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Benefits of a Statewide Student Identifier System for California

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Benefits of a Statewide Student Identifier System for California

Testimony Presented to the California State Senate Education Committee

By Laura S. Hamilton
RAND Education

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on SB 1453, which is currently being discussed by the California State Senate Education Committee. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. This statement is based on a variety of sources, including research conducted at RAND. However, the opinions and conclusions expressed are those of the author and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the agencies or others sponsoring its research.

I am a Behavioral Scientist at RAND, where I conduct research in the areas of accountability, assessment, and school reform evaluation. In addition to my research work, I recently completed a policy brief for EdSource detailing the need for student-level data in California.

The information California currently uses to evaluate schools and educational programs is often incomplete, leading to possible errors in accountability decisions and lack of conclusive evidence on the effectiveness of educational interventions. Many other states have already adopted a mechanism for linking students' scores over time, which is an important element of a comprehensive accountability system. Assessment data is far more valuable for improving teaching and learning, identifying best practices, and determining program effectiveness when those data are valid and reliable, and when they provide a clear picture of the value added by a school or program.

A unique student identifier linked to students' STAR test scores and demographic data would offer the opportunity to improve the quality of information California uses to evaluate both schools and programs and would facilitate better service provision to students. The primary benefit of a statewide ID would be the ability to link students'

records over time, regardless of whether students remain in the same school or district. The availability of linked data has several significant advantages.

First, it would improve the accuracy of accountability-related decisions by removing the effects of mobility from the interpretation of changes in test scores over time.

Second, it would allow researchers and other users to answer questions about the growth trajectories of different types of students. For example, one school may be successful at improving reading scores among particularly low-performing students while allowing achievement at higher levels to stagnate, whereas another may neglect the low performers and instead focus on raising scores at the top of the distribution. Use of only aggregate gains would mask this important difference.

Third, a statewide student identifier is necessary for examining students' transitions from one school to another. For example, evaluations of middle schools are hampered by an inability to link 6th-graders' performance to scores those students attained when they were in elementary school. Similarly, understanding how achievement is affected by the sometimes high mobility rates observed among many low-income students requires an ability to link students' scores as they move from one school or district to another.

Finally, a statewide ID system would dramatically improve the quality of research and evaluation that can be done on local and state initiatives, and would probably reduce the costs of those studies as well. RAND researchers have recently been involved in a number of state-funded evaluations, most notably the multi-year class-size reduction study. Unlike researchers who studied class-size reduction in Tennessee (a study that has achieved widespread recognition and that showed significant positive effects of reduced classes), researchers in California could not track individual students to determine how many years they participated in reduced-size classes. Instead, they had to rely on a combination of district-level aggregated student data and statewide data for cohorts of students. In part because of the inadequacies of California's statewide data system, the evaluators' ability to assess the impact of the program on raising student achievement is

weaker than it would be if longitudinally linked data were available. RAND's ongoing study of charter schools in California faces similar problems, particularly given the high mobility rates associated with many charter schools.

As this discussion indicates, a statewide student ID system would contribute to improved teaching and learning in California by improving the quality of accountability decisions as well as research and evaluation.