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Planned Oregon Education Database Raises Thorny Questions

by **Rob Manning** (https://www.opb.org/contributor/rob-manning/) (Follow ()) OPB Jan. 24, 2013 5:02 p.m. I Updated: Jan. 25, 2013 12:17 p.m.

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The state of Oregon wants more information on children. State education leaders are working on a student database that would track kids from before they enter kindergarten through college. The database is turning into one of the thornier parts of Oregon's education overhaul.

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Oregon has lots of data on students already.

Steve Langford, the information technology director in the Beaverton schools (http://www.beaverton.k12.or.us/home/), said K-12 data starts when students register.

"As students are enrolled in districts across the state, enrollment records are created, and a lot of that information comes from parents. It is keyed in by different staff at many different schools," Langford said.
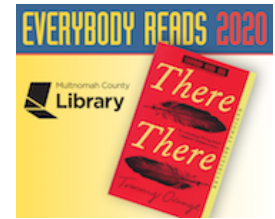
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Steve Langford is the Beaverton School District's chief information officer.

Rob Manning/OPB

That information goes from districts to the state. It becomes part of official reports. It's shared with federal officials, and forms the basis for academic research. But it's not always accurate.

Kris Alman, a Beaverton-area mom, obtained her son's electronic record and found it identified him as having essentially dropped out of school, as early as the fourth grade. Now, he's in high school.

Alman: "I looked at this and I'm thinking, 'Wait a minute, there's no way!'"

Alman said officials she's met with share her view that inaccuracies are part of the system. She said that's a bad sign for the planned longitudinal database.

But state officials say knitting together a longitudinal system to track kids is a high priority. It's called for in Oregon's waiver from the federal No Child Left Behind (http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml) law. The state won a $10 million federal grant to build it. And it's one of six deliverables the state's new chief education officer, Rudy Crew (http://www.oregon.gov/gov/oeib/docs/11crewbio.pdf), has to pursue.

After a speech last fall to a room full of college professors, Crew underscored the need for improvements on the data front.

"I just don't see yet the orchestration or the organization of the data work, and the data shop, if you will, that we need for the seamless data points that all of us would like to see available," he said. "So I'm kind of reserving judgment until I see more about that."

Now, the state's databases are split into silos, with little interaction. Colleges have information on their students. Early childhood programs have data on little kids.

Peter Tromba in the Eugene School District (http://www.4j.lane.edu/) says having information in the K-12 system from early on would be an improvement over the current situation.

"So, we're looking at eighth, or ninth, or tenth graders and having a good idea at that grade whether we have to do more to help them make it," Tromba said. "The key with a longitudinal data system is that we'll be able to ask and answer those questions for kids who are younger."

But including information from before kindergarten is a sensitive topic. That was the message from the Oregon Education Investment Board (http://www.oregon.gov/gov/pages/oeib/oregoneducationinvestmentboard.aspx)'s teacher rep, Hana Vaandering, at their meeting last October.

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"We're talking about – in the early childhood - tracking children from the time they're born, and I think that's a conversation with Oregonians that they're understanding exactly what we're doing before we do it,"

Vaandering said.

Tracking information at a student level is old hat in the K-12 system.

Again, Steve Langford in Beaverton: "The student has a state student ID, and we must send that data, so that they can be counted."

But that's not the case for kids before they enter kindergarten. The early childhood data system is geared more toward evaluating programs than tracking progress of individual kids, according the state's early learning director, Jada Rupley.

"I think as we look at tracking progress, to make sure that we have improvement, that we have outcomes, we have to be very careful about what it is we need to know," Rupley said.

She said her current data system is based on kids in a handful of specific early learning programs. "But we also have a major population of children who are in our childcare providers, and in our homes."

Governor John Kitzhaber wants to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars this year on a study to determine the best way to build the statewide longitudinal database.

The cost of building that database will be many times higher, consultant Rick Ganderson said in remarks to the Oregon Education Investment Board.

"So if you include this year, it's a total of $50 million," Ganderson said.

The governor's budget proposes $10 million in borrowing to start building that database in 2014.

And Chief Education Officer Rudy Crew said there's no question the system will be built.

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Rudy Crew

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"Oh, yes, it's not about whether," Crew said. "In my mind, it's never been about whether."

Crew imagines a system where teachers would have student-level data, principals could analyze groups of students, and information could move easily between schools and other institutions.

"There'd be all kinds of data that would be allowed to migrate, if you will, from the, if you will, K-12 system to the community college," Crew said. "So you'd be able to see from high schools how students are able to make that transition."

But some say it's just that ability to move data around that raises security concerns, particularly when it comes to social security numbers.

For example, the Oregon University System gathers social security numbers from students. State education officials want to be able to link to those numbers. They're planning a separate database with an added layer of protection for that.

But any connection to Social Security information worries Lisa Shultz, a former school board member in Beaverton.

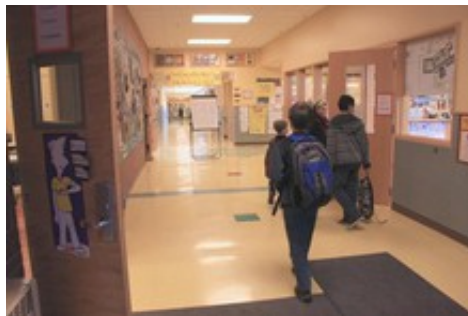"Child identify theft is a problem," Shultz said. "To create this database puts these children at risk."

District-level officials, like Peter Tromba in Eugene, argue for limited use of any clearly identifiable information on an individual student.

"So the state has no reason to know the name or the student identification number of any student in our district to give us some feedback on how our schools are doing," Tromba said. "They need to know individual student growth. The school does need to know that."

State education officials say any unique student information would be kept in the database that the state's setting up with extra security. Officials like Rudy Crew say privacy and security issues can be worked out over the next year.

In the end, advocates like Lisa Shultz wonder if the millions of dollars budgeted to collect and analyze information is really that helpful.

Shultz said at a certain point, you have to focus on solutions. "So it's sort of like a person who wants to lose weight – you can get on the scale every single day, but if you don't go on the exercise program, if you

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Amanda Peacher/OPB

don't eat well, if you don't develop healthy habits, what good does it do you, to get on the scale every day?"

But while some parent advocates, like Shultz, suggest the database may be a waste of money, some local school officials are worried the state will fail in the other direction. They agree the need for good data is real, but worry the state may not spend enough tocreate a truly accurate and secure system.

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