



## Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education

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### MEMORANDUM

**To:** Members, Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education  
**Through:** Diane Barrans, Executive Director  
**From:** Kerry Thomas, Internal Auditor  
**Date:** October 9, 2014  
**Subject:** Internal Auditor/ANSWERS Update

ANSWERS project management activities continue to be the focus of my efforts while internal audit activities are ongoing at a minimum level. This allocation of time is planned to continue through the SLDS grant project period ending in mid-2015.

#### ANSWERS Project Updates

##### What is ANSWERS? Video

With the consent of Virginia's SLDS grant project team, the ANSWERS project management team was able to adapt an explanatory video brief about what a statewide longitudinal data system is, how the data is used, and how privacy and security are addressed. This video '*What is ANSWERS?*' is accessible on the ANSWERS website and will be used to provide a high-level overview to stakeholders and the public.

##### NCES Site Visit Report

In early June 2014, ANSWERS funding entity, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), performed a site visit to Alaska to assess progress on SLDS grant-funded work, provide technical assistance, and learn best practices. Included in your packet materials is the NCES site visit report summarizing the background of SLDS in Alaska, the FY12 grant status, strengths and promising practices, and areas of continued improvement and recommendations. Overall, the report is very positive in terms of the grant project and ANSWERS prospect for sustainability beyond the grant.

## Program Management Office Recruiting Activities

As part of sustainability planning and preparation for transition from grant-funded project activities to the ACPE-funded Program Management Office (PMO) in mid-2015, several recruitments for program staff are underway or planned in the next quarter. Following is summary information for the ANSWERS PMO recruiting activity:

- ANSWERS Program Director – recruitment period closed in mid-October. Initial interviews are conducted by ANSWERS staff, and finalists will return for a second interview with the multi-agency ANSWERS team in late October.
- Programmer/Data Analyst – recruitment activities ongoing since July. Challenging to locate staff for this Juneau-based position. Recently engaged with recruiting firm to identify qualified and interested applicants.
- Project Analyst – recruitment closed in September with a large pool of qualified applicants. Expect to make offer mid-October and have new staff in place by month end.
- Database Architect – recruitment planned for November 2014.
- Research Manager – recruitment planned for December 2014.

## Collaboration with Arkansas Research Center

ANSWERS has contracted with the Arkansas Research Center (ARC), Arkansas' SLDS program, to assist in ANSWERS' data and information visualization. ARC staff visited Alaska in June and will continue to support data visualization activities and provide subject matter expertise to the ANSWERS team over the course of the project. See <http://arc.arkansas.gov> for more information about ARC and to view SLDS products.

I look forward to our discussion and seeing you in Anchorage at the October meeting.

# SITE VISIT REPORT

## ALASKA'S LONGITUDINAL DATA SYSTEM

FY12 SLDS GRANTEE

June 2, 2014



Statewide  
Longitudinal  
Data Systems  
Grant Program

**SITE VISIT REPORT**  
**ALASKA'S LONGITUDINAL DATA SYSTEM**

**FY12 SLDS GRANTEE**  
**JUNE 2, 2014**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) Grant Program conducts site visits to its grantee states in order to assess progress on SLDS grant-funded work, provide technical assistance, and learn best practices. The SLDS Team visited the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE) on June 2, 2014, to review the state's fiscal year (FY) 2012 SLDS grant.

## **BACKGROUND**

Geography poses a unique situation when it comes to education services in Alaska. There are approximately 500 public schools organized into 55 school districts, which range considerably in size. Some serve thousands of students from urban areas, while others serve fewer than 20 students from remote towns. There are Regional Educational Attendance Areas (REAs) that serve students living in villages in politically unorganized areas of rural Alaska. It is challenging even to distribute resources across the large and small districts, especially to areas where it may be more expensive to deliver services. It is important to consider this context when trying to find ways to serve students more effectively.

Additionally, Alaska's geography drives its economy, which depends heavily on natural resources. Local jobs are primarily in the industries of fishing, mining, forestry, and tourism. However, many of these employment opportunities only require minimal education. This impact of this situation on the education culture across the state suggests that more value may be placed on outcome—e.g., an individual contributing to the community—rather than educational attainment. There is a need to understand alignment issues that exist between education and employment needs, but this requires data that cross the state's K12 and postsecondary agencies and the ability to follow students as they transition into the workforce.

Alaska has historically focused on collecting and using K12 data. In 2001, a regulation passed that required the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) to assign each student an identification number by August 2002. In response, DEED implemented the On-line Alaska Student Information System (OASIS). In 2005, DEED received a \$3.5 million grant from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) to develop a statewide K12 SLDS. Building upon OASIS's infrastructure, the Unity Project expanded DEED's capability to collect and provide accurate and timely K12 data. DEED used federal funds to construct a data warehouse, develop a web-based reporting portal, and implement a Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF) to tie Alaska school districts' student information systems (SISs) together.

However, there were few efforts to link student data back to K12. Postsecondary data maintained by the University of Alaska (UA) has been used mainly to respond to federal reporting requirements, such as Perkins. This lack of linkage is partly due to UA and DEED using different student identifiers; Social Security numbers (SSNs) are not available from both systems.

For labor data, the Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD) maintains multiple administrative data stores, using SSNs as the unique identifiers. In addition to collecting unemployment insurance (UI) wage records, DOLWD also collects workers' occupations; Alaska is one of only a few states to do so. By being able to match an individual's occupation back to his or her prior program of study, Alaska will be able to better track the effectiveness of training programs and link education efforts to labor demands.

Leveraging the Unity Project's foundational work for postsecondary and workforce, Alaska has continued to set the stage for a larger P-20W SLDS. Since 2009, the state has hosted data summits, facilitated partners' retreats, gathered information from stakeholders, reviewed existing data systems to see what data are included and how they are being used, developed policy questions, and created an SLDS vision statement and policies on data governance and security. Moreover, various memoranda of understanding (MOUs) have been signed to facilitate data sharing among the four partner agencies: DEED, ACPE, UA, and DOLWD. Alaska Governor Parnell even established the Education Data Sharing (EDS) Policy under Administrative Order 261, which directs these agencies to link data to improve education and workforce outcomes.

The Alaska Performance Scholarship (APS) program was established in 2011, further encouraging a data-sharing culture. The program provides Alaskan high school students the opportunity to earn a scholarship to help cover the cost of an in-state postsecondary education if they take a more rigorous curriculum and achieve certain grades and test scores. Administration of the program requires unit-level data sharing among the agencies to determine student eligibility and to report on student outcomes.

The 2011 Final Report of the Alaska Advisory Task Force on Higher Education and Career Readiness (HECR) further emphasized the need for and the importance of an SLDS for Alaska. The task force made recommendations to the Alaska State Legislature in four focus areas: student success, career path guidance, strengthening schools, and predictable and sustainable funding. The task force specifically called for better collaboration among the four partner agencies to develop an SLDS in order to respond to education productivity questions. The task force recognized that:

“Without coordinated longitudinal reporting to document outcomes as students progress (or fail to progress) through and beyond Alaska's education system, Alaska cannot know that state education spending results in any specific benefit, much less understand the return on investment or be able to determine what cost efficiencies may be possible. The only way to improve policymaking decisions in this regard is through the combined and synchronized efforts of stakeholder institutions to develop and maintain a statewide system of longitudinal data gathering and reporting.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.alaska.edu/files/shapingalaskasfuture/Final\\_HECR\\_Report.pdf](https://www.alaska.edu/files/shapingalaskasfuture/Final_HECR_Report.pdf)

In 2012, Alaska received an FY12 SLDS grant for \$4 million to link existing K12, postsecondary, and workforce data in a P-20W SLDS known as ANSWERS (Alaska Navigator: Statewide Workforce and Education-Related Statistics). The partner agencies aim to provide critical information in the form of reports and other products to inform decisionmaking by Alaska’s policymakers, educators, and general public. Of particular interest is the return on investment as it relates to program outcomes. Alaska is currently able to measure inputs and immediate outcomes, but the state would like to focus more on long-term impact.

### **FY12 SLDS GRANT STATUS**

Alaska spent Year 1 in planning and preparation activities. As a result, it has established a multi-tiered governance structure. At its highest level resides the Executive Governance Board (EGB), which consists of senior executives from each partner agency. The EGB is responsible for setting the overall mission and strategic goals, crafting policy for ANSWERS, and obtaining funding and resources. Under the EGB is the Project Managers Team, which consists of project managers from each partner agency. They propose policies and operating principles, provide direction and guidance to ANSWERS staff, and ensure implementation of executive directives. The Implementation Team, which provides project oversight for ANSWERS as a whole, is the go-between with the advisory committees (Partner Technical Committee, Partner Research Committee, and Partner Legal Committee) and stakeholders. Through this governance structure, Alaska has passed many front-end activities—such as engagement and communication plans, proof-of-concept reports, and business and technical requirements—and is poised to successfully complete its grant objectives.

By focusing on project planning and preparation early in the grant, Alaska was able to work more efficiently and effectively on other project outcomes. In Year 2, ANSWERS’s infrastructure and development tasks commenced. The procurement for a technical contract to develop the custom software is complete, and the vendor is currently designing and developing the processing modules necessary to match and load data to the de-identified data warehouse. The procurement of hardware infrastructure is planned for early in Year 3, with implementation in summer 2014. With several large contracts currently in play, the SLDS Project Team is expecting an increase in expenditures. To date, the team has spent a total of \$1,139,814.61 in SLDS funds, or 28 percent of the total award.

### **STRENGTHS AND PROMISING PRACTICES**

The following strengths and promising practices in stakeholder engagement, governance, and sustainability have benefited Alaska and may also benefit other states.

#### **Stakeholder Engagement**

The Alaska project team has done a good job of engaging the SLDS partners and making them part of the process throughout the project. As a result, discussions around the additional capabilities ANSWERS will bring the state have initiated a good dialogue among the partners, along with widespread enthusiasm. As ANSWERS is implemented, it will be important for Alaska to maintain its

relationship with its partners and reach out to new potential partners to ensure ANSWERS continues to be relevant and embedded as part of the data culture in the state.

### **Governance**

During the grant period, Alaska focused a great deal on setting up the processes of governance to facilitate meeting the milestones of the grant. By establishing these processes throughout the grant, better relationships were fostered, and good communication and engagement by the partners helped to move the project forward. The EGB was established as the ultimate decisionmaking body. Decisions are made by consensus through an iterative process. Because of the positive relationships that exist between the partners, a history of prior data sharing, and existing levels of trust between the participating agencies, the EGB has been more effective and the process of gaining consensus has been more expeditious.

The Alaska project team has been effective in the engagement of the EGB, keeping its members informed of the progress of the project. As a result of this engagement, the EGB has been better equipped to respond to the project team when decisions need to be made. The project team also approached the EGB with recommendations when key decisions were needed of the EGB, which made the process of gaining consensus simpler and more timely. Alaska is developing documentation describing its governance processes, understanding that these processes must be continually evaluated and modified as needs evolve. The documentation lays out a framework for *how* the state will govern ANSWERS, and it focuses less on *who* the partners are. This document should be published once it is finalized and approved by the EGB.

Alaska defined a set of policy questions to assist in defining the scope and initial areas of focus for its SLDS development. These questions guide what data are available through ANSWERS and help Alaska decide which data requests from researchers to fulfill. Data requests must be aligned with the list of policy questions in order for data to be provided. Alaska engaged many stakeholders around the state to determine what these policy questions would be. As a result of the feedback received to compile these policy questions, support for Alaska's SLDS is much broader. These questions reflect what is important to Alaska; as people begin to use the data, they also need to see that it comes from ANSWERS.

### **Sustainability**

Alaska has established an ANSWERS Program Management Office (PMO) for the ongoing management and support of ANSWERS. The PMO, and ANSWERS itself, is designed to be modular, with the intent of being organizationally flexible to fit into other state agencies, depending on where the state may eventually decide it should go. This will decrease potential downtime in the system, or lag time in responding to data requests. Current post-grant funding will be provided by a \$1 million allocation from the Alaska Student Loan Corporation (ASLC).

## **AREAS OF CONTINUED IMPROVEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are intended to assist Alaska with the successful completion of its FY12 SLDS grant.

### **Sustainability**

Although a source of post-grant funding has been identified, there is a need to secure long-term funds and staff that will adequately support the ongoing support, maintenance, and enhancement of ANSWERS. To help generate broader support for ANSWERS, the project team—and eventually the ANSWERS PMO—must continually demonstrate the value of ANSWERS. This entails identifying opportunities and being responsive to those opportunities when they are presented. This demonstrated value can assist in justifying additional funding and personnel resources. Alaska has done a good job of branding ANSWERS. The project team should continue to look for marketing opportunities, including increasing recognition of the name and logo. As the team publicizes ANSWERS, it needs to be prepared to respond to questions that may be raised related to data privacy and how ANSWERS benefits the students and citizens of Alaska.

### **Data Matching**

Alaska should continue developing and refining the data-matching process. The reliability and accuracy of establishing linkages between the data sources are critical; it is important to continue to focus on bolstering confidence in the matching process. Alaska is uniquely positioned to leverage data available through the state's Permanent Fund Dividend agency, and accurate linking of data will strengthen the partners' support for ANSWERS and the credibility of the data being used from ANSWERS.

### **Public Perception**

Recent events have heightened citizen awareness of data confidentiality and privacy issues, and state education agencies in general must get ahead of these concerns and be willing to assure the public that these are important issues not taken lightly. In Alaska, because ANSWERS will be incorporating data from multiple agencies for multiple years, it would be prudent to anticipate similar privacy concerns being raised and to be prepared to address them. Process transparency is vital. Openness about what will and will not be done with the data, and about who has access and for what purposes, are important to answer. Alaska can take advantage of work done in other states—such as Rhode Island and West Virginia—around 'myth-busting' these privacy concerns.

## **CLOSING COMMENTS**

The State Support Team (SST) is prepared to assist Alaska with any of the recommendations outlined in this report. The SST members can participate in and/or provide technical assistance (TA) through monthly calls, training webinars, facilitation of meetings, or implementation of activities.

The following are specific activities with which the SST can support the Alaska SLDS project team:

- Assisting DOLWD in showing the value of the SLDS

The following are specific items the SST would like to receive from Alaska:

- The documentation/justification for cloud storage
- Updates on the state's work with the Regional Education Lab

Alaska has a great deal to offer the larger education community. The experience and knowledge of ACPE staff have been shared with other states at national conferences. Alaska's project team is encouraged to continue sharing—via Personnel Exchange Networks (PENs), webinars, the Public Domain Clearinghouse (PDC), and the SLDS Listserv—so that others can benefit from its lessons learned and best practices.