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## Teaching blur

California's fledgling student data system could be invaluable for setting sound education policy and improving schools — if the state can actually make use of the information. So the Legislature needs to change state law to ensure that the public reaps the full benefits of the new system.

SBx5 2, by Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, would amend state law to give researchers easier access to new data on student achievement. Otherwise, the state will continue to craft education policy without any clear insight into what works.

The 2009-10 school year marks the debut of the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System, which will track individual student performance from year to year.

Until now, the state only tabulated test scores by school or district. That consolidated approach offered an overall picture, but without the crucial student details necessary to judge the success or failure of teaching methods and educational programs.

But current state law impedes the use of that treasure trove of school data. The law allows only individual districts to release student-specific information. So researchers wanting to study the state's school system would have to contact every district in the state to get the student files.

That approach makes little sense when the state now has a central database collecting that information. The law aims to protect student privacy, but privacy concerns need not obstruct investigation of education programs. Simitian's bill would give the state power to release student data to researchers, easing the task of getting access to the files. Such expert studies are key to providing schools, the public and legislators with an accurate picture of the education system's strengths and weaknesses.

California has embarked on a host of educational reforms in the past decade, from reducing class sizes to holding schools accountable for improving yearly test scores. But the state has had little way to judge the effectiveness of those strategies, thanks to a lack of basic information about student performance.

The 2007 series of studies on California's school system, led by Stanford University, even noted that the state's school data was so inadequate that "even if we implemented reforms that were particularly effective, we might not realize it." Better information about students and classroom performance is vital to improving the state's education system, the studies said.

California will spend nearly \$67 billion in local, state and federal funds on K-12 education this fiscal year. But the state should ensure that it spends that sizable taxpayer investment on effective programs.

Legislators should clear the legal roadblocks, so California will finally have some hard facts to inform education decisions. Basing school policy on knowledge is a far better strategy than making choices with blind hope.