

# ANSWERS Frequently Asked Questions

Updated June 2016

## **About ANSWERS**

The ANSWERS frequently asked questions are categorized into four areas: General, Security/Transparency, Research, and More Information.

### **1. General**

#### **What is ANSWERS?**

ANSWERS is Alaska's Statewide Longitudinal Data System that securely links and de-identifies education and workforce information.

#### **What does ANSWERS stand for?**

Alaska's **N**avigator: **S**tatewide **W**orkforce and **E**ducation-**R**elated **S**tatistics

#### **Who is responsible for ANSWERS?**

An executive governance body, created in 2011 by Administrative Order 261, is charged with authority and responsibility for ANSWERS and is composed of the chief executives of the four partner organizations:

- the Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED),
- the Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD),
- the President of the University of Alaska (UA), and
- the Executive Director of the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE)

#### **History of ANSWERS:**

In July 2012, Alaska received a \$4 million federal grant to link existing K-12, postsecondary and workforce data for use in developing Alaska-specific analyses of education program outcomes. ANSWERS was developed to use this linked information to deliver education-outcomes information to Alaska stakeholders to assess, evaluate and improve the state's education and career development spectrum. June 30, 2016 marked the completion of the 4-year grant project.

The goal of ANSWERS has been to provide critical information to Alaska policymakers, educators, and the general public about Alaska's education and workforce spectrum. However, due to current budget constraints and changes in legislative priority, the previous sustainability model post-fiscal year 2016 is no longer viable. Rather than implement ANSWERS as a statewide resource providing education and workforce information to researchers and external parties, the four ANSWERS partner organizations use ANSWERS as a shared internal partner resource, with the goal of using ANSWERS information to analyze and evaluate outcomes of partner programs and services.

Beginning July 2016, ANSWERS will be utilized as a resource for partner organizations to produce outcome reports relevant to critical education and workforce programs in a secure and cost effective manner.

## **2. Security & Transparency**

### **What data is in ANSWERS?**

ANSWERS contains key data elements collected by the four Alaska partner organizations and relevant to performing partner program outcomes analysis.

### **What data will NOT be in ANSWERS?**

Data elements not relevant to evaluating Alaska education programs' outcomes are not in ANSWERS. Examples of irrelevant and excluded data elements are voting records, political or religious affiliation, or student street address. Also, data for students who have not participated in Alaska's education system are not included in ANSWERS.

### **How is data in ANSWERS being used?**

De-identified data in ANSWERS is being used to analyze and evaluate outcomes of education and workforce programs and services provided by the four partner organizations.

### **What are some of the ways ANSWERS data is NOT being used?**

ANSWERS data is not being used to identify individuals, evaluate performance of any individual, or to determine eligibility for programs or services.

### **Is individually identifiable information being stored?**

Yes, but not within the ANSWERS longitudinal database. Identifiable information is stored by the agency providing the data, and also in a secure, encrypted data linking tool, completely separate from ANSWERS.

### **How is data and individual privacy be protected?**

ANSWERS is protecting data in five primary ways:

1. De-identification: After data are linked across systems, personally identifiable information (PII) such as student name, exact birthdate, street address, or any traceable ID is removed and replaced by a random-generated ANSWERS number that cannot be used to re-identify the specific individual. The information used for the matching is stored by the agency providing the data and also in a repository that is completely separate and outside the program evaluation and reporting ANSWERS system.
2. Secure storage: Information in ANSWERS is encrypted and stored in the State of Alaska secure data center.
3. Output cell-suppression: Cell-suppression is a reporting methodology that protects individual privacy by "asterisking" or otherwise masking information or reports on small groups where someone in that community might be able to identify an individual. ANSWERS reports undergo rigorous automated tests and manual review to ensure data is reported only in groups large enough to preclude individual

identification.

4. Access limitations: Access to ANSWERS is provided only to a limited number of staff. Access is further limited to only those data elements or functionalities needed to perform specific staff duties or approved analyses.
5. Testing and monitoring: Scheduled logging, access reports and audits of system access regularly occur, as well as system updates to address the latest security threats.

### **Who holds the key to access encrypted ANSWERS data?**

State of Alaska programming staff are the only individuals able to decrypt ANSWERS data. These staff have undergone thorough background checks and must meet rigorous standards and follow strict protocols related to protection of data privacy. Access to ANSWERS is subject to automated system logging (real-time automated monitoring) and regular review, to ensure no inappropriate activity takes place.

### **What is the federal law that governs what student information may be released?**

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), as amended, or 20 USC 1232g (implementing regulations are 34 CFR Part 99). There are no exceptions that permit the release of data that could result in an individual's identity becoming publicly known. Exceptions are allowed for certain non-public program evaluation and research purposes, subject to detailed agreements, research structures, data destruction policies, and similar privacy protections.

### **Can I opt out of having my personal information included in ANSWERS?**

The ANSWERS system does not currently support an opt-out feature because the information contained in the system is de-identified. The data currently collected by each of the four agencies participating in ANSWERS is required by various state and federal laws as a condition of participating in publically-funded programs such as the state's K-12 education system. Specific to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), opt out rights apply only to certain identifiable information. There is not a right to opt out of having de-identified education performance information included in program evaluations. Note that data from programs that are not publically funded, such as private school or certain homeschool programs, will not be included in ANSWERS.

### **Will confidential data be sold and used for advertising or commercial gain?**

No, the ANSWERS data will not be sold and is only used to produce outcome reports relevant to education and workforce programs offered by the four partner organizations. In no case will published or shared data include identifying information such as name, date of birth, and identification or account number.

## **3. Research Requests**

### **How can I submit a research request to ANSWERS to obtain de-identified, aggregated data?**

Due to a changes in state priorities and associated budget reductions, the previous model which would have allowed approved research and external parties to request access to de-

identified, aggregated data directly from ANSWERS is no longer viable. Researchers and external parties seeking information about education and workforce development programs should contact the appropriate partner agency directly.

#### 4. **More Information**

##### **How can I get more information about ANSWERS?**

- Visit our website at [acpe.alaska.gov/ANSWERS](http://acpe.alaska.gov/ANSWERS)
- Contact ANSWERS at (907) 465-6788 or [ANSWERS@alaska.gov](mailto:ANSWERS@alaska.gov)

