March 26, 2013

Mr. Todd Beckerink  
Board President  
Falconer Central School District  
2 East Avenue North  
Falconer, NY 14733

Report: Unique Student Identifier

Dear Mr. Beckerink:

I am writing to transmit the final results of our recently completed audit of student data for the 2011-12 school year at Falconer Central School District (District). The audit was conducted pursuant to the Commissioner of Education’s authority under Section 305 of the Education Law. Our audit objectives were to: assess the adequacy of the systems and processes to collect and report student data and verify the reliability and accuracy of the assigned unique student identifiers (ID).

To accomplish our objectives, we interviewed District officials to determine how student data is collected, maintained, and processed; reviewed policies and procedures; and tested student data resolutions. We obtained an understanding of the applicable computer systems and the processes and controls in place at the District to assess the adequacy in providing reasonable assurance that the assigned IDs in the New York State Student Identification System (NYSSIS) are reliable.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

The Student Information Repository System (SIRS) is the primary system that provides a single source of standardized individual student records for analysis at the local, regional, and State levels to track student performance and to meet State and federal reporting and accountability requirements. Local Education Agencies (LEAs) must use this system to report certain data to the State Education Department (Department). NYSSIS is a key element of SIRS that was developed by
the Department to assign a unique ID to every pre-kindergarten through grade 12 student in New York State. The IDs assigned by NYSSIS are used by LEAs to report student-level data to SIRS. Unique IDs enhance student data reporting, improve data quality, and ensure that important educational records are associated with the correct students as they transfer between LEAs. Through NYSSIS, LEAs obtain new IDs for students who do not have an existing one and retrieve IDs that have been previously assigned. Data accuracy is paramount to ensuring that LEAs do not create new records in error or match two unique student records in error.

In NYSSIS, when a student’s demographic data is entered for processing, the system checks the database to determine whether that data matches any existing records. If no match is found, a new unique ID is created. If a match is found, the existing ID is assigned to the student. A “Near Match” results if the system cannot determine if the data submitted matches an existing record. A Near Match record is made up of the newly submitted student record and one or more records that are already in the database that contain many similar data elements but not enough to determine if the records are for the same student. As such, the newly submitted record is placed in a Hold Queue with the records from the system it nearly matches. Authorized LEA personnel must then review and resolve these Near Matches by determining if the student record should be matched with an existing ID or issue a new ID.

Audit Results

Student Data Control System

Good internal control and business practice requires that formal policies and procedures are put in place for functions that occur periodically. The policies and procedures should clearly define roles and responsibilities. This helps in determining whether the process in place is sufficient to ensure accuracy of result and also allows other personnel to take over should the need arise. The District does not have a formal written procedure to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the decisions made in the NYSSIS Hold Queue. However, the District is implementing an additional level of verification for the resolution process of the NYSSIS Hold Queue as a result of the audit.

Accuracy and Reliability of IDs

Our audit looked at the 35 students in the Hold Queue. The District created a new ID for 24 students that should have been matched to an existing ID. The existing ID in NYSSIS had the same student name and date of birth and in some cases, a common guardian, place of birth, immunization date, or phone number as well. During the audit, a District official also confirmed that the records should have been matched to existing IDs. The remaining 11 students were either properly matched to existing IDs or new IDs were appropriately created.

Recommendations

1. Establish a formal procedure for resolving the NYSSIS Hold Queue.

2. Ensure that appropriate actions are taken to resolve the NYSSIS Hold Queue and that all IDs are accurately assigned to students.
3. Take the necessary steps to correct the ID assigned to the 24 students.

The District’s response is attached as Appendix A to this report.

Sincerely,

James A. Conway

March 11, 2013

NYSED
Office of Audit Services
Rm. 524EB
89 Washington Avenue
Albany, NY 12234

Attention: Ed Lenart

Dear Mr. Lenart:

We accept the recommendation of the OAS Audit and have implemented the following procedures to correct the student identification numbers previously assigned:

- Added another person to review records during the verification process.
- Downloaded the NYSSIS Users Guide and Help Desk.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
Stephen Penhollow
Superintendent

[Signature]
Lawrence Spangenburg
CIO

SP/LS/jz