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VDOE & the Virginia Longitudinal Data System: Improving Student Outcomes & Protecting Privacy

The Virginia Longitudinal Data System (VLDS) provides state policy makers, authorized researchers and citizens with access to educational and workforce training data from multiple sources while protecting the privacy of Virginia students.

VLDS supports critical reporting on the quality of public education — such as accurate graduation and dropout rates for high schools and school divisions — while providing information that can help policy makers improve programs that prepare and connect Virginians with employment opportunities.

Data are provided by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) and the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC).

The development of VLDS was funded through a Longitudinal Data Systems Grant awarded to Virginia under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The federal grant allowed the commonwealth to build on VDOE's state-funded Educational Information Management System and put additional high quality data into the hands of teachers, administrators, researchers, policymakers and the public — while safeguarding the privacy of students and adults.

VLDS does not create a central database. Data are maintained separately in the databases of each participating state agency and are merged on demand in what is known as a federated longitudinal data system that protects the privacy of individuals. No agency or researcher can match the data back to an identifiable student or individual.

Does VLDS provide personally identifiable information to the federal government?

No. VLDS does not provide student-level data to the US Department of Education (USED) or any other federal agency. The commonwealth is not participating in any project to create a national or multistate database of personally identifiable student information.

As required by various federal laws, VDOE does, however, report aggregate school- and division-level information to USED. This information includes enrollment data, the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals, the percentage of students meeting state proficiency standards and other school- and division-level reports that do not include personally identifiable information.

How does VLDS protect the privacy of Virginia students and their families?

VLDS uses a double-de-identification process developed in partnership with Virginia Tech that prevents the release of personally identifiable information, such as a student name, date of birth or state-testing identifier.

Identifiable data — such as names and birth dates — are replaced by randomly generated identifiers by each agency prior to being merged and matched by VLDS. During the merger, the agency-assigned identifiers are replaced by new VLDS-generated random identifiers. The algorithms used to generate the identifiers expire and are automatically destroyed after each inquiry, providing for unique encryption for every VLDS data merge.

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Is VLDS part of the Common Core State Standards Initiative?

No. The Virginia Board of Education did not adopt the Common Core State Standards. Instruction and accountability in the commonwealth’s public schools are based on the Virginia Standards of Learning.

Will recent changes in FERPA force VDOE to share personally identifiable information?

No. While the December 2, 2011, revisions to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations broaden the circumstances under which the sharing of personally identifiable information with researchers is allowable under federal law, FERPA does not require states to share it.

VDOE has not changed its policies that protect personally identifiable information from disclosure and has no plans to do so.

Under what conditions may researchers access data through VLDS?

All research supported by VLDS must be approved by the state agencies providing the data. Research is subject to the terms of required legal agreements prohibiting the disclosure of personally identifiable information and must be aligned with these state-identified research questions:

- How can Virginia improve high school graduation rates while increasing students’ preparation for college and careers?
- How can Virginia improve the preparation, recruitment, and retention of Virginia’s education personnel, including their meaningful and ongoing professional development, especially in teacher shortage areas and in hard-to-staff schools?
- How can Virginia improve state workforce-training programs?
- How can Virginia do a better job preparing young people and adults for employment opportunities and match the needs of job seekers with those of employers?

The participating state agencies guide and oversee the work of researchers to ensure accuracy and privacy.

Does VLDS allow researchers to access data about the physical characteristics, homes and personal beliefs of students and their families?

No. Information that school divisions may collect for a legitimate local purpose — such as improving the efficiency of pupil transportation — is not collected by VDOE and therefore not available through VLDS.

VDOE collects only the data it is required to collect under state and federal laws and regulations. The department does not collect information about students’ religious beliefs, voting preferences of parents, family income, health, extracurricular activities or GIS positions of homes and school bus stops.

Where can I find more information about how VLDS supports efforts to improve educational outcomes and the training programs that prepare and connect Virginians with employment opportunities?

More information about VLDS — including an informative video — is available on the VDOE website at this address: http://www.doe.virginia.gov/info_management/longitudinal_data_system/index.shtml.

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