



background

Report # 134

Data Sharing Among Schools And Human Services

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Sharing Data to Help Children

Closing the knowledge gap *Sharing school and human service data*

It is common practice for schools and human services agencies to keep information they gather on children they serve segregated from one another, largely because confidentiality laws that discourage doing otherwise. For decades, schools and human services agencies in Allegheny County were no exception.

Today, however, the county Department of Human Services (DHS) and Pittsburgh Public Schools are in the second year of a novel legal agreement that enables them to share data on children they have in common – a step that has led to a more complete understanding of students involved in human services and a collaborative approach to finding innovative ways to address their needs.

The emergence of the Youth Futures Commission in Allegheny County was a key factor in getting a data sharing agreement between DHS and the school district. The Commission evolved from a similar initiative, the Youth Crime Prevention Council, established 13 years earlier at the urging of former U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Pennsylvania Frederick Thieman to organize prevention efforts and law enforcement to address juvenile crime and violence.

The need for such an agreement became clear when a Commission subcommittee was assigned to investigate cross-systems data sharing. “You would hear someone say, ‘We don’t know who the homeless students are.’ Or, ‘We don’t know if our kids have been arrested.’ Or, on the county side, ‘We don’t know if someone we are providing services to is going to school or not,’” said Thieman, Youth Futures Commission co-chair and president of the Buhl Foundation.

Obstacles To Data Sharing

Benefits of sharing data had been recognized for years, but efforts to integrate school and human services failed time and again in the face of legal and other challenges. The major obstacles included:

- **Legal.** Laws restricting the release of student data include the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), which controls disclosure of education records. In most cases, student or parent consent is needed to disclose records such as grades, test scores and behavior information. About 30 laws protect DHS-held data, including the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). Consent is almost always necessary to disclose child health data.
- **Technical.** Systems compatibility and data-mining capabilities were among the technical issues

A novel data-sharing agreement in Allegheny County is helping school and county human services officials better understand circumstances inside and outside of school that influence the academic performance and behavior of students.

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that had to be resolved in order to integrate and analyze school data on 26,000 students, DHS data related to human services, as well as juvenile justice data and data from other sources.

- **Cost.** Financial issues included start-up and other data-sharing costs and who would pay them.

Incentives Mount

The launch of The Pittsburgh Promise in 2007 gave the Pittsburgh Public Schools an additional incentive for gaining a more complete profile of its students and their families. The scholarship program offers all city public school graduates who meet residency, academic and attendance requirements up to \$10,000 a year toward the cost of attending a college, university or technical school in Pennsylvania.

It led to a district-wide initiative to help students become “Promise

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ready” and a goal of having at least 80% of graduates finish college or a workforce certification program. The district put in place programs to strengthen teaching, counseling, curriculum, administration, and other areas critical to improving the educational environment and preparing students to earn scholarships and continue their education.

DHS also had powerful incentives to gain deeper insight into city public school students. Some 14,450 Pittsburgh Public Schools students – about 53 percent of district enrollment – have been involved in at least one human service program. In 2008, for example, they accounted for 39% of the children in the child welfare system and 36% of the children receiving mental health services.

More than a decade earlier, DHS began a series of reforms built on openness to new ideas, integration and multi-system collaboration, that had the support of a foundation-financed Human Services Integration Fund.

One step was to create a state-of-the-art data warehouse as a central repository of human services data. The data warehouse enabled DHS to process and analyze millions of client records to improve services, delivery and to better inform decision-making. The data warehouse grew to include more than 25 different data systems – except school district data.

Overcoming Obstacles

Thieman took the role of third-party facilitator and was able to gain the support of top school district and DHS leadership for sharing data, which was critical to overcoming the obstacles to reaching a legal agreement.

Following an assessment of the issues that had frustrated past data-sharing efforts, he met with Pittsburgh

Public Schools Solicitor Ira Weiss and a strategy emerged. It was agreed that the legal issues, although challenging, were not insurmountable and that the place to start was with the cost and technical issues.

The DHS data warehouse had the capacity to manage a large volume of data from dozens of different systems and mine it in ways that would enable DHS and the school district to gain insight into students of mutual interest, identify gaps in services, evaluate interventions and other tasks.

The issue of who would pay the start-up and other costs was also resolved quickly. Given the resources at the DHS data warehouse, it was determined that the cost of the new initiative would not be significant. DHS offered to find the money to support the initiative. And the foundations behind the Human Services Integration Fund agreed to release funds to cover data integration and other costs.

The general legal challenge was to find enough flexibility in confidentiality laws to make data sharing feasible. Restrictions contained in HIPAA and more than two dozen other laws and regulations made it difficult for DHS to integrate data with the school district without explicit consent. The course chosen was to find a way to entrust DHS with school district data and build into the agreement protec-

tions against unauthorized disclosure.

Attorneys also identified data that could be shared without consent, such as the release of school directory information, including name, age, address and school the student attends.

But creating a more robust data-sharing arrangement required access to an even broader pool of student information. Attorneys found the solution in a recent amendment to FERPA, which provided a more detailed description of the law’s research exception. Under the law, consent is not required to release student data to organizations conducting certain studies for the district.

The exception allowed the school district to integrate data without consent as part of an “action research” project undertaken with DHS to identify indicators of academic and behavior successes and deficits, prepare statistical analyses, and develop and implement strategies and interventions for improving service delivery and student academic outcomes.

The agreement was signed by school and county officials in December 2009. And by the summer of 2010, school data were flowing into the DHS data warehouse and select data sets were analyzed to test the system’s capabilities.



references

This report is largely based on the following publications.

Fraser, J. (2011). *Framework for Collaboration: The Memorandum of Understanding between Allegheny County DHS and Pittsburgh Public Schools*. Pittsburgh, PA: Allegheny County Department of Human Resources. www.alleghenycounty.us/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=32826

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