

# Report Summary

Social Security Administration Office of the Inspector General

July 2010



## Objective

To assess kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (K-12) schools' collection and use of Social Security numbers (SSN) and the potential risks associated with current practices.

## Background

Millions of children enroll in K-12 schools each year. To assist in this process, K-12 schools may collect and use SSNs for various purposes. Although no single Federal law regulates overall use and disclosure of SSNs by K-12 schools, the *Privacy Act of 1974*, *Social Security Act*, and *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974*, contain provisions that govern disclosure and use of SSNs.

To view the full report, visit <http://www.ssa.gov/oig/ADO/BEPDF/A-08-10-11057.pdf>

## **Kindergarten Through 12th Grade Schools' Collection and Use of Social Security Numbers (A-08-10-11057)**

### Our Findings

Despite the increasing threat of identity theft, our review of State laws and school policies and practices disclosed that K-12 schools' collection and use of SSNs was widespread. We determined that many K-12 schools used SSNs as the primary student identifier or for other purposes, even when another identifier would have sufficed. In addition, there has been a growing trend among State Departments of Education to establish longitudinal databases, which may include SSNs, of K-12 children to track students' progress over time. While some State laws may require that K-12 schools collect SSNs in some instances, we believe some do so as a matter of convenience. However, we do not believe administrative convenience should ever be more important than safeguarding children's personal information.

### Our Recommendations

We recommend that SSA:

1. Coordinate with State Departments of Education and K-12 school systems to inform the education community about the potential risks associated with using SSNs as student identifiers or for other purposes.
2. Encourage State Departments of Education and K-12 schools to reduce unnecessary collection and use of SSNs and implement stringent safeguards to protect SSNs when collected
3. Promote the best practices of States and K-12 schools that have taken steps to limit SSN collection and use.

SSA agreed with our recommendations.