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Grant will streamline gathering of education data

The Alaska Department of Education & Early Development has received a \$3.5 million federal grant to centrally computerize information about student performance across the state, Commissioner Roger Sampson announced today.

“Our goal is to streamline the collection of data about student performance so district administrators, principals and teachers can spend more of their time helping students,” Commissioner Sampson said.

Increasing effective instructional time is one of the main goals of the State Board of Education & Early Development.

Alaska was one of 14 states to win a “longitudinal data system” grant from the Institute of Education Sciences, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education. The grant’s name refers to gathering information about students from year to year. In Alaska, the grant will fund EED’s winning proposal, named Unity Project: Data Mining for Student Success.

“To reach a point where Alaska is able to make data-driven decisions to improve student outcomes, the state must make significant improvements to its current data system and data use policies,” said Chris Letterman, Unity Project Manager and manager of EED’s Information Technology Services.

Longitudinal data make it possible to follow individual students’ academic growth and assess the value of specific education programs. With the transfer of students from district to district, and the turnover in principals and teachers, it’s especially important for educators to have ready access to accurate information about student performance.

The project also will provide a means for school districts and the state to comply with federal reporting requirements in the No Child Left Behind Act.

The Unity Project, with a timeline of three years, will revolutionize education data collection and analysis in Alaska by:

- Implementing well-defined content and common definitions for student-level data.
- Constructing secure web portals customized for internal department use, districts, researchers, the Alaska Legislature, the public, and the U.S. Department of Education that provide reports, as well as tools to create customized reports.
- Integrating the state data system with those of Alaska's 53 school districts, making district reporting quick, efficient, and exact. Districts now must enter the same piece of information many times just to comply with a variety of reporting requirements.

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