Policies, Programs, and Implementation (PPI) Meeting Summary

Monday, July 12, 2021

PPI Committee Kickoff

PPI Chair Bradley McMillen (Wake County Public School System, North Carolina) and PPI Vice Chair Linda Jenkins (Arkansas Department of Education) welcomed members to the meeting. PPI participants introduced themselves, noting their home agency/organization, the most critical parts of their job, and their top priorities for PPI discussion. Bradley briefly reviewed major activities and discussions from the 2020 PPI virtual meeting and reviewed the 2021 meeting agenda.

Opening Session Follow-up: Cybersecurity

Bradley McMillen led a follow-up discussion on topics introduced by Steven Hernandez (U.S. Department of Education) during his presentation on Cybersecurity. PPI members discussed the importance of having an action plan in place prior to a potential cybersecurity incident and noted that substantial staff effort is required to recover from an incident. For example, after an attack, it may be necessary to shut down and sweep every local education agency (LEA) device while still performing normal LEA functions manually. Members appreciated the new resources that Steven provided and plan to share them with colleagues. For some PPI members, the presentation provided affirmation that their agencies are taking the right actions.

Education Data Collection and Quality During a Pandemic

Bradley McMillen and Linda Jenkins invited members to break into three small groups to discuss the biggest challenges and lessons learned from the past year regarding data collection and quality.

- Breakout group 1 focused on data collection. LEAs reported that it can be difficult to collect quality data when staff are focused on more fundamental priorities such as making sure students have access to school. For example, some LEAs dispatched buses with Wi-Fi where students and teachers could access virtual education. In such circumstances, attendance and participation data are more difficult to collect because students are no longer sitting in classrooms. Instead, some LEAs are looking at whether students turn in assignments, participate in activities, or demonstrate progress through the course material. Such participation measures may not be comparable to traditional attendance measures. Determining grade point averages for graduating seniors was also challenging. It is important that agencies remain clear about the limitations of these data when stakeholders use data from this past year for decisionmaking.
- Breakout group 2 discussed how the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic affected graduation requirements. One LEA reported that they changed graduation requirements so that students only had to meet basic state-mandated requirements rather than more stringent LEA expectations. This required hand-review of hundreds of transcripts. Maine historically has had a state diploma available to students whose educational progress was severely interrupted, and this year many state diplomas were awarded. These state diplomas are comparable to a regular diploma, but afford more flexibility to accommodate disruption. Having a non-standard graduation system in place relieved a state education agency (SEA) from needing to develop one during the COVID-19 pandemic, but not all states were prepared that way. Members also discussed variations in

assessment rates. Agencies that remained open for in-person instruction did not report the same challenges with assessment participation as those that offered online assessments or expected online students to come into school to take in-person assessments.

- Breakout group 3 discussed challenges to data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning with waivers and defaults within the system. Some states received accessibility and accountability waivers to ease reporting burden, but the timing of these waivers sometimes caused complications. Student information system (SIS) default codes posed problems of their own—with attendance data, students defaulted to Absent in some states, to Present in others, which complicated matters later in the COVID-19 pandemic when more refined means of taking attendance were implemented. Members noted that introducing changes in data collection mid-year was something to be avoided. Some districts instituted special "present under quarantine" codes that were not always used or tracked reliably, and others simply were unable to collect attendance data in a way that took the COVID-19 pandemic into account. Some members questioned the quality of the past year's attendance data, noting that drops in attendance could have been real or a function of disruptions to typical reporting and collection processes.

Key points that emerged from the overall discussion included the following:

- Agencies faced substantial challenges in collecting data, including data related to attendance and engagement, access to technology and devices, and accountability data related to learning gains.
- Some data values have changed a lot during the COVID-19 pandemic; for example, disciplinary actions were greatly reduced in some agencies because of the availability of online alternatives to school suspensions.
- While one-time funding helped during the COVID-19 pandemic, agencies must now determine how to maintain the initiatives they started, and how to measure outcomes from the funding. For example, agencies that used one-time funding to purchase devices must now budget to maintain their inventory.
- LEAs had to quickly implement new data collections to answer pressing administrative and instructional questions and information needs, such as how many students were expected to take state tests. LEAs had to quickly adapt existing processes to allow schools to operate, as when determining changing student transportation needs.
- Agencies took different approaches to communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. While some restricted communications to traditional channels such as websites, email, mail, and parent portals, others also used social media and messaging apps. Email frequency varied, with different LEAs reporting that they offered daily, weekly, and ad hoc email communication. One LEA re-purposed a system used to alert students to the arrival of their school bus in real time to share other information. Communication was especially difficult when families did not have access to technology.
- Many members reported that their agencies expect most students to return to in-person school in the fall, but they will still offer the option of virtual.
- Some agencies found that the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to make changes that needed to occur anyway, such as moving manual processes online.
- Agencies that already had virtual schools reported that they drew extensively on those existing resources and partnerships.

- Agencies are facing challenges with data reporting, including determining how to report metrics while acknowledging data gaps and anomalies such as low assessment participation rates.

Tuesday, July 13, 2021

Education Data Reporting During a Pandemic

Bradley McMillen led a group discussion focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted data reporting, including effects on local reporting, SEA and federal data reporting, and accountability reporting, as well as the related topics of data analysis, data presentation, and data use.

- Agencies are populating reports with data that are available, such as demographic, graduation, and attendance data, but there are gaps in reporting around assessment and growth data. A challenge this year will be determining how to report missing data; for example, how to calculate growth data with a skipped year.
- Growth calculations will need to take into account the fact that students may have had multiple teachers over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic or may have been taught by a third-party vendor. Identifying deficits seems to be a higher priority than assessing growth, as some agencies will not look at growth until 2024 because of missing data from the COVID-19 pandemic year.
- Data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic may help to provide new information on opportunities to learn and equity. New data can also shed light on how connectivity varies, and whether school schedules or the number of shutdowns impacted other programs such as food assistance programs.
- SEAs are cautious about data reporting and are including information and disclaimers that explain how the data can and cannot be used appropriately. Data from last year will likely not be comparable with other years.

Student Registration Data / Social-Emotional Data

Bradley McMillen and Linda Jenkins invited members to break into three small groups to discuss student registration data and social-emotional learning (SEL) data.

- Breakout group 1 discussed registration and data reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on methods of reporting data in these circumstances; in some districts, this issue had an impact on attendance, whereas in others there was no such effect. SEAs and LEAs added registration options for remote learning, face-to-face, and hybrid or blended to identify students in different environments even when attendance was not affected. Some districts will carry these data options into future years. Connectivity was a recurrent concern during the registration process, and participants detailed their districts' efforts to extend reliable internet services to remote-learning students and families.
- Breakout group 2 discussed SEL data. One SEA has SEL data in its early warning system, but it was noted that SEL had become contentious. In California, a collaborative of urban districts called CORE Districts (https://coredistricts.org/about-us/) is working to establish and maintain a shared data system. The collaborative is responsible and publicly accountable for reporting school progress across multiple academic and non-academic indicators; this work and the effort to help districts learn from each other has earned national recognition. Elsewhere, SEAs and LEAs partner with local universities to extend

the use of SEL data. Many SEAs and LEAs use surveys to capture SEL data. One member suggested that survey instruments provide a snapshot of respondents' socio-emotional status and might, therefore, be viewed as a formative assessment.

- Breakout group 3 discussed challenges to collecting SEL data, beginning with pushback from parents who do not think it appropriate for schools to collect SEL data. Participants noted that the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) must be taken into account when working with behavioral data. Others clarified that PPRA applies to students, so asking teachers or parents about student behavior may be viewed differently. Questions asked to parents cover such areas as how the student feels about school, whether students have a quiet space at home to do homework, etc. Questions about bullying seem to appear in SEL surveys, while topics like sexual orientation and gender identity tend to be avoided.

Key points that emerged from the overall discussion included: the importance of including SEL in data collections, which entails

- a clear definition of SEL data; and
- a way of reaching out to students and their families to collect data without infringing upon privacy or the student's emotional well-being.

Members also recognized a need to put guardrails in place when reporting SEL data to improve health and safety in schools.

PPI Election

Linda Jenkins was nominated as the 2021-22 PPI chair and Stephen Gervais (San Bernardino City Unified School District, California) was nominated as the 2021-22 PPI vice chair.

Wednesday, July 14, 2021

Joint Session Follow-up: Virtual Education and Attendance

Bradley McMillen led a group discussion on the previous day's joint session on attendance and virtual education. Comments focused on how crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic may have subjected agencies to stresses and uncovered operational weaknesses, but also motivated agencies to make meaningful improvements. The sudden diversification in education modalities revealed gaps in data definitions relating to presence, absence, and learning. When forced to act because of the emergency nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, agencies had to make decisions about what matters the most and were able to improve processes, better monitor staff implementation of virtual learning training, and generate more accurate snapshots of gaps in skill areas.

Reports to PPI

Metadata Working Group Update

Georgia Hughes-Webb (West Virginia Department of Education) joined PPI to provide an update on the Forum's Metadata Working Group. Georgia highlighted this guide's principal difference from the 2009 *Forum Guide to Metadata: The Meaning Behind Education Data* (https://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2009805.asp)—a focus on metadata use over metadata definitions and system development. She also noted metadata's relevance to the issues

mentioned in the joint session and mentioned this guide's connection to the recently published *Forum Guide to Data Governance* (https://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2020083.asp).

Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) 2021 Report

Rachel Johnson (Loudoun County Public Schools, Virginia) attended the CoSN virtual conference on behalf of the Forum. She reported discussions on equity, data privacy, cultural appropriation, and several mental health topics. Diversity in race and gender, inclusion, and SEL were also discussed. Rachel offered a playlist of equity issues addressed at the conference: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDOSuhLS_mzzQwCBracEW1-ZAemXbQiLQ.

Education Data Emerging From the Pandemic

Bradley McMillen and Linda Jenkins invited members to break into three small groups to discuss data priorities for successful instruction and administration during the 2021-22 school year.

- Breakout group 1 discussed the difficulties of technology equity at the state level, and the lack of trust that can come with this lack of equity. Surveys and questions are not useful if families without the needed technology are reluctant to report that they do not have these resources, or if families have chosen to live off the grid and do not want to be connected to the Internet. Free or discounted internet plans and distributed hotspots may prove to be helpful but are not necessarily stand-alone solutions.
- Breakout group 2 discussed the plausibility (or implausibility) of returning to pre-COVID-19 pandemic learning models now that the benefits of remote learning are better understood. Districts have reported lower rates of suspensions due to re-routing students who might be suspended to remote learning; working students, bullied students, and some students with special needs also flourished in remote learning. One issue behind state mandates to return to face-to-face learning is the fact that some people view local schools as day-care providers, with the supervisory function being more important than educational priorities—in such a circumstance, even robust virtual instruction is not seen to be as beneficial as having a place to send children each day.
- Breakout group 3 discussed the need for better digital equity planning going forward (related resources to help with planning are available at https://www.educationsuperhighway.org/resources/). Data from internet service providers is not sufficient to create such plans, and should not be relied upon in future pandemics, disasters, or weather emergencies. SEAs and LEAs are assessing findings on opportunities to learn in different modalities, detailed breakdowns of diverse communities, and which additional data need to be collected. Rather than getting data updates at the start of the next school year, many states are simply focused on getting students back into the classroom.

Key points that emerged from the overall discussion included

- gaps in technology/digital equity;
- the need to view the Internet as a public utility; and
- inflation in learning gap assessments over the previous year, with the highest inflation occurring in the lowest grades (possibly due to the requirement for assessments to be given in schools).

The Arkansas Department of Education shares reports on data use with the public: https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Offices/information-technology/data-warehouse--reporting-unit/research-publications.

Thursday, July 15, 2021

Joint Session Follow-up: ED*Facts* and the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC)

Bradley McMillen led a group discussion on the prior day's joint session on updates from the CRDC and ED*Facts*. Members mentioned the operational difficulties that arise when the CRDC attempts to collect data that are not included in an agency's staff information system. Duplicate collection items, which had also been raised in the joint session, were also an area of concern. Members were advised to continue asking about this during the open OMB comment period for the updated ED*Facts* package and to notify NCES when duplicate requests are identified.

Topics from the Floor

Bradley McMillen opened the floor for members to discuss topics of interest that were not addressed during planned conversations. Members discussed the following topics:

- *Coordinating benefits to students.* The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for accurate, up-to-date student addresses not only to foster communication with students and families but also to ensure that families received additional pandemic benefits, such as pandemic electronic benefit transfer (P-EBT) cards. Education agencies are working with health and human services agencies to coordinate benefits to students and to increase the quality of data; for example, by collecting contact information monthly. Changes in the way SEAs and LEAs collect, validate, and report student address information have led to improvements in data quality.
- *Responding to annual Impact Aid Grant surveys.* The COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult for LEAs to get the responses needed for the annual survey of federally connected students under the Impact Aid Grant System (https://impactaid.ed.gov). Collection was especially challenging for LEAs that were unable to use the electronic survey option.
- *Reporting advanced course information.* Collecting and reporting advanced coursetaking data, such as the distinction between standard level (SL) and higher level (HL) International Baccalaureate courses and exams, can help agencies better understand the course content currently offered and taught, collect more detailed data, and better support schools. This topic can be further discussed with the Forum's School Courses for the Exchange of Data (SCED) Working Group (https://nces.ed.gov/forum/sced.asp).

Education Data Following the Pandemic

Bradley McMillen and Linda Jenkins invited members to break into three small groups to look ahead and discuss education data in a post-COVID-19 pandemic world.

- Breakout group 1 discussed the possibility of maintaining virtual education going forward, even as some states push for a return to on-site education only. Participants voiced concerns about the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has not gone away and removing the option for virtual work may present a hardship for students and teachers. Concerns were also raised about the impact on those students who have been able to succeed virtually despite struggling in in-person settings (such as students who have been bullied).

- Breakout group 2 discussed those elements of virtual education that may persist after a return to in-person education. Remote connectivity and streamlined procedures are likely to continue in many agencies. One SEA found the benefits of remote connectivity when a one-day meeting with the U.S. Department of Education's Privacy Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) could be held virtually, avoiding 8-hour round trip travel for some participants. Online office hours and improved relationships with information technology (IT) departments are also likely to last. However, the complications to data privacy and ethics brought by virtual learning are not going away. For example, if students need help when using an app, is it okay for them to ask for help from the app's IT support team? Is it ethical for the support team to respond if they are not school employees who have been cleared to work with children?
- Breakout group 3 also explored how virtual education may continue in the future, what forms it may take, and what circumstances may require it. Extreme weather came up as a relevant example of a non-pandemic circumstance for virtual instruction (for example, when air quality declines due to wildfires). Even if remote learning goes away, some of its practices (such as a focus on mastery-based outcomes) are likely to be retained.

Key points that emerged from the overall discussion included

- the desire of many parents, teachers, and students to see remote learning continue;
- concern about harming students who have been helped by remote learning; and
- tension between agency staff who could reasonably work from home and those who did not have that option.

PPI Committee Business

Bradley recognized retiring PPI members for their many contributions to the committee.

Steering Committee Business/Report

The Steering Committee approved a slate of nominated Forum and Committee officers, which will be voted upon by the full Forum during the Closing Session.

Meeting Review/Future Planning

Bradley thanked PPI members for their contributions. There is support for continuing to have breakout discussions in future meetings—PPI was the only standing committee to have breakouts this year, and they positively contributed to the quality of the meeting.