



Best Practice Recommendations for SEA Websites

About PTAC

The U.S. Department of Education established the Privacy Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) as a “one-stop” resource for education stakeholders to learn about data privacy, confidentiality, and security practices related to student-level longitudinal data systems and other uses of student data. PTAC provides timely information and updated guidance through a variety of resources, including training materials and opportunities to receive direct assistance with privacy, security, and confidentiality of student data systems. More PTAC information is available at <http://ptac.ed.gov>.

PTAC welcomes input on this document and suggestions for future technical assistance resources relating to student privacy. Comments and suggestions can be sent to PrivacyTA@ed.gov.

Purpose

With the advent of statewide longitudinal data systems, states are maintaining increased amounts of data about individual students. This document is intended to offer state education agencies (SEAs) guidance on best practices to increase transparency and usability of their websites with regard to these data. PTAC and the U.S. Department of Education recognize that SEAs have unique and varied reasons for establishing the content of their websites and do not intend to advocate a “one-size-fits-all” solution for SEA websites. The recommendations in this document are not legally required; these are best practices recommendations only.

Best Practice Recommendations

Transparency

You should consider providing explicit and up-to-date information about the student information that you maintain, including the following:

- **Description of data** – Post your data dictionaries or describe generally the types of data that you maintain and their source (e.g., assessment data obtained from local education agencies, postsecondary attendance data obtained from postsecondary institutions, early childhood data obtained from Head Start providers, etc.).
- **Data governance** – Describe generally your organizational approach to data and information management, including your policies and procedures for managing the full data lifecycle. Consider posting your data governance plan.
- **Data access** – Describe categories of individuals who have a right to access the data, including both personally identifiable information and aggregate-level data. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act provides parents and eligible students with the right to inspect and review education records—you should describe how that right can be exercised and specify procedures for correcting erroneous data, including whether corrections should be made at the SEA level, the school level, or otherwise.

- **Data sharing** – Describe generally the external entities (organizations or institutions) with which you are sharing student data, and clarify the purposes for sharing and the types of sources shared; consider providing templates and/or examples of data sharing agreements.
- **Data usage and results** – If you have used the data to prepare feedback reports, evaluations, or research studies, you should consider describing how the data have been used and posting your findings and reports. (As always, remember to balance the need for transparency and making data available against the need to protect the privacy and confidentiality of individual students).
- **Data protection and privacy policies** – You should describe generally how you protect the data you maintain, and consider posting links to appropriate resources, such as federal and state laws and regulations governing student privacy.

Website Usability

The choice of disclosure avoidance methodology and specifications affects how the resulting data can be used and interpreted. Consider providing the general public with a clearly worded, easily accessible, and up-to-date explanation of your data reporting policies, rules, and privacy protection practices, including information on the restricted-use data (e.g., what data are restricted, who is authorized to access these data, and under what conditions). This description should be worded in simple terms and should clarify which disclosure avoidance procedures you use in your public reports, as well as when and why these procedures are being applied (e.g., if you suppress some results in a table, consider elaborating in the notes that the data have been suppressed to protect students' privacy and confidentiality). Also, provide clear definitions of all disclosure techniques you use. Consider including this information in the stand-alone Handbooks and reports, on your SEA website, and in the methodological documentation that accompanies data tables (e.g., in the Help section of the website where users go to download data tables and/or in the note section of individual tables). We recommend clearly and consistently marking any symbols used in the reports to ensure that figure legends and/or table notes are not confusing.

- **Customized entry points** – Provide different entry points (on the Home page) for various categories of users, such as parents, teachers, and administrators. These users have different types of responsibilities and information needs that should be reflected in the website.
- **Separate data privacy section** – Create a separate section describing data privacy and security policies on the Home page, or in another logical place, such as within a section on Laws/Regulations or Data Access/Use.
- **Search engine** – Create a search engine feature that allows users to filter the results by date and other criteria.
- **Clear language** – Use plain language and consider including a glossary of terms. For interactive website features and forms, provide detailed usage instructions.
- **Contact information** – Specify whom users can contact for assistance.
- **Multiple languages** – If you serve a diverse population, consider providing at least a portion of your content in multiple languages.
- **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)** – Consider whether including FAQs would help users. FAQs can be broken down by audience type or other categories.
- **Additional resources** – Provide links to page(s) with other relevant resources. These should be organized in an easily identifiable way—for example, links on related topics could be placed on one page and/or be grouped by topic.