Federal recommendations to support data access
through improved statewide longitudinal data systems

While states have been building cross-agency, longitudinal data systems for decades and have made notable progress, today's state data systems, and the federal programs and funding streams that support them, are largely designed and used for system-level compliance and monitoring activities. **The very design of our current state data systems and the policies that govern them are not oriented toward providing access to information that helps individuals, the public, and policymakers answer their questions and make decisions.**

Robust statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) that connect data from early childhood through workforce, are designed to prioritize meaningful access to data, and are able to meet current and future information needs are possible. The bones of the necessary infrastructure exist in every state data system at varying degrees of quality. The federal government has the ability to both ease and expedite state efforts to improve their SLDSs. Federal leaders can support state efforts to improve their SLDSs in the following ways.

1. Clarify and increase the funding available for SLDS modernization and capacity building.

State and local leaders need clarity on the availability of federal funds to support data modernization efforts and how those funds may be used. Increasing the federal funding available for these efforts could incentivize states to undertake much-needed improvements in their data systems, making data more accessible and useful to individuals, the public, and policymakers. Further, providing clear guidance and technical assistance on how existing funds may be used, braided, and blended to support SLDS modernization would enable states to tap into current resources as well as new ones to support their modernization efforts. Possible funding strategies include:

- Issuing guidance clarifying the availability of current funding streams for modernizing, refining, and sustaining data infrastructure and building capacity;

- Increasing the appropriations levels for the current Department of Education (ED) SLDS Grant Program and the Department of Labor (DOL) Workforce Data Quality Initiative Grant Program and expanding eligible state-level grantees and uses of funds;

- Considering other funding sources such as a state data block grant as recommended by the Advisory Committee on Data for Evidence Building or a data pilot similar to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Data Innovation Pilot; and

- Prioritizing funding for states willing to link their P–20W data with a focus on access and use of that data.

2. Expand privacy technical assistance and support.

States consistently cite the confusing patchwork of privacy laws and policies as a barrier to making progress linking data across sectors in support of access goals. Evolving state and local privacy needs overwhelm current federal technical assistance capacity (e.g., through the Privacy Technical Assistance Center [PTAC]) such that states struggle to find sufficient support and technical assistance to address their privacy concerns. The federal government should strengthen data privacy support for states in the following ways:

- Issuing joint guidance from ED and DOL on integrated data systems and privacy; and
- Formally authorizing and strengthening PTAC in a manner that ensures sufficient autonomy, flexibility, and funding to address the most pressing privacy and cybersecurity needs of the field and that ensures that part of PTAC's mission is to disseminate information highlighting best practices for protecting privacy while enabling data use.

3. Provide guidance on and support for linking and accessing data.

States receive conflicting guidance about linking data across agencies and sectors as well as their ability to include certain types of federal data within their SLDSs. Nothing in federal law prohibits states from integrating data across education and workforce sectors, and often, the use of federal data is allowable. These misconceptions could easily be cleared up through administrative action. Such action would provide states clarity or direct approval, enabling them to feel confident about taking next steps to evolve their data systems. The following collaborative actions could provide states with increased clarity:

- Issuing clear guidance on the permissibility of combining education and workforce data unless explicitly prohibited by federal law or regulation; and
- Supporting state data systems in obtaining access to federal data that is relevant to education and workforce, such as:
  » Wage and employment records (e.g., unemployment insurance, census records, other applicable sources),
  » Postsecondary enrollment data across state lines,
  » Military enlistment information, and
  » Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) data.

4. Scale best practices and address barriers.

States rely on the federal government to step in to address priorities or challenges that states cannot tackle on their own. In addition to the actions described in this section, this support includes promoting best practices, addressing systematic barriers, providing states with cover to take action, and breaking down silos. Existing federal efforts can be expanded and enhanced through the following actions:

- Investing in more efforts like ED's State Support Team, which provides important support to states through technical assistance, resources, and convenings. Expanding this approach should include a mechanism to ensure that agencies coordinate with each other to support states.

- Charging the federal chief data officers network with helping their counterparts in states by:
  - » Identifying barriers to state data system modernization efforts that the federal government can ease;
  - » Recommending ways that the levels of government could better coordinate their data collection, reporting, access, and use efforts; and
  - » Creating best practices resources and other tools for states.

- Creating an office at the Office of Management and Budget charged with interagency coordination at the federal and state levels to break down silos and identify solutions that address longstanding barriers to data collaboration.