

# **ANSWERS Frequently Asked Questions – Alaska’s P-20W SLDS**

*Updated December 2015*

## **About ANSWERS**

The ANSWERS questions are categorized into five areas: General, Security, Transparency, Commercialization and More Information.

### **1. General**

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

ANSWERS is Alaska’s P-20W Statewide Longitudinal Data System (pre-school through grade 20 and the workforce SLDS).

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

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

#### **What will ANSWERS do for Alaska?**

ANSWERS will be a resource for state policy-makers and Alaska education stakeholders to answer key questions about how well the Alaska education pipeline is preparing students for higher education and workforce success. It will be a means of determining which programs are most successful in providing Alaska with resident hires for skilled, high-wage jobs. By linking existing relevant data from the state’s K-12, postsecondary education and workforce training information systems, ANSWERS will provide the state with the ability to make informed policy and funding decisions based upon effectively evaluating Alaska-specific program and policy outcomes, and to clearly measure the state’s return on its investment in education programs.

#### **Why does Alaska need ANSWERS?**

In order to make sound, evidence-based decisions to support Alaska’s public education system and economy, policy-makers need to know: 1) the cost of programs, services and initiatives, 2) how many Alaskans receive services, and 3) the impact or value of the services for individuals and the state. Specifically, policy-makers need to know whether students who complete a particular program are more likely to succeed in education and in the workforce than those who don’t, and if that success translates into well-trained Alaskans who are more likely to remain in Alaska and earn wages at levels that lead to economic success. ANSWERS will provide the ability to look at that return-on-investment in educational programs and initiatives, by providing information about the long-term differences between cohort groups. For the first time, Alaska will have a dynamic resource from which to know what programs make a long-term difference in students’ lives, and the outcomes achieved by these programs.

#### **Who will benefit from ANSWERS?**

Identifying the most successful services is important to policy-makers making funding decisions, to teachers and educators designing programs and interventions, and to parents

and students making education planning decisions. Answering questions about which programs and services are shown to be most likely to make a difference, and for which population groups, is especially important when there are limited funds and can help legislators and policy-makers target resources where they will have the most impact.

### **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 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)

### **How is ANSWERS funded?**

ANSWERS development and implementation is funded by a three-year, \$4 million federal grant, through mid-2015. It is currently staffed by a team from DEED, DOLWD, UA, and ACPE, with ACPE providing overall project management.

### **How will ANSWERS be funded after the grant period?**

Interim funding will come through ACPE's operating budget, which is substantially funded by the Alaska Student Loan Corporation. The ANSWERS project includes a sustainability plan to minimize costs by designing ANSWERS to automate expensive manual processes. Longer term, the ANSWERS executives intend to use the initial two to three years of ANSWERS operation to evaluate its service value to the state relative to its cost. Based on that evaluation, recommendations will be advanced to the administration and legislature, for consideration as to a financing source and structure that meets statewide interests and demands for ANSWERS data in the most cost-efficient and effective manner.

### **Why develop ANSWERS rather than expand the functionality of an existing database such as the Department of Education and Early Development's K-12 system?**

Two primary reasons:

1. Cost: Expanding an existing database to do something different from its original design is technically possible, but would be considerably more complicated and expensive than simply designing a longitudinal database.
2. Privacy: Existing agency systems require identification of individuals. ANSWERS purposefully has no identifying information such as name or shared reference number.

## **2. Security**

### **What data will be in ANSWERS?**

ANSWERS will contain key data elements collected by the four Alaska partner agencies. In

order to be linked in ANSWERS the selected data elements must 1) be available without a new data collection, and 2) be essential to answer one of 10 policy questions identified by education and workforce stakeholders as an education outcome indicator (see [acpe.alaska.gov/ANSWERS](http://acpe.alaska.gov/ANSWERS) for the full list of policy questions).

### **How does ANSWERS' structure differ from other state databases and systems?**

ANSWERS will maintain de-identified, historical information for the purpose of longitudinal evaluation and analysis. Other state databases are primarily transactional, meaning they are designed to be used to manage student or citizen individual participation in state services, such as education programs or unemployment insurance, and therefore include customers' real-time or near real-time, identifiable information. ANSWERS, in contrast, is longitudinal information that cannot be used to identify specific individuals. In compliance with strict federal and state privacy protection requirements, ANSWERS data for program evaluation and reporting does not include identifying information such as name, date of birth, and identification or account number.

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

Data elements not relevant to evaluating Alaska education programs' outcomes will not be in ANSWERS. Examples of irrelevant and excluded data elements are voting records, political or religious affiliation, or student street address. Also, individuals who have not participated in Alaska's education system will not be included in ANSWERS, therefore, data on residents and job-seekers who have not participated in Alaska's educational system are excluded.

### **Will there be new ANSWERS data collections or student surveys and tests?**

No. All data in ANSWERS will come from existing data systems. While it is possible that an education provider such as a school district may seek to leverage ANSWERS' capacity to conduct analyses of their programs and services, this type of service and related data collection and analysis would occur only at their request.

### **What are some of the ways ANSWERS data will NOT be used?**

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

### **Will individually identifiable information be 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 will data and individual privacy be protected?**

ANSWERS will protect data in five primary ways:

1. De-identification: After data are linked across systems, information such as student name, exact birthdate, street address, or any traceable ID will be 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 the ANSWERS information management system (AIMS), a repository that is completely separate and outside the program evaluation and reporting ANSWERS system.

2. Secure storage: Information stored within 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 will 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 staff or approved researchers who have undergone background checks, or a related approval process, and access will be limited to only those data elements or functionalities needed to perform specific staff duties or approved analyses.
5. Testing and monitoring: Regularly scheduled logging, access reports and audits of system accesses will 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.

### **3. Transparency**

#### **How will data in ANSWERS be used?**

ANSWERS data will be used to evaluate and improve Alaska’s education and career development system, as approved by the ANSWERS Executive Governance Board. For example, ANSWERS will allow evaluation of different groups of Alaska high school graduates’ performance as they progress through higher education and into the workforce. A specific question ANSWERS might address is: Are Alaska high school graduates who qualify for the Alaska Performance Scholarship more likely to attend college/career training in Alaska or work in Alaska, and earn a higher income, as compared to other Alaska high school students?

#### **What are some examples of ANSWERS data products?**

ANSWERS’ information products will include:

1. Reports to parents, students and the public, available as summary reports and Web dashboards, in the form of aggregated and cell-size suppressed information. Examples include Alaska school performance or average earnings for students who completed training in different Alaska career fields.

2. Responses to information requests from legislators and similar stakeholders about the performance of a specific program or population. Under federal and state law, such responses must be aggregated at a level to prevent identification of individuals.
3. Feedback reports, available to key stakeholders such as district superintendents, providing information about the performance of key subgroups of their students in higher education or the workforce, and designed to assist in the evaluation of education programs.
4. Responses to research requests, which will require approval according to protocols evaluating the appropriateness of the research request, methodology, and data requested, and ensuring data are used only in accordance with all applicable laws and for approved purposes.

**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.

**Will federal agencies have access to ANSWERS data?**

No. Congress has specifically prohibited the creation of a federal student-level database. While it is possible that the state may generate reports from ANSWERS to meet Alaska's federal reporting requirements; because of the way data in ANSWERS is linked, such reports would be aggregated information only, and provided only in cases where it is more efficient for the state to meet existing federal reporting requirements through ANSWERS than through other systems.

**Why is the ANSWERS system needed if data can now be linked for the state's annual Alaska Performance Scholarship (APS) outcomes report?**

While the APS outcomes report is a "proof of concept" of the analyses made possible through linking existing data, it requires that expensive manual processing and memoranda of understanding be duplicated annually. ANSWERS will increase security by allowing for matching to occur within the State of Alaska secure data center and eliminate current labor-intensive, costly processes which inhibit the development of additional reporting. ANSWERS will also address the concern that data linked under current processes is not de-identified, which means that copies of linked data may include such identifying information as student names or ID numbers. Bottom line: ANSWERS will result in lower costs, more efficient processes, more timely data, and – most important – enhanced security because data is de-identified and protected information which never leaves the state's secure systems.

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

The ANSWERS system does not currently support an opt out feature due to its de-

identified construct. 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 home-school programs, will not be included in ANSWERS.

#### **Do other states have systems similar to ANSWERS?**

Nearly all states either have some form of longitudinal data systems or are in the process of developing them. As of 2012, 36 states are providing state funding for their longitudinal data systems.

#### **4. Commercialization**

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

No, the ANSWERS data will not be sold and will only be used for approved research, program evaluation and reporting. In no case will publish or shared data include identifying information such as name, date of birth, and identification or account number.

#### **5. More Information**

##### **How can I get more information about ANSWERS and this project?**

- Visit our website at [acpe.alaska.gov/ANSWERS](http://acpe.alaska.gov/ANSWERS)
- Sign up for ANSWERS listserv updates at the website
- Contact ANSWERS project leaders:
  - Stephanie Butler, Project Director, [stephanie.butler@alaska.gov](mailto:stephanie.butler@alaska.gov) or 907-465-6743
  - Kerry Thomas, Project Manager, [kerry.thomas@alaska.gov](mailto:kerry.thomas@alaska.gov) or 907-465-6749