

COMMENTARY

A Researcher's Plea to CDE

Don't Stop Collecting Data!

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PUBLISHED: December 9, 2010

When education folks in California talk about the need for state-wide data, they are generally referring to [CALPADS](#) (California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System), which has been in the news again lately after [Governor Jerry Brown cut funding for the system through a line-item veto](#). Although it may not be the sexiest topic, a well-functioning data system is critical to the success of any other education policy reform; after all, how can we determine what works and what doesn't if we aren't keeping track of the data?

There is no doubt that when/if CALPADS gets up and running well, it will allow researchers and state analysts to look at some important policy questions that we have not been able to answer due to the lack of data. Understandably, this is a high priority for a lot of people. But in the meantime, as a researcher who already uses a lot of statewide data from the [California Department of Education](#) (CDE).

I'm also concerned with the status of data we currently collect, or have been collecting. Specifically, I've relied on [CBEDS](#), or the California Basic Educational Data System, for years, as the only state-wide source of information on school and district characteristics, including staffing, programs, attendance and demographics. The [Professional Assignment Information Form](#) (PAIF) is a wealth of information on teacher characteristics and assignments, and is the only way to look at who is teaching what, and where. Of course, like any researcher, I've often wished the data were better (would it really be so difficult to include salary data in the PAIF?) and being able to link the information across time will be wonderful, when that happens; still, for what it is, even in its current state,

CBEDS is way better than what I've seen available in other states. Eventually, CALPADS (and the associated teacher data system, [CALTIDES](#), or the California Longitudinal Teacher Integrated Data Education System, will replace many aspects of CBEDS but I was recently dismayed to find that at least one piece of the current data has already disappeared. One of the most useful aspects of the PAIF has been the assignment data that identify the specific subject areas taught by each teacher (in addition to teacher characteristics such as gender, race, education level and credentials held, as well as district and total experience). However, the 2009-10 file only has basic teacher characteristics and none of the assignment or credential data.

According to the CDE website, some of the information previously collected on the PAIF has been 'transitioned' to CALPADS but is still supposed to be part of the CBEDS files. An email from the CDE requesting the data says that they did a "modified collection of the PAIF this year, so assignment and course data will not be available for the 2009-10 year." This omission makes it impossible to answer timely questions like whether districts have made staffing changes in the wake of categorical flexibility, or whether districts have responded to recent budget cuts by eliminating more elective courses like arts and music and consolidating staff in core subjects.

Perhaps this is a one-year budget thing but I'm more worried that this was an intentional deletion of data from the PAIF as part of the CALPADS transition. The CALPADS FAQ says: "CALPADS collects all individual-level data related to students and certificated staff, with the exception of credential and authorization information previously collected on the PAIF. The credential and authorization information is maintained by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing and will be linked to data submitted in CALPADS once (CALTIDES) becomes operational in 2012." I can't decide if this means the data is actually there, somewhere in the bowels of CALPADS, or not, but it certainly sounds like even if it is, it will not be available to the research community for several more years (assuming CALTIDES sees the light of day),

I do hope the CDE is aware of, and working to correct, these transitional issues. Given the general uncertainty that surrounds California schools and education policy, we cannot afford to lose any of the sources of information that we currently have.

Suggested citation

Imazeki, J. (2010, December). *A researcher's plea to CDE: Don't stop collecting data!* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education.
<https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/researchers-plea-cde>



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