

## Is It Time for a National Student Tracking System?

In recent testimony before Congress, Bill Gates called for a Center for State Education Data to aggregate information on student achievement. However, given the differences in students' socioeconomic situations across the United States, as well as varying curriculum and academic standards across districts, is a national system to track academic progress feasible?

### Yes

The growing debate around the creation of a national system for the secure exchange of key education data has far-reaching implications for PK–20 educators. Although some view this as an educational issue, in North Carolina, we view data access as an economic issue. *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, by the National Commission on Education and the Economy, reports that in the last 30 years the cost to educate each student has increased 240%, yet student achievement levels remain about the same. The cost of education in the United States ranks second highest in the world, yet we have one of the highest dropout rates. The commission's authors caution, "The problem is not with our educators. It is with the system in which they work."



June Atkinson

"The problem is not with our educators. It is with the system in which they work."

Our ultimate goal is much broader than simply tracking students. The PK–20 education entities in North Carolina recently embarked on an important project, called the *NC Education Insight Project*, that includes access to student data

### No

Tracking might be helpful when crises strike, as an efficient way to access some information for placing students. This is all it is, however: a simple administrative support. What typically happens, once any sort of student tracking is introduced, is that it is used to definitely reflect student achievement. Educational success is complex to track when done well. If we remove the complexity and opt for a clean and fast system, we miss the point of education completely, and we end up marginalizing more students than we help.

Learning is ongoing and can never be reflected in a simple grade or any kind of simplistic data system. Socioeconomic status, learning style, age, gender, race, language, and other factors have long been recognized in educational research as important variables in anyone's learning progress. Why do we insist on finding a simple solution to a complex issue?



Ruth Reynard

Although there is a certain practicality about keeping records of students—who they are, where they live, and

across three systems. We want a system that leverages our existing databases and allows North Carolina's PK–20 educators to eliminate information silos, integrate and analyze data, and make informed decisions about programs and practices that will prepare students to be more productive citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To evaluate performance of graduates in the workplace, our *NC Education Insight Project* will also include relevant data from the Employment Security Commission and the NC Board of Nursing. These additional data will allow us to assess the performance and success of graduates as they leave the system.

The initial outcome will be unprecedented insight into two areas in which North Carolina is currently experiencing critical shortages: teaching and nursing. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), the North Carolina Community

College System (NCCCS), and the University of North Carolina General Administration (UNCGA) can determine which policy initiatives show the best evidence of increasing student achievement, optimize performance in each system, and enhance operational efficiency statewide. Security and privacy are key concerns. Authorized personnel will be granted access to data based on assigned permissions and state and federal guidelines.

The *NC Education Insight Project* will clearly lead to an unprecedented level of informed decision making among educational entities in North Carolina, but a number of important questions can only be answered if we ultimately have access to a nationwide data system: Are our students academically prepared to enter schools and colleges in other states or do they need remediation? How do our teachers perform when they enter the workforce in other

states? What happens to students who leave the state? Will displaced students be counted as dropouts? Which higher education programs are producing the most effective teachers?

Our initiative began with a collective decision by leaders at NCDPI, NCCCS, and UNCGA. Rather than working alone, they optimized performance of the state PK–20 system by locking arms, leveraging federal reporting requirements, and working collaboratively to find answers and gain insight that will benefit the state's students throughout their education—and beyond. This effort will only be complete when we can integrate data from other states in a national system. Now is the time!

*June St. Clair Atkinson is the North Carolina State Superintendent of Public Instruction. She received a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy from North Carolina State University in 1996, and has made presentations to business and other educational groups in 43 states.*

other personal demographics as well as reporting on their progress through school—where is the connection with evidence of learning? These are very different objectives. The reality is that teachers are driven by standardized tests, which only tell us how students respond to and take tests, not what they know.

Tests tell us how those students who have a similar way of knowing to the test maker can respond to or take the test. Other students with differing learning styles remain marginalized. Preparing students for tests also does not ensure learning is taking place—only information exchange, organization, and memorization. Measuring learning is a very different objective and must be based on measurable learning outcomes.

Once the course work and various learning options have been covered, the student must produce something—a project, a paper, a

presentation, a skill demonstration, a construction of some sort, or a portfolio—to show that learning has taken place. All of the learning must be integrated into the final product or products. How can a test ever be a production of student learning? Students do not create tests; teachers and administrators do.

If test results are the only way in which student learning is tracked for administrative purposes, then nothing is known about the actual learning taking place. Additionally, if the tracking data are used to either progress or remediate a student, then the student falls victim to a faulty and biased process. For example, if groups of students perform similarly on a standardized test, then the test also becomes discriminatory. That is, there may be groups of students who are badly resourced in a particular area, and all would perform poorly in a standardized test. The tracking then shows

those students as a group doing badly. Decisions made from this biased data will result in whole groups of students being marginalized and labeled. At this point, the result of tracking is far from accurate or helpful.

Although student tracking may provide some administrative help, those data should not be used to tabulate student progress or predict student achievement unless those data also include various forms of reporting from teachers in a more holistic manner. That is, if teachers can include data from various demonstrations of learning by students, then those data can be analyzed for educational purposes. Without that level of complexity, numbers mean nothing.

*Ruth Reynard holds a PhD in curriculum, teaching and learning from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. She was an associate professor of education for almost eight years. Currently she is director of faculty for Career Education Corporation in Illinois.*