"Strengthening Education Research and Privacy Protections to Better Serve Students"
House Education and the Workforce Committee
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Testimony for Robert Swiggum, Deputy Superintendent, Georgia Department of Education

Thank you Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Scott, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Bob Swiggum, and I am the Deputy Superintendent of Technology Services for the Georgia Department of Education. Today I am going to share with you Georgia's journey to implement a Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) and the impact it has had on educating our students.

In Georgia, whether discussing student achievement, program monitoring, education funding, accountability or any other education-related conversation, data is at the center of the discussion. We believe that parents should have access to their child's educational records in order to support their child's growth; that teachers should have access to meaningful data on the students in their classroom to support their instructional practices; and that school leaders should be able to use data to make critical system-level decisions to impact student achievement. We provide access to data with the understanding that student-level information must be respected and protected while also acknowledging that student information is a vital resource for students, parents, and teachers in their educational planning. In Georgia, we have been working diligently to find the proper balance of strong data security policy while also supporting stakeholders.

Thanks to a federal SLDS grant, Georgia began construction on a statewide longitudinal system in 2010 and implemented the first phase in 2011. A state-supported system supports equity across Georgia, allowing districts without the capacity or funding to support a largescale technology investment access to the benefits of a robust data system. The statewide system also allows students and teachers access to the right information when moving between districts and schools. Throughout the initial design, development, and ongoing implementation of the SLDS, we have engaged stakeholders to ensure that the system serves the needs of all Georgia's students and teachers.

What are those needs? Before creating this system, only 8 percent of the school districts in Georgia could afford a student information system at the local level that maintained multiple years of data. In 2009, in the vast majority of our local schools and districts, the school year would end, administrators would submit key data points from the previous year to the state to meet reporting requirements, and then they would delete all information from the system to prepare for the new school year. A clean slate.

While this saves money, it does not help the teachers in our classroom, the principals in our buildings – or the parents working to ensure their child is successful in school year after year. All stakeholders – teachers, principals and parents – need to see how a child is performing over time, not just in a given year, to fully understand how to best meet that child's needs. Some teachers found a workaround: keeping years of paperwork filed away under lock and key. But this system is not sustainable.

That is why Georgia decided to create a statewide longitudinal data system. We as a state have the responsibility to provide our teachers, our principals, our parents with the tools and resources that will help all kids achieve. Today, in Georgia, with the click of a button, a teacher can now analyze data on achievement, attendance and enrollment for every kid in their classroom that year. With another click of a button, they can drill down to see this information for a student over the past six years.

Principals can view this information for students with their school building. Parents can view this information for their individual child.

How? In 2010, Georgia partnered with local schools and districts to create the statewide longitudinal data system we have today. We worked closely with them to ensure the system is meaningful to educators on the ground and that it safeguards student-level information. Early on, we recognized that previous Georgia Department of Education (DOE) projects had not been as successful as they were promised to be. We knew some would be skeptical to collaborate with the state on yet another project.

We spent several months working with district staff, asking them to explain what they would like to see in an SLDS, and we learned a lot about what they did not want us to do. They gave us very clear feedback. First, they did not want their teachers leaving their local student information system to get the data they needed. Second, they did not want any additional IDs or passwords that teachers would have to remember to access information from the DOE. Third, they did not want a complicated state-run security system over which they had no control. And fourth, they did not want to send any new data to the DOE. The list was short but demonstrated their frustration with DOE-led projects and the level of distrust that existed between the state and local districts.

Our solution to these issues was multifaceted. To ensure the system was meaningful to students, educators and parents, we knew we had to get districts' input on the design of the system. To accomplish this, we developed a technical design that allowed teachers to access the necessary information from the SLDS via their local student information system without any additional IDs or passwords. This new tool became known to our districts as the "Georgia Tunnel."

Through the Tunnel, a classroom teacher could then access the information on the students in their classroom – no more, no less. A school principal could access the information on the students in her school building, not the entire district. In this way, we provided easy access for teachers and school leaders, while at the same time maintaining the privacy of the children in our state. The Tunnel allows user authentication to occur at the district level, meaning that the district is in control of security and privacy settings and knowing who is allowed what level of information. This ensures that information is only accessible to those who need it.

This system did not increase the workload on our local schools and districts. Districts did not have to send the state any additional data to populate the system. Instead, we used existing data to ensure there was no additional workload on our local schools and districts. We also ensured there is a purpose behind every piece of information the state is collecting and schools and districts are using through this system.

At the state, we established robust data governance processes that ensure new data collection requirements are in accordance with changes to state law, federal law or rules established by the Georgia State Board of Education. If any new data is required to be collected, we are required by state law to post the purpose of the collection for public comment and to report any new data collections to the Governor's and legislative offices.

We also made the state system completely voluntary. If a district did not see value in the system, they did not have to use it. Many districts were interested in trying this system but skeptical since past projects had failed to meet their needs. So we built a prototype. Each district had the opportunity to try out the system before committing to use it. That's when the real engagement began. For the first time, most teachers, principals and other educators saw how they could use key data and information – most

of it dating back six years – to inform their instruction and make key policy decisions. That is how they realized the power of longitudinal data.

We have expanded the use of this system since it was first made available in 2011. Today, teachers not only can see how a student performed on a test, but also how much growth they have achieved. A teacher also can readily access the state standards and see resources and professional development opportunities aligned with these standards. Teachers also can use the system to build quizzes and tests for their classrooms. The system allows them to develop the tests and grade them online so results are immediate.

Perhaps most importantly, the state introduced the Parent Portal in 2015. Now, a parent can access the information they need to make informed decisions on their child's education, whether it is their test scores over time, the growth they are making, or their attendance records, to name a few.

It is clear that the statewide longitudinal data system has become a critical resource across our state in the past five years. This year, we passed the 60 million page view count and continue to grow exponentially. That is 60 million times a teacher, student, parent or administrator asked for and received information – critical information that was not available before this system was created. It is a true testament to the value of the SLDS and the value of the partnership we forged among the state, local districts, and teachers across our state.

Georgia teachers find benefit from using the SLDS. Tammy Boston, a mathematics teacher at Armuhee High School in Floyd County, Georgia remarked, "I teach 149 students so contacting parents can be a challenge, particularly when you have students who are struggling. One of the things I like to do when I call a parent, is I like to know background information – how did they do in math one and math two before they got to my class – I can do that through LDS." Similarly, Debora Childs a teacher at Cave Spring Elementary, had this to say: "I have a fairly new child and we're still receiving records. And the speech teacher gave me a form to fill out on this child and she needed various data on the child. I went to the office to dig through his files and there was almost nothing there. Then it hit me, you know I had the resource right there at my desk, so when I pulled it up I had access to his records from the previous two schools that he had attended so I could fill the form out and it was ready for her that day."

We continue to partner with our local districts today to make this system as meaningful as possible and to maintain its privacy and security. In 2015, the Georgia state legislature unanimously passed Senate Bill 89, known as the Student Data Privacy, Accessibility and Transparency Act. This bill has been described as one of the most comprehensive laws in the nation, providing strict rules for data collection and use while also increasing the capacity of our agency to implement and strengthen our supports.

In Georgia, we are always interested in the impact our policy decisions have on academic progress. To help understand the impact information access has on academic progress, we work with third-party researchers on evaluation. Data from the SLDS can only be accessed by researchers through a rigorous data request process. Researchers are permitted access to the appropriate level of de-identified data after a thorough evaluation by our internal review board.

While it is difficult to parse out and define the specific impact of the SLDS on academic progress across our state, we know it is a major factor by comparing our results over time. Georgia's graduation rate in 2009 was 59%; last year it was 78%. We know many factors have helped to make that increase possible, but I believe that answering 60 million requests for information from our teachers, students, administrators and parents has helped to improve instruction and achievement for all kids.

Thank you again for inviting me today. I look forward to your questions.