Lax data

skew rate

of state's

dropouts
ByPatKossan
The Arizona Republic

Arizona's reputation as a
state with too many dropouts
and too few students keeping
up with their national peers
may not be the fault of bad
schools, but the result of
missing or faulty informa-
tion about those schools, a
study released Friday con-
cluded.
What statewide informa-
tion is available often is con-
flicting. Some of it is lan-
guishing in paper file folders
or is missing. Much of it just
doesn't exist, lb add to the
problem, the few electronic
data systems the state has
can't talk tqeach other.
Education researchers
from the state's three univer-
sities examined 10 of Ari-
zona's critical education is-
sues, such as teacher train-
ing, special education and
English language learners,
and made one common dis-
covery: The state has no in-
formation to determine
whether programs work or
not.
Arizona doesn't have
enough data to draw conclu-
sions about how it stacks up
to other states, said Alex Mol-
nar, director of Arizona State
University's Education Pol-
icy Studies Laboratory.
"In that kind of a setting,
anyone can assert the suc-
cess and failure of almost
anything," Molnar said. That
leads to a system built by pol-
itics and ideologies instead of
facts, he said.
This is Arizona's first com-
prehensive study of its edu-
cation system and provides a.
historical perspective, a
snapshot of where the state
stands now and recommen-
dations for better results in
the future. It is the product of
the Arizona Education Policy
Initiative, a research consor-
tium created this year by Ari-
zona State University Vice
President Eugene Garcia and
colleagues at the University
of Arizona and Northern Ari-

zona University. The three
universities contributed re-
searchers to work on the
study.
Garcia, who expects to
publish the report annually,
hopes it will push Arizona to
catch up with Texas, Califor-
nia, Florida and Indiana,
which are far ahead in setting
up technology to collect im-
portant and detailed informa-
tion on students, teachers
and financing.
Garcia said Arizona often
gets poor marks in national
studies, not because the state
isn't doing well in teacher
preparation or student learn-
ing, but because it doesn't
have any information to show
that systems are working.
"It's not that we don't have
processes," Garcia said. "It's
that we don't have data on it."

Garcia expects that will

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change now that business lead-
ers and new well-funded think
tanks, such as the Rodel Chari-
table Foundation of Arizona
and retired ASU President Lat-
tie Coor's Center for the Future

of Arizona, are getting in-
volved in K-12 education. State
movers and shakers are dis-
covering there is no informa-
tion available to answer their

vital questions.

Some conclusions

Here are some of the conclu-
sions from the "The Condition
of Pre-K-12 Education in Ari-
zona: 2004":

Teachers: To stop the exo-
dus of teachers from class-
rooms, Arizona needs to track
where they are going each
year and why. It needs to track
training programs to know
whichones are producing suc-
cessful teachers who remain in
the classroom, especially in
poor and rural schools that
need teachers, and then repro-
duce that training.

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Such a tracking system
could give the state informa-
tion to develop a program that
would return hundreds of
trained teachers to the class-
room with enticements such as
paying off college loans, re-
duced housing costs or bo-
nuses.

Students: The lack of a
statewide system that tracks
data about individual students
and their progress through
their school years leaves Ari-
zona without direction on how
to improve student learning.
For example, the state has no
way to determine whether new
learning techniques required
by Arizona's English-only law,
which bans bilingual teaching,
books and material in class-
rooms, are helping children

learn English as well as his-
tory, math or science concepts
more quickly.
The state does not have
credible data to know whether
students attending charter
schools perform better than
they would have in traditional
schools, and no data on what
happens to charter students
who need special education.
Early childhood: The
state's child care system is an
untracked mass of public and
private centers, run by for-
profit and non-profit, secular
and faith-based organizations
in storefronts and in private
homes, with funding from fed-
eral, state and city sources, do-
nations and parent tuition dol-
lars. There is no information
about which programs are do-
ing the best job preparing chil-
dren for kindergarten, how
public money is being used,
how much the staff are paid or
how much training they re-
ceive.

Testing: The state is on the
right road with developing
learning goals for each grade

and then testing those goals,
using Arizona's Instrument to
Measure Standards. But the
state data used to determine
whether children are learning
in the classroom is in disarray.
The AIMS test is changing too
often to provide reliable data
on student progress.
Other measurements, such
as graduation and dropout
rates, are self-reported, defini-
tions are unclear, and the infor-
mation is coming from schools
with students who move in and
out of districts frequently.

The next step
The Arizona Education Pol-
icy Initiative's next step is or-
ganizing a statewide summit of
educators, business leaders
and researchers to hammer

out a plan to start building and
funding a statewide informa-
tion tracking system.
The entire report is avail-
able online at www.asu.edu/
educ/epsl/index.htm.

Reach the reporter at
pat.kossan@arizonarepublic.com.