

National Student ID Cards: The Time Has Come

By Ananda Roberts

For the past three years, I have had a ringside seat to a unique collaboration between a school district and local after-school programs involving the use of electronic ID cards to link school information to after-school participation. The experiment has convinced me that we should establish a nationwide student ID tracking system to follow students through their entire K-12 careers.

The cooperative school/after-school ID card program implemented by the Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky, has proved that a local tracking system can make a genuine difference in students' lives by equipping after-school administrators with insight into children's school attendance and achievement.

On a grander scale, a national student ID card makes sense for reasons ranging from better data collection to better accountability to funding sources. The beauty of the concept is that a single card can provide a gateway to a wide range of information that was never available before.

With this kind of system, it will be possible to know whether a student has dropped out of school or simply switched school districts. We will have the data necessary to track students longitudinally and use that information to build better academic programs designed to increase children's chances of success. And much more.

With a national database designed to ensure that everyone is collecting the same information and reporting it in the same way, a national student ID card can also provide quantifiable evidence that one program is working and another is not. It can help guide curriculum decisions and shape approaches to aiding academically challenged students. It can help determine which programs should be funded and which should be dropped.

To be sure, any proposal of this kind will unleash the same kind of controversy triggered by calls for a national identity card in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, but the uses of the two systems would be entirely different.

One would be used to screen individuals before boarding a plane, entering a federal building, and so on, raising critical civil liberty concerns over privacy and profiling. The other would simply be a vehicle for data collection, much like a credit card or even a driver's license that allows information to be shared from state to state.

As such, a national student ID card could solve a multitude of problems in the ongoing struggle to measure the effectiveness of different teaching methodologies by making it possible to compare results across the country on a much more comprehensive level than in the past.

At the front end, a national student ID card would be a simple attendance tracking tool. Students could be provided with bar-coded ID cards that would be scanned every time they enter and leave a school. The scanned data could be instantly transferred from a scanner to an attached PC, providing a complete log of time and attendance without the need for manual attendance-taking and data compilation.

At the back end, the scanned information could be uploaded from the PC to a database with a few clicks at the end of the day. This data could then be integrated with student grades, test scores and other information to be used for district-to-district comparisons as well as for national longitudinal studies. This information could be made available exclusively through a data warehouse, eliminating the privacy concerns that would be associated with storing personal information on the card itself.

Consider the possibilities. If a child is doing well in one school district in El Paso, Texas, school officials will be able to track his performance if he moves to another of the city's nine school systems, to Atlanta or anywhere else in the country. Accurate data will be available to compare the achievements of different ethnic groups in different geographical areas, to measure the impact of federal funding under the No Child Left Behind Act, and so on.

In my opinion, however, the system cannot stop at the schoolhouse door. I believe that any initiative to create a nationwide student tracking system must take a holistic view.

We must also include information on participation in community-based after-school programs in order to understand the impact of positive after-school experiences and tutoring on areas from school performance to dropout rates, as we are seeing in Louisville. We need to start even earlier by gathering data on participation in Head Start programs and then connect that information to K-12 statistics.

If we fail to broaden the data net to encompass time spent outside the classroom — at least to the extent that it can be measured — we will lose the opportunity to see the big picture. In the case of after-school activities, for example, the data collected by swiping an ID card will make it possible to tie after-school program attendance, frequency of attendance and the length of time spent in a facility to student achievement and school attendance. This in turn will help funders know where to allocate their resources.

The challenge in setting up this kind of system would be significant, but so would the benefits. At a time when student achievement levels are static and the U.S. economy is buffeted by global competition, it is more important than ever to use education funds wisely. Here's why.

Jay P. Greene, a professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas, has calculated that we have doubled per-pupil spending over the last 30 years, decreased the average student-teacher ratio, and increased the number of teachers with advanced degrees as well as the average years of experience per teacher. Yet average reading and math scores for 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds as reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have remained virtually unchanged since 1970.

This failure to increase educational performance strongly suggests that we are putting our dollars in the wrong place. With proper implementation, a national student ID card program would help provide the data we need to evaluate what works and what doesn't. That in turn could improve our resource allocation and bring us closer to our goal of helping children anywhere in the country reach their full potential.

Credit line

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