EDUCATION'S DATA MANAGEMENT INITIATIVE

Significant Progress Made, but Better Planning Needed to Accomplish Project Goals

Why GAO Did This Study

As a condition of receiving federal funding for elementary and secondary education programs, states each year provide vast amounts of data to Education. While the need for information that informs evaluation is important (particularly with the No Child Left Behind Act), Education's data gathering has heretofore presented some problems. It has been burdensome to states because there are multiple and redundant requests administered by a number of offices. In addition, the resulting data supplied by states has not been accurate, timely, or conducive to assessing program performance. To improve the information by which it evaluates such programs and also to ease states' reporting burden, Education in 2002 initiated an ambitious, multiyear plan to consolidate elementary and secondary data collections into a single, departmentwide system focused on performance. Given its importance, we prepared a study, under the authority of the Comptroller General, to provide Congress with information on its progress.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education (1) develop a strategy to help states provide quality data, (2) develop a process within the department to resolve critical, outstanding issues, and (3) develop a clear plan for completing final aspects of PBDMI, including specific time frames and indicators of progress toward the initiative's goals. Education agreed with our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-6.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact David Bellis at (415) 904-2272 or bellisd@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Through its Performance-Based Data Management Initiative (PBDMI), Education has consolidated and defined much of the data it anticipates collecting under a unified system. Education reports that many data definitions have been agreed-to and data redundancies eliminated. PBDMI officials also said that to date, however, it has not been able to resolve all remaining differences among the program offices that manage many of the different data collections.

PBDMI officials have conducted extensive outreach to the states to advance the initiative. The outreach to states involved regional conferences, two rounds of site visits, and according to officials, $100,000 in grants to most states to help offset their costs. State data providers responding to our survey expressed general satisfaction with the department's outreach, but some were not optimistic that the initiative would ease their reporting burden or enhance their own analytic capacity. The states were not able to produce enough data during test submissions in 2003 and 2004 to enable data quality verification or phasing out the department's multiple data collections. With regard to the lack of sufficient data from many states, Education officials said some lack the technical capacity needed to produce new performance data requirements. State data providers reported having competing demands for their time and resources, given other federal initiatives.

Education officials have decided to proceed with the undertaking and have developed a draft interim strategy for moving forward. But they currently have no formal plan for how they would overcome obstacles such as the lack of state data and other technical and training delays to the initiative.

Reporting to Education: A Sample of Data Collections Seeking Information on Elementary and Secondary Programs in One State in 2004
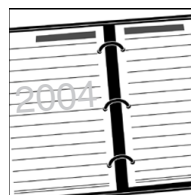
By Education's own account, around 200 data collections are administered to states about elementary and secondary programs

March
- Survey of private, not-for profit schools
- 2 common core of data surveys: schools and state nonfiscal survey

May
- 3 program assessments: Title I, vocational, and special education
- Private schools participation in Title I
- Follow-up report on career and technical education completers

Aug.
- Instruction for limited English and immigrant students
- School and staff admininistrative report
- Discipline, crime, and violence report
- Charter school evaluation report

Oct.
- Instructional personnel report
- Student enrollment data collection (fall count)
- Safe and drug free schools report
- Count of home-schooled children

Source: Virginia State Department of Education.