

FAQ:

The California Partnership for Achieving Student Success (Cal-PASS)

Q. What is Cal-PASS?

Cal-PASS is the California Partnership for Achieving Student Success, a voluntary, collaboration in which California schools, colleges and universities share student data and bring together teams of educators to mine that information for insights to reshape curricula and help more students enroll in college.

The database includes years of student grades as well as California's Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) results in English language arts, mathematics, science and history/social science, and the California High School Exit Exam. It can follow students' results as they move from middle school to high school to college to universities and into the workforce.

Q. Who belongs to Cal-Pass? Who pays for it?

All 110 California's community colleges, most universities and two-thirds of the state's school districts belong to the Cal-PASS data-sharing consortium. It is free to the schools and colleges. The \$4 million a year program is funded by the State of California and by foundations working to repair the ruptures in the educational pipeline and help more students succeed in college.

Q. What is required of the schools and colleges? What do they get out of it?

By joining the data-sharing network, schools agree to make available to partners in their region at least five years of data, including grades, attendance and demographic information. They can also elect to allow researchers and educational opportunity programs such as TRIO, Puente and ACCESS to use their data.

Q. What about student privacy and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)?

Cal-PASS complies fully with FERPA. Access to the database is password-protected and tightly restricted. All members must sign and abide by strict confidentiality safeguards. The student information is encrypted and made anonymous. Cal-PASS tools allow members to follow cohorts from middle school through college, but student names, Social Security numbers and other identifiers are not disclosed.

Q. Where is the data stored? How far back are records kept?

The data is stored on secure servers in Sacramento, California. Cal-PASS, which began in 1998 with Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District sharing records with San Diego State University, now holds 340 million course records from 25 million students in its data storehouse.

Q. Who does the actual data-mining?

Cal-PASS has web-based tools that make it easier for front-line educators and administrators to work with mountains of data. Authorized users can make queries and generate their own reports or request customized reports and analyses from the 15-member Cal-PASS staff. The web tools allow educators to see student grades, graduation and transition rates by school, subject, semester and over multiple years.

Q. How does Cal-PASS enable educators to put data to good use?

The main work of Cal-PASS is done by groups of classroom teachers and college faculty from the same academic disciplines (English, mathematics, science, etc.) who meet monthly in Professional Learning Councils to consider how to better align school and college curricula. Some 1,200 educators belong to 60 Councils across the state. Regional coordinators help arrange the meetings, frame the agenda, facilitate the dialog and orchestrate follow-through on making the instructional adjustments.

Q. What role do foundations play?

Foundation grants cover half of Cal-PASS's \$4 million budget. Some foundations sponsor data-sharing initiatives in particular regions such as California's Central Valley or focus on specific populations such as foster youth. Foundation support also helped Cal-PASS develop its new SMART Tool that makes it easier for teachers to get answers to their questions about data (See separate SMART Tool fact sheet).

Q. Does Cal-PASS work outside the state of California?

Cal-Pass is an entirely California program, but like any successful educational initiative, it has attracted attention outside its home region, and it has provided technical assistance to data-sharing projects modeled on Cal-PASS in San Antonio, Texas, and the state of Hawaii. An independent, not-for-profit institute is being established to help additional states with data-sharing.

Q. What's the difference between Cal-PASS and CalPADS?

Cal-PASS is an improvement model. It collects and shares data across and among different segments of education, from kindergarten through universities, for the purpose of understanding and using data for educational improvements. It has spawned innovations and also helped research on student achievement and transitions.

CALPADS is the ~~new~~ California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data created and administered by the California Department of Education (CDE) to meet federal K-12 reporting requirements. Since CalPADS will already be collecting extensive school data, Cal-PASS now will obtain the data it needs directly from CalPADS. Cal-PASS will concentrate less on the mechanics of gathering data and more on its primary mission, which is to help schools and colleges improve instruction and learning.

Q. What are concrete examples of how Cal-PASS works?

- The 11th and 12th grade English teachers at a San Diego high school worked with a professor on better preparing students for research and writing assignments in college. Their approach -- adding more non-fiction, expository texts to the literature-based curriculum -- now's being used at all 10 San Diego high schools.
- Another council found that students with otherwise good grades were foundering in chemistry because they lacked math skills. The council's answer: a two-week summer math-for-chemistry bridge course. Students who took it earned B grades (3.05 GPA) compared to the C+ (2.40) of those who did not.
- Math teachers in Cal-PASS councils have prepared detailed guides to the California Content Standards for Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry and Pre-Calculus classes that break down the skills students need at the start of each course and the skills needed to master each standard.
- A project supported by the Stuart Foundation will link California's Child Welfare Services database with Cal-PASS data, providing a new way to look at how foster youth fare in school and college.
- Cal-PASS is working with the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University to see if traditionally underrepresented students given the opportunity to take rigorous, career-focused classes at community colleges while still in high school wind up enrolling in college at higher rates.

The SMART Tool empowers educators to make evidence-based decisions

California's 110 community colleges now have at their fingertips a web tool that gives them instant readouts on success and failure rates, charts trends over several years and pinpoints problems that stymie students' seeking to move from basic skills classes onto the academic and career tracks that lead to job credentials, degrees and transfer to universities.

The new **SMART Tool**, which will soon be available to high schools and universities as well, is an application that gives educators and policymakers a practical way of extracting actionable information from increasingly vast, complex databases. It gives them the key to unlock their own data warehouse.

With states across the country under mandates to build better longitudinal data systems, the **SMART Tool** ensures that data do not just sit on servers and fill accountability reports. It gives policymakers as well as practitioners an easy way to find data needed to make hard decisions. It does this without jeopardizing the privacy of student records.

In California, where the **SMART Tool** was developed by the California Partnership for Achieving Student Success (Cal-PASS), this application is already being used to help the state's 110 community colleges make institutional and instructional changes that are needed to improve student success.

Developed with support from the William and Flora Hewlett and James Irvine Foundations, the **SMART Tool** – the acronym stands for Standardized Metrics for Analysis, Reporting, and Tracking – was made available to colleges this fall at no cost.

The **SMART Tool** employs powerful but easy to use business analytical software that allows college presidents, policymakers, faculty and counselors to perform analyses over the web that once were the sole domain of IT or institutional research departments. It makes readily available information and comparisons they simply could not get before.

With familiar point-and-click and drag-and-drop commands, the **SMART Tool** quickly disaggregates years of data on grades and completion rates. It instantly breaks results down by age, gender, race and ethnicity, disability, full- or part-time status, day and evening classes, and a host of other variables. It can show what grades and how many credits students on financial aid earned, or measure the impact of tutoring, learning communities and other interventions. It can do this for entire student cohorts or just those those on certain tracks or in particular courses.

Each college specifies which colleges it will share data with. All data are kept anonymous so privacy is protected. Many participants also allow their data to be used by researchers and for projects promoting college access and opportunity.

Cal-PASS is a voluntary collaboration with a warehouse of 330 million student records from California schools, colleges and universities that extends back more than a decade.

Education Leaders Recognize the Value of Cal-PASS

“States building longitudinal data systems shouldn’t stop with collecting data. With state funding and support, Cal-PASS has created a resource for California schools and colleges to use data not just for reporting purposes, but also to help educators examine patterns of student progression and glean the insights needed to improve their programs. States should learn from the Cal-PASS experience that there are practical ways to ensure that data can be used readily and easily by principals and presidents, instructors and counselors, to help students better prepare for their futures.”

Michael Kirst, Emeritus Professor, Stanford University

“The Cal-PASS work is groundbreaking, in both technological and human terms. The new Cal-PASS SMART tool provides powerful and remarkably user-friendly support for the work of institutions committed to understanding how students progress -- or don't -- through their educational pathways. But Cal-PASS also understands that many barriers to student progress can be effectively addressed only through skillfully facilitated work engaging committed groups of faculty.”

Kay McClenney, Director, Center for Community College Student Engagement, University of Texas at Austin

“Schools need more tools to diagnose students’ progress and develop strategies for ensuring that more of their graduates are ready for the demands of college. Our research suggests that tools such as those developed by Cal-PASS have the potential to enable more schools to implement the kinds of changes that improve student progress and transitions to college.”

Dave Conley, Director, Educational Policy Improvement Center, University of Oregon

“To ensure that more students have the chance to attend and finish college, high schools need to do everything they can to help students get ready, and colleges and universities need to focus explicitly on the goal of student success. One of the best vehicles that we have found to assist educators with this work is Cal-PASS. We encourage all our partners in California to use this resource, and think other states would be wise to emulate it.”

Michele Siqueiros, Executive Director, Campaign for College Opportunity

“The SMART tool has been one of our best investments to date. It shows how new technologies can be harnessed to support schools and colleges focused on using evidence to improve teaching and learning. It's a helpful resource for gathering data on innovations and monitoring students' academic progress. But even more important, it puts data into the hands of practitioners and brings evidence-based approaches into the classroom.”

Denis Udall, Program Officer, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

“The work of Cal-PASS has been nothing short of amazing. Not only has it led to greatly improved collaboration among our teachers, feeder middle schools and college partners, it has dramatically changed the way our district educates our students. It works! The collaboration is built around real data -- the Cal-PASS data – and it has been eye-opening for all participants. What they learned changed what happened in the classroom and resulted in steadily improving test scores. Naturally, we’re expanding this work to our other high schools.”

Robert Collins, Superintendent of the Grossmont Union High School District