Closing the knowledge gap
Sharing school and human service data

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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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 protections 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.


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