

GETTING SMART ON



PERSONALIZATION
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Introduction

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Personalization + Privacy = Data Backpack

In October 2012, Digital Learning Now and Getting Smart released [Data Backpacks: Portable Records & Learner Profiles](#) report and [Powering Personalization](#) infographic. Situated in a backdrop of “new personalization technologies” and under a “demand for differentiated instruction,” we argued that, “Current student records and transcripts are insufficient to meet the evolving needs of teachers, students and parents.”

We identified the following problems with the current system:

- The current official transcript does not provide enough information for teachers to personalize learning from the first day of school.
- Customized learning requires an enhanced and expanded Learner Profile.
- Parents and teachers should have better mechanisms to protect sensitive student data while also empowering multiple providers to use and contribute to a Learner Profile.

Much has happened over the three years since the release of the report. The [Aspen Task Force on Connected Learning](#) endorsed the concept for a Data Backpack, particularly in an era where students engage in learning activities inside and outside of school. Utah [passed legislation](#) creating a [Student Achievement Backpack](#). Recognizing the importance of protecting student privacy in this connected learning environment has prompted more than 151 companies to sign a [voluntary pledge](#) for safeguarding data. The Data Quality Campaign led a diverse coalition endorsing [principles](#) for the use and protection of student data. And Georgia passed one of the [most comprehensive data privacy laws](#) in the country that balances the need to better empower parents without closing off innovative instructional models.

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Our original exploratory questions now seem more relevant than ever:

- What if students come to each course or classroom with a Digital Backpack of data about their learning levels, preferences, motivations and personal accomplishments?
- How would this improve each teacher's ability to tailor learning to meet the needs of individual students?
- What if parents and students could easily access their child's records to share the information with after-school providers of their choosing?
- How would all of the personalization this affords add up to Deeper Learning and improved college and career readiness?

Our research generated two primary recommendations for addressing the inadequacies of today's student records in order to power personalization and acknowledge student privacy—The Data Backpack and The Expanded Learner Profile.

The Data Backpack: The Data Backpack is an expanded, common electronic student record, an official transcript that follows students through every transition—from grade to grade and school to school. The Backpack includes traditional transcript data such as demographic information, state testing data and supplementary student supports. However, it would also include additional information in order to represent a more holistic picture of a student's work and achievements—such as a gradebook of standards-based performance data and a portfolio of personal best work samples. This would help better capture the student's progression at any moment in time. This enhanced data would provide additional context to shed light on attendance and behavior patterns, supplementary support services, grades and other performance information such as proficiency scores and learning gains.

The Expanded Learner Profile: The Expanded Learner Profile builds on the "official transcript" of the Data Backpack to provide additional clues that unlock learner needs, preferences and potential. While each student's Data Backpack would be populated by a universal set of common elements at a new minimum level, the components of each student's Learner Profile could be customized based on student needs, platform data requirements and families' individual decisions.

Beyond describing a vision for this approach, our report recognized a number of barriers, including several that continue to weigh heavily on the field. These issues include clarifying ownership of student data, technical and translational issues, collaboration concerns and the need to consider potential unintended consequences. With the experience of the past three years in mind, we would add to this list a greater appreciation for implementation challenges. Key concerns here include the motivation needed to bring multiple stakeholders together to adopt this approach as well as advancing this model in a way that incorporates security and privacy protections up front, ultimately [building trust](#) between teachers, students and parents.

In the conclusion, we acknowledged the contribution made by the first paper:

We believe that a threefold challenge exists: a definitional challenge, a legal challenge and a technical challenge. Together we need to answer the following questions: **(1) What kind of data are we talking about? (2) What legal guidance is required for custodians and users of the data? And (3) How do we safely and securely move the data in ways that both maintain its integrity and make it maximally useful?**

Our first paper focused largely on the definitional challenge. We described the potential of the Student Data Backpack and Expanded Learning Profile and acknowledged that much work remained to address the technical and legal/political challenges.

To explore those ongoing challenges—and in an effort to continue to move this work forward— we are kicking off a new blog series that will feature insights from the original authors as well as other members of the Foundation for Excellence in Education and Getting Smart teams. We'll also share the voices of those who have been actively working to implement similar policies and initiatives.

We believe the Student Data Backpack and Expanded Learning Profile address both the potential of student data to personalize learning and a path toward protecting student information. This is not merely a huge problem to solve, but also a huge opportunity to seize.

[Originally posted](#) on [Getting Smart blog](#), 01 July 2015.

Parent-Managed Learner Profiles Will Power Personalization

Tom Vander Ark, Founder and CEO of Getting Smart

Jessie's mom arrived at an elementary enrollment open house with a full record from the Montessori school she had attended for five years. The profile included competency-levels across all subject areas, pages of rich narrative describing her work habits and social-emotional factors, demonstrations of mastery, a record of participation in additional services like her weekly work with a speech-language pathologist and personal insights from teachers on her strengths and weaknesses across the curriculum over her five years in the school.

Daniela arrives a month after school starts. Her mother, who speaks little English, indicates she completed third grade in another state but she does not have contact information. Consider the advantage Jessie's new teachers have with access to such rich and detailed information; they will be equipped to personalize her learning from day one. Unfortunately, most students enroll in U.S. schools like Daniela did, arriving with little or no information about their academic journey. Some quick diagnostic tests can help, but it would be far better if every student benefited from a rich portable education record.

Here's another example: Vanessa receives speech-therapy at school as part of her Individual Education Plan. Vanessa also receives private speech therapy outside of school. The two therapists have never met or spoken to one another, and Vanessa's goals with each remain independent of one another. Vanessa takes gymnastics. Last week her private physical therapist joined in to support her and see what she's currently working on. But her school physical education teacher is out of that loop. If Vanessa's mom managed her profile, she could connect the speech therapists and the contributors to her physical health.

The [Department of Education has been advocating](#) that every student (or parent of an underage student) has access to his or her own academic data in a machine-readable format. That sounds great, but how would it work? What data would parents and students receive? What could they add?

We've been studying this issue for a couple years (and wrote a 2012 paper called [Data Backpack](#), which did a decent job describing the benefits of portable records). Below find an updated and more detailed summary of how parent- and student-managed profiles will work.

What is a Learner Profile? A Learner Profile includes three elements:

- *Learning transcript:* Grades, courses (and/or learning levels), state and district achievement data
- *Personalized learning information:* Supplemental achievement data, record of services received, feedback on work habits, record of extracurricular activities and work/service experiences
- *Portfolio of student work:* Collection of personal best work products

Why would a parent want to manage a Learner Profile? There are at least five compelling reasons for parents (i.e., a parent/guardian) and young adults to actively cultivate a Learner Profile:

- *Curiosity:* Gain access to all the information schools and tools generate about students;
- *Control:* To proactively manage your son/daughter's educational transcript to improve his/her life options;

- *Personalization*: Empower your son/daughter's teachers, tutors and tools with the information needed to begin personalizing learning experiences from day one;
- *Options*: As the number of learning opportunities increases, a comprehensive profile will help students and parents to identify and make good decisions;
- *College and career*: A well-constructed portfolio of student work will help students gain access to the best options after high school. Teaching young people to manage a positive career profile will be a valuable, lifelong skill.

How would a parent manage a Learner Profile? A parent would download a free Web and/or mobile application that would allow access to a son/daughter's information from the school district (or network). Parents would have access to transcript data (grades, courses and test results); they would not have the ability to edit them, but they could add comments that may help explain gaps or relevant events.

Parents and students 16 (or perhaps 18) and older would have reading and writing access to the personalized learning information. They could give a tutor, online learning teacher or summer school provider access to the profile and allow them to make contributions. Parents and young adults could observe district records but not change district/network information.

Parents and their agents (e.g., tutors) could make additions or comments regarding:

- record of special services received
- supplemental achievement data
- feedback on work habits and social skills
- extracurricular activities
- work and service experiences

A parent could decide to hide data from future providers. For example, if a student completes an Individual Education Plan, a parent hoping for a fresh start in a new school may decide to not share that specific history. (However, a school could still obtain a full record from a prior school for up to three years.)

Students would collect a portfolio of personal bests. A teacher may also select representative work products to share with a student's next teacher.

How would Learner Profiles work? Learner Profiles wouldn't actually carry all the data around; instead, they would use linked data to see information from many different systems. While a common data standard should exist for how information is shared, the definition of a Learner Profile will be rather fluid with plenty of opportunities to customize.

Who would have access to a Learner Profile? Parents and older students could grant read or read/write permission to outside contributors. For example, a mentor could comment on the development of a student's interpersonal skills during an internship. A tutor (or tutoring system) could award a badge to a student's portfolio for the demonstration of learning.

How much would it cost? The Learner Profile would be free to parents and students as a Web and mobile application. Online stores (like Amazon, Google Play, Microsoft Store, Apple Store) are likely to offer parents free apps, given the simultaneous opportunity to recommend and sell learning services and products.

Why would schools support Learner Profiles? Teachers will benefit from comprehensive portable profiles by gaining large amounts of information about new students. By contributing to Learner Profiles, supplemental programs, tutors and online learning systems will be able to make valuable contributions, too.

What about children with disconnected parents? As the number of learning options expands, many students and families would benefit from a chosen guide. The [Donnell Kay Foundation imagines a new system](#) of education in which learners create customized paths with advocates working to connect their present learning to their desired future. This role of mentor/advocate/coach could benefit all students, but particularly students who lack the benefit of having engaged parents.

In some cases, parents/guardians will choose to allow designees (e.g., mentors, relatives) to manage Learner Profile privacy settings. Young people in the foster care and juvenile justice system may have a court- (or state-) appointed guide that would manage privacy settings.

Data Quality Campaign [recently noted](#), "With access to current education data, child welfare staff can help the highly mobile students in foster care achieve school success by providing support such as the following: helping with timely enrollment and transfer of credits if a school change is needed, identifying the need for educational supports, working with school staff to address attendance and discipline issues and assisting with transition planning to post-school activities such as higher education."

How would postsecondary profiles work? LinkedIn Founder Reid Hoffman said a [21st-century diploma](#) "would accommodate a completely unbundled approach to education, allowing students to easily apply credits obtained from a wide range of sources, including internships, peer-to-peer learning, online classes and more, to the same certification." This "dynamic and upgradable," machine-readable profile "should allow a person to convey the full scope of his or her skills and expertise with greater comprehensiveness and nuance, in part to enable better matching with jobs." Hoffman obviously has an interest in LinkedIn serving as the preferred market signaling platform.

Nonprofit [IMS Global](#) supported development of an [Education and Career Positioning System](#) championed by [Lone Star College System](#) in Houston. At a [community college convening](#), Lone Star chancellor Richard Carpenter challenged the audience of community college leaders to transform what colleges can do for students by enabling students to "own the student record." The Lone Star pilot was a good start. With foundation support, a small state or group of school districts could pilot a parent-controlled Learner Profile.

Online profile management is becoming important in every aspect of life; it's a new digital literacy competency that every young person must learn to exercise. That starts with empowering parents to take charge of education data with a portable Learning Profile.

The Opportunity for States to Provide Secure Data Access to Parents and Educators

Paige Kowalski, Vice President for Policy and Advocacy at the Data Quality Campaign

Providing secure access to student-level data to educators and parents who are closest to students gets us closer to realizing the promise of personalized learning. It also helps to build trust among educators and families when addressing the need for data collection and use. However, only [13 states](#) currently grant teachers and parents access to learn about individual students' progress over time, despite the fact that every state has the capacity to do so. One emerging solution for providing access to quality, useful data is the [Student Data Backpack](#).

Student Data Backpacks are electronic records of learning that accompany students throughout their education—when they move up to a new grade or even if they transition to a new school or district. They intend to present families with a more holistic picture of student learning than has been traditionally available, and they can include details such as performance against standards-based assessments, portfolios of students' best work and even information from online tools student use to continue learning outside of school hours and walls.

National leaders in personalized learning efforts like Digital Learning Now, Aspen Institute and Getting Smart provide guidance and champion the power of the Student Data Backpack to the field. States themselves have taken note of the importance of providing access to student-level data to educators and families, and some have seen the Backpack as a means to successfully meet that goal. According to Data Quality Campaign's annual survey [Data for Action](#), several states (Arkansas, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, New Hampshire, Ohio, Tennessee, Utah and Wisconsin) report use of the Backpack concept to provide educators and families with secure access to student data.

Inspired by the vision described in [Digital Learning Now's Data Backpack report](#), Utah currently remains the only state with explicit Student Data Backpack legislation, passed in 2013. [The legislation](#) refers to the item as the "Student Achievement Backpack," which is defined as being "for a student from kindergarten through grade 12, a complete Learner Profile that: is in electronic format; follows the student from grade to grade and school to school; and is accessible by the student's parent or guardian or an authorized LEA user." The legislation details what data gets collected for the Backpack, including key points that prove useful to educators and families such as course grades, course history and results from the statewide assessment U-PASS. Beginning in 2015, the Backpack will also include attendance data, teacher data (including teacher qualifications), formative, interim and summative assessment results, student mastery of core concepts, U-PASS growth scores, reading benchmark scores, school ratings and reading levels of the student at the end of third grade. Critically, the legislation also stipulates security measures to ensure data is protected, and it details the secure access granted to parents/guardians as well as access granted to teachers with parental authorization.

States find themselves at a pivotal moment in which to demonstrate the value to parents who have express concerns over data collection, sharing and privacy. The reality remains that too many parents have not yet realized the value of data for their families, children and schools. Providing timely, quality information to educators, parents and students themselves would demonstrate the value of data, as those closest to students could begin to credibly answer questions like, "Does my child have the knowledge and skills needed to be successful?" State leadership in developing and funding access through solutions such as Student Data Backpacks would demonstrate that states are listening to parental and public concerns and seizing the moment to deliver on the real value of the information states and districts collect, but have not yet maximized, in support of student learning.

[Originally posted](#) on [Getting Smart blog](#), 16 July 2015.

Technical Challenges on the Path to Personalization

Tom Vander Ark, Founder and CEO of Getting Smart

Personalized learning will boost engagement, persistence and achievement. That seems to be one of the most prevalent memes of our time (and the basis for the 2011 book "[Getting Smart](#)").

Fifteen years ago the meme was aligned instruction. The new bet, rather than aligning with an age cohort, revolves around every student—individual learning progressions that leverage student interests and address student needs.

As [summarized last year](#), we see evidence for the personalized learning thesis in four tech-enhanced categories:

- Results from next generation school models ([Aspire](#), [KIPP](#), [Summit](#), [Mooresville](#), etc.)
- Technology-enabled math products have boosted achievement ([DreamBox](#), [ST Math](#))
- Technology-enabled literacy products have boosted achievement ([i-Ready](#), [Read 180](#), [Waterford](#))
- Studies of online and blended learning show efficacy

Student engagement proves fundamental to both achievement and completion rates. [Ace Parsi from NASBE](#) notes that, "Student engagement represents the capacity and inclination for students to take ownership of their past, present and future educational experiences by enlisting their cognitive, behavioral and emotional investment in learning."

Successful school networks focused on engagement, including [Big Picture Learning](#), [Edvisions](#), [Envision Schools](#), [International Studies](#) and [New Tech Network](#), focus on authentic work and demonstrations of learning. With advice from experts at the [Buck Institute for Education](#), these networks engage students in projects that promote Deeper Learning. We profiled [20 of these schools](#) and saw teachers working hard, often in relatively low-tech environments, to personalize learning and help students build portfolios of personal bests.

The combination of these best practices and new tools gives us optimism that personalized learning will be adopted at scale and will lead to the anticipated gains. But first, there are a few technical and implementation challenges that need to be solved.

Definitions. Before we dive into the challenges, a few definitions. We believe a comprehensive Learner Profile is key to personalization. It includes a:

- *Data Backpack:* An expanded common electronic student record—an official transcript that follows students through every transition, grade to grade and school to school. The Backpack includes traditional transcript data such as demographic information, state testing data and supplementary student supports. However, it would also include additional information in order to represent a more holistic picture of a student's work and achievements, such as a grade book of standards-based performance data and a portfolio of personal best work samples. It would better capture the student's progression at any moment in time.

- *Learner Profile*: An expanded Learner Profile builds on the Data Backpack to provide additional clues to unlock learner needs, preferences and potential. While each student's Data Backpack would be populated by a set of common elements for all students at a new minimum level, the components of each student's Learner Profile could be customized based on student needs, platform data requirements and families' decisions. It would track college and career readiness and could include a narrative discussion of learner assets and challenges. The postsecondary version could feature financial data: cost to complete, aid opportunities and payment schedule.
- *Student Portfolio*: A learner-curated collection of personal best work products as well as a record of work experience and community service. It could include, just like [some colleges offer](#), a domain and blog that the student can take away when they leave.

Technical Challenges. There are five challenges to overcome to unlock the power of personalized learning:

- *Student record*. Each state will need to define a common student record for a portable Data Backpack. More broadly, a Learner Profile will be rather fluid with lots of opportunity to customize.
- *Interoperability*. A common data standard, like IMS's [Learning Tools Interoperability \(LTI\)](#), will guide how information gets shared between systems.
- *Combining formative*: Many U.S. schools benefit from information coming from many sources of formative assessment, often embedded in digital learning experiences. But they have no way to combine the information from multiple sources in ways that are useful for driving instructional improvement or managing student progress. The solution probably involves tagging content and assessment data (the way [Houston requires partners to use Thin Common Cartridge](#)). "Tagging has to be considered carefully," however, says Dan Ingvarson who built the tagging scheme for Australia but has also seen several generations of the practice go down the drain with the introduction of new standards.
- *Estimating growth*. As more students progress on personalized pathways, it will become necessary to develop [comparable growth rates](#) to ensure that all students make adequate progress. Current scales (like Lexile/Quantile) are frequently used to compare growth. New, more subtle measures aligned with new standards would be even better.
- *Correlation*. Better use of formative assessment (and less reliance on big, year-end, summative tests) will require comparable achievement and growth rates so student learning can be compared from school to school. In addition to tagging, a post hoc data barrage can correlate sequences from different environments by analyzing thousands of data points, after the fact. [IMS's Caliper Analytics](#) standards support both post hoc and real-time data feeds for millions of students daily.

These are imminently solvable problems; they are more politically than technically challenging. Solutions will take a little leadership from industry groups, EdTech leaders and foundations.

Implementation Challenges on the Path to Personalization

Tom Vander Ark, Founder and CEO at Getting Smart

Personalized learning means every student has a unique plan, path and pace. They can learn any place and build their own portfolio of personal bests to showcase what they've learned. Powered by new tools, personalized learning boosts engagement, persistence and achievement.

However, there are [several technical challenges](#) to delivering on the promise of personalization including defining a standard student record, boosting interoperability, combining multiple formative sources and estimating comparable individual student growth rates. Since these challenges prove more political than technical, most simply require sector organizations to forge agreements.

Seven implementation barriers are more daunting than the technical challenges.

1. **Policy.** Privacy policies under consideration in Congress as well as numerous states threaten to stall personalization by restricting parent, teacher, vendor and researcher access to student learning data. Embracing personalization and privacy policymakers can strike the right balance. [Parent-managed Learner Profiles](#) will be part of the solution.
2. **Leadership.** There are thousands of chief academic officers (CAOs) who just figured out how to build and manage instruction regimes. Now they're trying to pivot toward personalized learning. This change reflects a dramatic change in the mental model of senior district officials in terms of how they understand systems, what they look for in classrooms and how they organize roles and goals of staff members. (In March, we suggested [10 elements of comprehensive solution](#).)
3. **School models.** Schools are organized around age-based cohorts. Teachers do their best to differentiate across significant skill differences, but real personalization requires an individual path and pace, and that's hard to do in traditional schools. Competency-based schools ask students to show what they know and allow them to progress based upon demonstrated mastery. (New models are discussed extensively at [Competency Works](#).)
4. **Assessment.** Quality formative assessment guides personalized learning, and it is often built into authentic learning experiences. Adaptive assessments provide useful guidance for other experiences. Projects can be personalized for students' interests and learning levels, but it takes skillful adjustment of scoring rubrics. Combining multiple formative assessments to help a student customize their own path remains more challenging than it should be. (See [Formative Assessment: Progress, Barriers and Opportunity](#).)
5. **Adoption.** Schools will need to invest in systems that collect necessary information. Teachers will need to commit to using the information to personalize learning. Parents will need to download information and manage access to Learner Profiles. Each of these groups will require adequate incentives and supports to promote continued and effective use.
6. **Student use.** Online profile management is becoming important in every aspect of life; it's a new digital literacy competency that every young person must learn to exercise. Encouraging and supporting widespread student use of portfolios will be key to effective implementation. (See [Every Student Should Have A Digital Portfolio](#).)

7. *Disconnected parents.* As the number of learning options expands, many students and families would benefit from a chosen guide. The [Donnell Kay Foundation imagines a new system](#) of education where learners create customized paths with advocates working with them to connect their present learning to their desired future. This role of mentor-advocate could benefit all students but particularly students without the benefit of engaged parents. In some cases, parents/guardians will choose to allow designees (e.g., mentors, relatives) to manage Learner Profile privacy settings. Young people in the foster care and juvenile justice system may have a court- (or state-) appointed guide that would manage privacy settings.

Despite technical and implementation challenges, the path to personalization offers tremendous opportunity to boost achievement for both accelerated and struggling learners.

[Originally posted on Getting Smart blog, 28 July 2015.](#)

Implementing the Data Backpack: Utah's Story

Erin Lockett, Policy Coordinator at The Foundation For Excellence in Education

The annual [Digital Learning Report Card](#) examines each state's progress in implementing policies that give students access to high-quality digital learning, as defined by the [10 Elements of High Quality Digital Learning](#). The report is produced by [Digital Learning Now](#) (DLN), an initiative of the [Foundation for Excellence in Education](#) (ExcelinEd). One of the features of this year's Report Card involves the addition of State Policy Profiles that provide insight into the intention, implementation and implications of policies that are advancing personalized learning. Key among these are policies related to student data.

Digital Learning Now believes that states should consider applying the following principles when considering student Data Backpacks:

- Provide clear definitions for exactly what student data is provided to parents and teachers in the Backpack, and guarantee the data can be easily understood and used.
- Ensure that clear requirements dictate when requests for information must be responded to, so that parents and teachers can make informed choices to improve student learning.
- Protect the data collected by this Backpack through the use of high-quality data privacy and security policy.

Utah's SB 82— Student Achievement Backpack— meets these expectations. Inspired by Digital Learning Now and Getting Smart's 2012 paper, [Data Backpacks: Portable Records & Learner Profiles](#), Utah policymakers set out to become the first state to make Data Backpacks a reality. And in 2013, Utah Governor Gary Herbert signed into law the [Student Achievement Backpack](#) legislation.

Truly Personalized Learning. If parents, teachers and schools want to work toward the goal of personalized learning, they need to understand each child's learning style, interests and history so they can create a customized education that works best for that child.

Robyn Bagley, a school administrator and chair of Utah's grassroots organization [Parents for Choice in Education](#), asserts, "We can't have personalized learning plans without a student Data Backpack."

Utah's Data Backpacks will give parents and educators a comprehensive view of each student's progress and achievement so they can work with the student to create a personalized learning plan. Through these portable records, teachers and parents will be able to track student progress—not just in one class, but in every course on a student's personalized plan. For example, a student taking an online course will be able to share her progress with teachers in her brick-and-mortar school.

Step-by-Step Implementation. In Utah, the State Office of Education is rolling out the Student Achievement Backpack legislation in three phases.

The first two phases—which Utah currently focuses on—happen behind the scenes. Within these phases, the state has made student data cloud-based and will expand Utah's current Student Information System (SIS) to include more information. The third and final phase includes a final mobility integration of all required data to ensure accessible viewing by June 2017.

Once all phases are complete, teachers and administrators will begin to tailor students' learning experiences based on a Learner Profile.

Profiles will include information like:

- Course enrollments and history
- Course grades
- Teacher qualifications
- State assessment results (including growth scores)
- Student demographics
- Summary attendance
- Special Education summary information

Implications for Other States. For parents and educators within Utah, the Student Achievement Backpack is an important first step to providing a better understanding of a student's progress and achievement. This understanding carries importance for two reasons: It can help ensure effective monitoring in any given school year, and it can help students, counselors and families in their postsecondary planning. Utah is paving the way with this innovative portable record, but states considering Data Backpacks should also consider what other elements are necessary to create a more complete Learner Profile, with the goal of more meaningful personalized learning paths for students.

States should strive to answer questions such as: How can teachers and parents track a student's progress in a way that captures the totality of their progress in school, with online content and in an after-school tutoring program? When and how do parents and students have access to their information? How can information on a student's work completed in school, out of school and online be recognized so that a parent or teacher can pinpoint the extra attention needed for a struggling student, and how can a thriving student find additional activities tailored to his or her interests? In the shift to a more comprehensive and holistic data system to improve student learning, what additional [student data securities](#), communications and professional development are necessary to support parents and teachers?

[Originally posted on Getting Smart blog, 23 July 2015.](#)

What Can We Learn About Personalized Learning from IEPs?

Karla Phillips, Policy Director, Competency-Based Education at Foundation for Excellence in Education

The goal of an individualized education for students with special needs is finally beginning to extend to ALL students with the movement towards personalization. We know that all kids are unique and a one-size-fits-all model hampers students from reaching their maximum potential. Fortunately, technological advancements in education help to empower educators who have a vision for next generation learning.

As the effort to scale personalized learning gains momentum, [I will continue to ask](#) what lessons we can learn after 40 years of implementing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)? I think one of the big lessons revolves around the quality of information needed to help educators truly personalize a student's learning.

One of the hallmarks of special education has been the Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP is required to collect information about the student such as current levels of academic achievement and functional performance, annual goals and progress, as well as the necessary services, supports and modifications a student will need to reach their goals. In many ways, IEPs were a precursor to what we now envision with Data Backpacks and Learner Profiles.

Central to the idea of personalization, we find the need for tools such as [Data Backpacks](#) (common electronic student records) and complementary [Learner Profiles](#) customized with learner needs, strengths, interests and motivations. My colleagues here at Digital Learning Now [recognized the experience](#) that can be gleaned from years of implementing IEPs way back in 2012.

So what can we learn about Learner Profiles from IEPs?

- **Design Data Backpacks and Learner Profiles to focus on students' strengths and interests, not their deficits or weaknesses.** Historically, one of the biggest criticisms of IEPs has been that, by their very design, the focus remains squarely on everything the student can't do. Keep the focus of Learner Profiles on what students have already achieved and what strategies have worked. From there, incorporate learners' interests, motivations and goals to discern how to take achievement to the next level.
- **Don't let the focus of Data Backpacks and Learner Profiles become only instruments of compliance.** Preserve their potential power to inform instruction, guide supports, empower families and guide parent decisions.
- **Design Data Backpacks and Learner Profiles from the beginning to be fully accessible and to meet the needs of all stakeholders (administrators, teachers, parents and therapists).** Ensure that careful privacy and security safeguards are in place, and allow delegated users full access.
- **Make portability a top goal.** The past decade has demonstrated that software, vendors and even local decision-makers can quickly impede the portability of student data. We live in a very mobile society. The ability of a school to meet a student's needs on day one proves critical.
- **Think of the approximately half a million foster children in the United States.** [WestEd](#) notes that, in California, foster care youth average nine school transitions by age 18. Delays in student records and other critical information result in prolonged or inaccurate grade- or course-level placements as well as critical services and supports.

- **Frequent relocations pose similar problems for the children of our nation's military families.** The potential of Data Backpacks and Learner Profiles to facilitate the ability of families and case managers in providing seamless transitions for students is exciting.

Data-driven, personalized learning represents a brave new world. But let's remember that if we don't learn from history, we will be destined to repeat it.

[Originally posted](#) on [Getting Smart](#) blog, 04 August 2015.

Conclusion

Aimee Rogstad Guidera, President and CEO of Data Quality Campaign

Parent Access to Secure, Quality Data is not an Option; It's an Imperative

What Do Parents Want?

Parents are eager for information about their child's education. As a mom, I want to know if my daughter is struggling in math before she comes home in tears. I need information to support my child's learning at home—and to support my child and her teacher in making the best decisions for her learning in the classroom. I promise you, I am not the only parent grasping for more—and better—information about how my kid is doing in school. Parent focus groups conducted by the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) point to just that. One parent in Kansas City told us, "Anything that they can tell me that helps empower me to help my child learn more at home, the better."

Parents want all the information possible to help support their kids, in school and beyond. Still, most states aren't giving parents the information they want—and deserve—to make smart decisions about their child's education. Currently, [only 17 states](#) provide parents with access to longitudinal data about their child. To truly get the whole picture of their student's successes and challenges, parents need access to a variety of indicators that look at performance over time. While parents are starving to know more about their kid's learning, they often only receive crumbs of information—disparate data points that are hard to weave together into a coherent picture and don't tell the full story of their child's education. The current move by some parents to opt their children out of tests is consistent with what we already know: It is nearly impossible to convince parents of the value of data in education if you still can't answer their most basic questions.

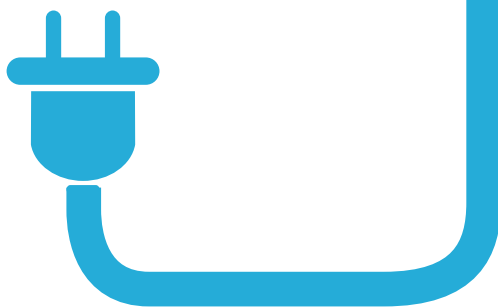
Role of Student Data Backpacks

State and federal policymakers need to ensure that parents have access to high-quality, longitudinal data about their students. In response to parent demand, states including [Georgia](#) and [Utah](#) have pursued different strategies that each build new tools to give parents access to their children's data. In Utah, the state legislature has led the way and requires that by 2017 all students have an electronic student Data Backpack that accompanies them to any school within the state, allowing parents to track their students' progress both in the classroom and through other external learning opportunities. Georgia's Department of Education created the Parent Portal which allows parents to access state longitudinal data about their child through the district's student information system. These two different approaches demonstrate that states are willing to innovate to meet the needs of parents and families. Regardless of the means states employ to ensure that data becomes available to parents, the most useful tools to parents include information that is:

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- *Accessible and timely*—Is the information there when you need it? Is it easy to find and presented in a format you understand? Does the data help you understand how your child currently is doing in school?
- *Portable*—Does the data follow the student if they move to another district? What about after-school care or summer programs?
- *Secure*—Are there safeguards and privacy policies in place to protect my student’s information? Is access limited only to those who need it?
- *Understandable*—Does it offer an analysis of the data to point me towards a next step? Is the information packaged in a way that offers a clear picture of my child’s learning?

We Can Do This

One of my favorite things about student Data Backpacks is that they are entirely within our reach. States have already built the data systems needed to give parents access to the longitudinal, student-level information that will transform how they understand and make decisions about their child’s education. With so much data infrastructure already in place, it is imperative that states take the next step to provide parents with access to data about their students that is accessible, timely, portable and secure.

In my daughters’ school in Minnesota, I’m already seeing how the district’s focus on using data has changed my kids’ parent-teacher conferences. Now, my husband and I are informed collaborators with my daughters and their teachers, able to understand her progress, areas for improvement and steps each of us can take to help her meet her goals. But data use should not be limited only to parents in my district or even in my state. I believe that all parents deserve to have real, information-driven conversations with teachers. I am confident that, with enough political will and a little elbow grease, states can provide parents with the data they need to ensure their student’s success through graduation and into the future.

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