can be transferred include: attendance, assessment results, grades, honors and special education requirements.

## Other States are Ahead of Us

Several states collect data on their students routinely and maintain a central repository as a database. For this research, we studied the data collection processes in the states of Florida (Haynes, 2002), Nevada (Nevada Department of Education, 2002) and Alaska (Alaska Department of Education, 2001). Florida has been in the forefront of tracking individual student progress in the entire state for several years now. Florida requires its school districts to request the social security number for every student in grades pre-kindergarten through adult to facilitate the maintenance of permanent records, tracking of individual student performance, transfer of student records, applications for post secondary institutions, and processing of district exit paper work. (Haynes, 2002)

If the social security number is made available by the parents/guardian, the social security number is used as the first nine digits of the student's Florida Student Number Identifier. In case of non-availability of the social security number, the districts are still required to create a unique identifier for every student based on the common method adopted statewide and report the personal identifier to the state. When the student transfers from a school district, the receiving school district is required to check the state's database and continue to use the same Florida Student Number Identifier.

The states of Nevada and Alaska have adopted Florida's model and are in the process of developing their own repositories of student information. To support school reform and address the important educational issues, the state of Nevada has instituted the Statewide Management of Automated Record Transfer (SMART) system. Nevada law requires the school districts to request the student's social security number to be used in SMART. Alaska has developed the On-line Alaska School Information System (OASIS) to improve its policy and decision-making and speed up record transfer. OASIS has also required social security numbers from the students as a personal identifier thus far, but it may switch to an alternate identification system in the future.

### Accountability

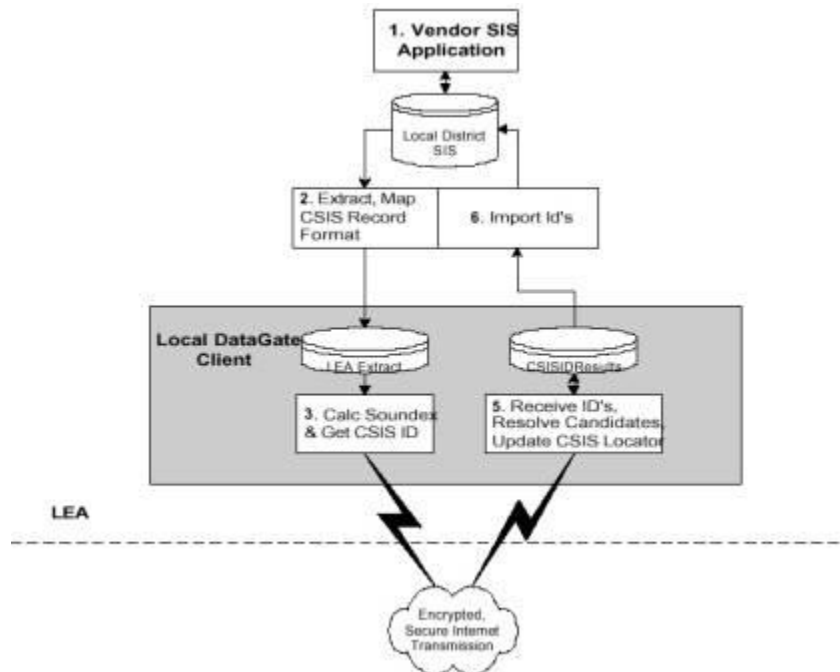
From an administrative standpoint, it makes sense to connect testing to an evaluation of reforms previously authorized. By instituting the student data system, the state will have the ability to sort testing data from multiple years and analyze it chronologically against state and local programs that aim to improve student achievement. Rather than blaming students for their low achievement, California will have the responsibility of maintaining strategies for educators and schools to raise these students' learning skills. With the state monitoring specific data on students, local education entities will feel a greater responsibility towards making progress and the public will feel satisfied that the state's educational goals are being met.

### Technology, Privacy and Security

The technology for collecting, maintaining and transferring of individual student data is being developed by California Student Information Services (CSIS, 2002), which was authorized by California legislature in 1997. CSIS is/was considering some of the following information to make up parts of the personal identifier:

- Student's Legal Name
- Student's also known as names (AKA)
- Parents' Name(s)
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Birth Date
- Birth Place
- Other potentially sensitive demographic data.

CSIS, just as the data maintenance agencies of other states, will observe the rules and regulations defined in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. It is beyond the scope of this policy paper to address all the details of the technological architecture involved in CSIS's proposal for encrypting the identifier and the algorithm to calculate the identifier. However, the flow chart in Figure. 1 (adopted from <http://www.csis.k12.ca.us/library>) provides a simplified version of how privacy and security will be ensured.



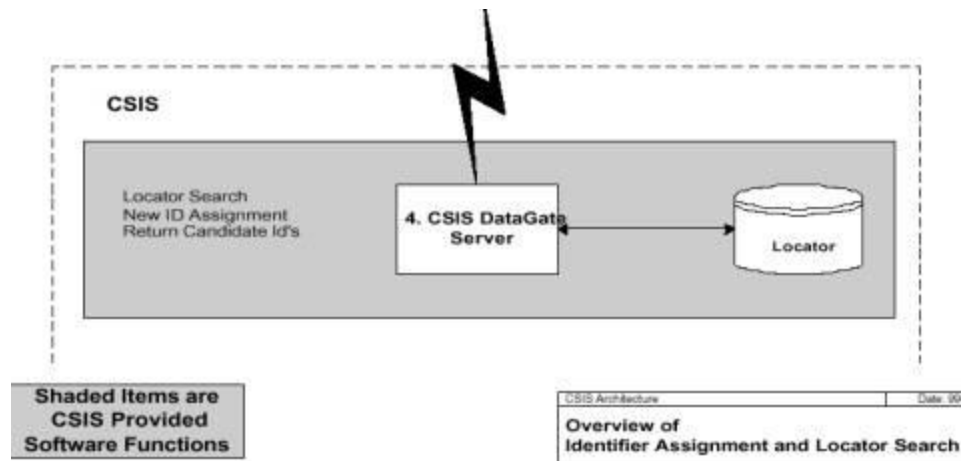


Figure.1 CSIS Architecture of System for Identifier Assignment and Locator Search (adopted from <http://www.csis.k12.ca.us/library>)

### Opposing Arguments

Dissenters believe the student identifier could be a violation of student privacy. Using the Social Security Number could be an alternate method of identifying individual students, as done in other states. However, the biggest problem with the use of SSN is that the test publishers print it on the score reports, according to Martha Haynes, Director of Educational Information and Accountability Service in DOE, Florida (Haynes, 2002). The students tend to misplace them and parents lodge complaints, because the score reports can land in the wrong hands. The simple solution for the above problem would be to mask the SSN in the score reports in California.

In case of any identifier use, there has to be provisions in place, both technical and procedural, to guard the personal information, as this will be one of the roadblocks for implementing a longitudinal student data system.

### Fiscal Impacts

The immediate budgetary impact of SB1453 is expected to be very reasonable. An API (Academic Performance Index) database was originally proposed in the 2001-02 budget, but was not approved due to budget shortfalls (California Legislative Analyst's Office, 2001). By supporting a small initial investment in this direly needed technology this year, the legislature will finally get the data it has been looking for to create an effective education system for the 21st century.

### Conclusion

Given the above references and support, we advocate that the California State Budget provide the fiscal support necessary to authorize CSIS to create the student identifier system.

### References

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