

Checklist for Selecting the Appropriate Sources of Data

State and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs) regularly collect data for multiple purposes. A key aspect of planning a data collection is to select appropriate sources of data. Knowing what is feasible and realistic is critical to successful information sharing, including arrangements made between SEAs and LEAs for the transfer of data.

Those designing data collections can use the following checklist to select appropriate sources of data:

- ✓ Identify feasible sources of information:
 - Can the information be obtained through analysis of existing data?
 - Are records available from which the information can be compiled?
 - Are subject matter experts or other knowledgeable persons available from whom the information can be gathered and assembled?
 - Must the information be generated by controlled observation or measurement?
- ✓ Determine whether existing data can be used to answer the question:
 - Are data available that are relevant to the question?
 - Do available data meet the criteria of reliability, validity, and other aspects of required technical quality?
 - Are the data structured in a manner that provides the appropriate unit of analysis and that allows appropriate investigation of relationships among variables?
 - Are the data sufficiently current?
 - If multiple sources of data are used, are the data sufficiently comparable (for example, dates of collection)?
- ✓ Determine whether administrative records can be used:
 - Are there administrative records that contain all the information needed (for example, numbers and characteristics of students by race/ethnicity and gender for the administrative unit/level required to address the questions)?
 - Are there alternative methods of obtaining the records (once the administrative units in which the records are kept have been identified) that can accommodate different local recordkeeping, practices, and policies?
 - Are the definitions and concepts employed by the various jurisdictions involved comparable and uniform? Be prepared to invest in methods (for example, crosswalking) that attempt to make data comparable among various jurisdictions.
 - Does an examination of the uses for which the records are kept reveal clues about possible distortions relative to the questions? Administrative record data are no more immune to validity issues than data from any other source.
- ✓ Determine whether data can be collected from individual data providers:
 - Is there a person, position, or department with access to the information being sought? If there is, can that individual or department serve as the data provider?
 - Is the data provider being asked to obtain information from administrative records? If so, consider the administrative record questions above.
 - Is the data provider being asked to report information about a group or organizational unit in the absence of records?
 - Is the person from whom the data are being requested the most capable person to act as a data provider? If not, can a procedure be designed for choosing the best data provider?

- ✓ Determine whether data can be obtained via observation:
 - Is it feasible to train staff or to hire trained observers?
 - Do standard protocols for observation exist, or can they be created?
 - Can the observers be granted access to the phenomena of interest?

For more best practices and additional checklists on data collection and reporting, see the *Forum Guide to Strategies for Education Data Collection and Reporting (SEDCAR)* (https://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2021013.asp).