

Wisconsin: Data Policy Landscape

While the only teacher data can be found in the state's licensure database, Wisconsin has no statewide human resources or teacher assignment database. There is increasing interest within the university system and at a lesser extent within state educational leadership to begin linking data on teacher preparation with teacher placement, retention, and effectiveness. At least some of this interest is being driven by various PK-16 Councils within the state. The higher education system has an individual unit record data system that can identify graduates from teacher preparation programs, which is mostly based on Social Security Number (SSN) identifiers that could support this link. The state cannot link data to teachers because of a legal barrier, as seen in the following section of WI state statute 118.30(2)(c):

The results of examinations administered under this section to pupils enrolled in public schools, including charter schools, may not be used to evaluate teacher performance, to discharge, suspend or formally discipline a teacher or as the reason for the non-renewal of a teacher's contract. (Retrieved August 16, 2005, from <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/rsb/stats.html>)

However, a representative from the Office of Education Accountability believes there will be increased movement towards integration, because in 2005 the state implemented a unique identifier for students, which is necessary to begin linking student and teacher data. However, the representative does not believe the state assessment system is flexible enough for districts to put teacher identifiers into the data. More state agency leaders are asking how assessment data can be used to evaluate programs of all types, from preparation to the district level.

Current Database Capabilities

Nevertheless, the state universities are assembling a fair amount of data. Each campus submits two student unit record data files to the system each year called the "Student CDR." These data include courses taken, demographics, if a student takes a course that is pass/fail/audit, and the student's cumulative GPA. The data do not include grades. Courses then can be matched with a data file that identifies when the course was offered, course level, and number of credits. When students enter the system, data include the high school from which they graduated, their ACT scores, and class rank. Campuses provide ID numbers, though it is not clear whether ID numbers are unique. Historically, the SSN was used as an identifier. This system enables tracking some—but not all—students as they move across campuses.

Students have the option not to provide their SSN, but most do. However, the data system can only identify those who are training to be teachers, majoring in elementary education or special education. Those who have a content major and then expect to teach cannot be identified as prospective teachers while in the system.

Future Use and Capabilities

The University of Wisconsin (UW) PK-16 Advisory Council is preparing to address the issue of a comprehensive data system, including how to create the system and how to link teacher preparation with behavior and performance. Several challenges include the need (a) to rebuild relationships between the UW system and Department of Public Instruction (DPI), since several years ago there was an informal data council, and (b) to create new rules for data use, including clarifying the stakes and ensuring that individual teachers and higher education programs are not judged unfairly.

Given the current budget crisis, many teacher educators fear that data pointing out problems could be used as an excuse to cut budgets as opposed to investing in needed solutions. A number of education reformers in Wisconsin have expressed concern that it is difficult to capture the complexity of teaching and learning; given the limited databases and the current punitive environment, integrating the data together may be risky.

The Political Landscape

Historically the state has collected data, but the question of how to use the data has not really come up. Increasingly, there districts, the public, and other stakeholders expect state data to be integrated. Districts want integrated data provided to them, particularly those districts whose personnel are data savvy. It is not clear if teacher preparation programs are pushing for integrated data, and political pressure for integration is not apparent. The Teachers for a New Era (TNE) conversations in Milwaukee have pushed the data conversation ahead within the state.

The state supports two PK-16 Councils, the state leader council and the UW system advisory council. The state leader council has not developed a strategic plan. However, the K-12 state superintendent is also a regent in the UW system and may push for increased data integration. The other PK-16 Council is an advisory council within the UW system that provides advice to the system about aligning resources and prioritizing issues around teacher preparation. The council is focused on building the network within higher education. After 3 years, the council is ready to examine and share data.

Potential Barriers

There are four barriers to following and assessing new teachers as they exit schools of education.

1. The DPI is just now moving to unite records for students.
2. SSNs are not used by all students in the UW system.
3. There is political resistance to anything that would identify individual teachers.
4. Good relationships do not exist between DPI and the UW system, delaying the process of determining how to connect data. Additionally, UW campuses have tried but not received data from DPI that contains information on graduates, whether they are working, and what assignments they have.

