



MLDS CENTER

Maryland Longitudinal Data System

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MEMORANDUM

TO: MLDS Governing Board

FROM: Molly B. Abend, Data Management Coordinator
Ross Goldstein, Executive Director

DATE: September 9, 2024

SUBJECT: MLDS Center Suppression Policy

Purpose

The purpose of this agenda item is to provide information to the Governing Board on the MLDS Center's suppression policy.

Background

As specified in Education Article § 24-703(h), Annotated Code of Maryland, the MLDS Center may only use aggregate data in the release of data in reports and in response to data requests. The law also specifies that data that may be identifiable based on the size or uniqueness of the population under consideration may not be reported by the Center. The Center implemented that requirement by following the guidance of the National Center for Education Statistics in its technical brief entitled, *Statistical Methods for Protecting Personally Indefinable Information in Aggregate Reporting*. That guidance states that values less than 10 (whether directly disclosed or that can be derived) should be suppressed.

That bright line approach is straightforward and provides strong assurance against inadvertent disclosure of personal information. However, the approach does not allow for exceptions when disclosure risk is minimal. It also does not provide a process for a more nuanced approach that would allow the Center to weigh disclosure risk against the needs of policy makers to have comprehensive and meaningful information to guide decision making. As a result, over time the Center has established exceptions to the strict approach established in the NCES guidance document. This new policy starts with the NCES standard, documents exceptions the Center has been using, and establishes an ongoing and transparent process for addressing suppression moving forward.

Review

The proposed suppression policy was comprehensively reviewed by the Data Governance Advisory Board (Data GAB), SLDS State Support Team (SST) members, Data Integration Support Center (DISC) team from WestEd, and U.S. Department of Education's Privacy Technical Assistance Center (PTAC). Data GAB members reviewed the first iteration of the suppression policy on May 23, 2024 and we sent a revised version to the SLDS SST that same day after the Data GAB meeting. After internal revisions we met with DISC on July 10, 2024 and received feedback on what the policy statement should include and a recommendation to create a disclosure review board. DISC also provided various examples of current disclosure review boards. On July 26, 2024 the MLDS Center sent a revised draft to the SLDS SST who

reviewed and forwarded to PTAC for a review focused on federal privacy laws. Finally, Data GAB was presented with the final version on August 15, 2024.

- May 23: Data GAB
- May 23: SLDS SST
- July 10: DISC, WestED
- July 26, 2024: PTAC reviewed
- August 15: Data GAB

Policy Summary

The proposed suppression policy states that “the MLDS Center will balance the mission to provide meaningful information to Maryland stakeholders with the need to protect individuals’ privacy.” The policy document includes background information on the MLDS Center’s reporting and compliance requirements and procedures for determining if data “may be identifiable based on the size or uniqueness of the population” and therefore must be suppressed. As mentioned above, the baseline approach is to suppress any value less than 10.

Disclosure Review Advisory Board

The policy also explains that as part of the MLDS Center’s suppression procedures, a Disclosure Review Advisory Board will be implemented to help assess when to relax the baseline approach in cases where the risk of disclosure is minimal and there is a need for more complete reporting.

A timeline for implementation of the *Disclosure Review Advisory Board* is below:

Task	Deadline/Date
Create Advisory Board Implementation Plan and Draft Charter	10/11/24
Present Implementation Plan and Draft Charter to Data GAB	10/17/24
Present Implementation Plan and Draft Charter to RPB	11/7/24
Advisory Board Meeting #1	11/15/24
Present Implementation Plan and Draft Charter to Governing Board	12/13/24

Action

Approval of Suppression Policy.

Attachment

MLDS Center Suppression Policy For Disclosure Avoidance September 2024



MLDS Center Suppression Policy For Disclosure Avoidance September 2024

Policy Statement – The MLDS Center will balance the mission to provide meaningful information to Maryland stakeholders with the need to protect individuals' privacy.

The MLDS Center provides comprehensive and valuable information to MD stakeholders about student outcomes to guide policy while implementing efforts to reduce the risk of inadvertent disclosure of information about individual students and workers.

Background – According to State law (see Ed. Art. § 24-703(h), Annotated Code of Maryland) only authorized staff of the Center may access de-identified data for analyses, research, and reporting. Further, research, reports, and responses to data requests may only contain aggregate data. Finally, data that may be identifiable based on the size or uniqueness of the population under consideration may not be reported in any form by the MLDS Center.

The MLDS Center also ensures compliance with other state and federal laws governing data in the MLDS. This includes compliance with:

1. The federal Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 C.F.R Part 99)
2. The Maryland Public Information Act (Maryland Code, §4-101, et seq. of the General Provisions Article); and
3. The Federal-State Unemployment Compensation Program (20 C.F.R. Part 603).

This policy establishes procedures for determining if data “may be identifiable based on the size or uniqueness of the population” and therefore must be suppressed. All aggregated data tables must undergo a suppression review by the MLDS Center Executive Director, or the Executive Director’s designee, prior to the data tables being removed from the MLDS. For research and reporting purposes, under no circumstances are de-identified, individual-level data approved for removal from the system. This policy applies to descriptive statistics (e.g., where Ns and percentages are reported). Other statistical output (e.g., regression coefficients, *p* values) generally do not need to be suppressed.

Suppression Procedures – To ensure compliance with the requirement to suppress data that may be identifiable based on the size or uniqueness of the population under consideration and ensure that information about individual students and workers is not disclosed, the MLDS Center’s baseline approach is to suppress any value less than 10. This approach will consider both actual values and derived values and apply disclosure avoidance techniques (such as complementary suppression and perturbation) necessary to ensure identifiable information is not disclosed. The procedures also allow for a Disclosure Review Advisory Board (DRAB) to relax this standard when the risk of disclosure is minimal and there is a need for more complete reporting.