

December 1991

Data Collection Coordination for the Education and Well-Being of Washington State Children: Actions and Future Options

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Authorizing Legislation

Washington State Senate Bill 5474 created an interagency task force to examine data collection efforts related to the education and well-being of children. Task force members represented legislative staff; key state agencies involved with data collection and with children's programs; and the associations of school directors, school administrators, cities, and counties. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy provided the staff support for the task force.

The task force's primary purpose was to determine ways to provide aggregated program data on children, using school district boundaries as the mechanism for sorting the information. Data sorted by school district boundary could be used by state and local policymakers in planning and evaluating their education programs and activities.

The bill also required the task force to identify:

- the types of data needed;
- the cost and feasibility of various data collection options for aggregation and reporting actions, which could be implemented at little or no cost;
- actions which would require additional resources for implementation; and
- related issues (such as confidentiality, common definitions, and timeframes) as deemed appropriate.

Findings

Many state agencies and school districts collect information on Washington's children. However, it is almost impossible to combine data from different program sources for resource allocation, program planning, and evaluation purposes. A variety of agencies would like to be able to assemble data on children from different programs and geographic boundaries.

At the local level, school district personnel have been unable to obtain certain state social and health data that would be helpful to them, because such data is aggregated and reported by ZIP code or county--not by school district. As schools increasingly become a

focal point for the delivery of various social services, they need more state-level information on the social, health, employment, and juvenile justice backgrounds of the children they serve.

Until recently, merging a variety of information from different programs was difficult and expensive. However, the advent of geographic information systems on personal computers makes it possible to merge program data from different sources and areas (e.g., census tracts and ZIP codes) and report it by different geographic areas (e.g., school districts and cities).

Recommendations

The task force adopted a policy framework to categorize data. The framework helped answer resource allocation and program evaluation questions on the education and well-being of children. Five key data categories were identified: poverty, family, health, criminal, and educational status. This report contains a detailed summary of the questions and data elements, as well as identification of who collects the elements and what methods they use.

The task force recommends the following options, provided that an appropriation is available:

- ***Short-Term Option: Provide aggregated data by ZIP code and report by school district boundary.*** Each agency would send its data on total numbers of children (collected by ZIP code and aggregated by each program) to the Office of Financial Management (OFM). OFM would convert the data into estimated total numbers of children in each school district in each program (e.g., the number of children on Medicaid in each school district).

The data could be assembled and distributed in an annual report to state and local policymakers and school districts beginning September 1992. This option has the lowest estimated costs because there would be no investment in a geographic information system.

An advantage of this option is that it can be implemented quickly and will provide information on a school district level across the state. A disadvantage is that it would be limited to basic descriptive information organized by school districts, and thus would not be useful for planning in other policy areas.

- ***Intermediate Option: Provide demographic program data on children by geographic unit to a central geographic information system.*** Each agency would send a data file on the numbers of children by age, sex, and race/ethnicity to OFM in each agency program. There would be no individual identifying information included with the data. OFM would compile different geographic reports (such as by city, legislative district, or school district) describing how many children of a certain age, sex, and race/ethnicity participate in a particular program. OFM would aggregate the data and set up an annual reporting system. The first annual report would be available by September 1995. OFM and the Department of Information

Systems would set up the geographic information system and link it to OFM's Executive Information System. Through a computer network, individuals would be able to access different aggregated data reports tailored to their own interests.

An advantage of this option is that a geographic information system would be employed. It would provide a greater level of detail on the characteristics of children, and the ability to use geographic units in addition to school districts. It would also permit reports which cross-tabulate client characteristics. A disadvantage is that no cross-program comparisons of individual children would be available.

- **Other Options** Two other options were considered. One was similar to the intermediate option recommended, and the other could be a long-term goal for data collection on children. The long-term option would create a geographic information system that receives individual data on participants and aggregates it to produce reports that track participants across programs. This is not possible under any of the other options. However, a host of confidentiality, quality of data, and cost issues would have to be considered with this option.