

Better Data Urged to Link K-12, Postsecondary Outcomes: Information could lead to curricular and instructional changes

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If high schools are going to better prepare students for college and careers, experts say they need to track graduates enrolling in higher education, whether they take remedial courses to get up to speed, and whether they earn a degree.

At a meeting in Washington last week, politicians from both sides of the aisle, along with educators and nonprofit leaders, discussed the importance of using data to support the college- and career-ready agenda.

The event was sponsored by the Washington-based Data Quality Campaign, a national venture started in 2005 to encourage the use of high-quality data to improve student achievement, and College Summit, a nonprofit organization, also in Washington, that provides college-readiness programs in high schools.

"Our educators and students will not make sufficient college-ready gains unless they have information on how their students are actually doing in college," said J.B. Schramm, the founder and chief executive officer of College Summit, who, along with co-author E. Kinney Zalesne, released a paper, "Seizing the Measurement Moment."

While some communities around the country are creating postsecondary feedback systems, Mr. Schramm said efforts are inefficient and states need to take the lead.

"Only states have the incentive, the means, the impartiality, and the stamina to get this information in the hands of educators," he said. Some states, with significant federal support, have made progress in building these data systems in the past six years, but more needs to be done, he said.

Mr. Schramm suggested four steps to move forward: Improve the ability to measure students' postsecondary success; make those data available statewide; provide technical assistance to translate data into action; and reward districts whose students' college enrollment and performance improves.

Once the information is gathered on student success after high school, Mr. Schramm said, it needs to be available in a user-friendly format for parents, the business community, and policymakers to make sound decisions about the rigor of curriculum and teaching.

Demand is growing for linking performance between education systems, the speakers suggested. A 2010 survey of high school educators by Deloitte, a finance-consulting company, found that 92 percent felt having data on students' academic performance in college was critical for evaluating the effectiveness of high school curricula and instruction. Yet only 13 percent of educators say they get postsecondary data for all their school's graduates.

Identifying Weaknesses

Knowing how students fare in college can help K-12 identify weaknesses in curriculum, such as the need for more math requirements or more rigorous writing instruction. That information can also relieve colleges from having to invest as much in developmental education and, ultimately, fortify the workforce, the College Summit report suggests.

U.S. Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., applauded efforts to improve tracking of student and teacher performance through better use of data. Rather than having top-down federal policies, schools want the freedom to make decisions based on their local needs, even though good education must be standards-enforced, he said.

"If there is no stick for the federal government to use--and I don't think there should be--then how do you make sure the job is getting done? The answer is data," Mr. Hunter said. "There has to be sunshine and there has to be the ability to compare apples to apples from every stakeholder at the local level going to the highest level. "

The information on school performance has to be easy to see and translated by the "stay-at-home mom or the Ph.D mom," said Rep. Hunter, adding that the idea is doable but will likely take a long time before it becomes a reality.

Lyndsay Pinkus, the director of national and federal policy initiatives for the Data Quality Campaign, said that momentum around this issue is accelerating. In 2005, 12 states were reporting the capacity to link K-12 and higher education systems, and by 2010, the number had leaped to 44.

In New York City, this year for the first time, report cards will provide data points for students on three measures: college readiness, college acceptance, and college retention, noted Bennett Lieberman, a panelist at the event and the principal of Central Park East High School. Eventually, schools will be able to compare their performance with others. Having that information will help schools make smarter decisions about where they are steering students and which schools have better supports, Mr. Lieberman said.

Charles McGrew, the executive director of the Kentucky P-20 Data Collaborative, said his state creates postsecondary information reports in formats for K-12 educators and administrators and postsecondary educators. "We put information in the hands of people who actually can make a change," he said. "There is a hunger for it."

The data need to be objective, and educators need to collaborate on how to make the entire education system better for kids rather than blame one another, Mr. McGrew said. "The minute it starts to be a finger-pointing enterprise is the minute things stop to work."

U.S. Sen. Michael F. Bennet, D-Colo., a former schools superintendent in Denver, said there is a big systems problem in the delivery model of K-12 education.

"You can't do this systems work unless you have data and unless you are rigorous about it and unless you actually measure what you are trying to do."

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