

# Electronic data transfers could slow transcript fraud

**Robert Brumfield**  
Assistant Editor

Fraud involving student transcripts is increasing dramatically, according to Roberta Ferguson, a registrar at Marshall University in West Virginia.

"I've been in this business 16 years. In the last two years, I've seen more fraudulent documents than in the 14 years before," she said. "Due to the excellent copy processes that are now available, students have been able to create diplomas as well as transcripts. We've seen some cut-and-paste documents that are pretty realistic. At

our graduate college campus, we had some transcript paper stolen. ... Any time you're dealing with paper, there are issues with security."

Traditional methods of transferring student records electronically have their shortcomings, too. Existing protocols are complicated and cumbersome, specialists say, and compatibility is a major concern among the most commonly used traditional protocols.

Now all that is about to change—or so says Glynn Ligon, president of ESP Solutions Group, an Austin, Texas-based

provider of education data systems for state education agencies.

ESP has announced the formation of a new company—the National Transcript Center (NTC)—to transfer student transcripts securely and electronically among institutions.

NTC says it will help secondary and post-secondary schools exchange sensitive student records in a more secure, more cost-effective, simpler, and more efficient environment—regardless of the data formats or security protocols any participating school employs.

According to NTC, large states such as Texas and California transfer up to a million student documents each year. NTC says its centralized server for the intrastate and interstate exchange of official student records can send information as securely as an online bank transaction.

Key to the service NTC provides is a proprietary data translation engine that expands a school's regular network of trading partners to include schools using any major data-exchange protocol. The company's solution reportedly will permit high schools and colleges to communicate securely with the NTC server using the open-standard format of choice. These include Extensible Markup Language (XML), Electronic Data Interchange (EDI), or the Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF).

NTC says it can track and verify the point-to-point exchange of student documents with a far greater degree of efficiency and security than the current hard-copy method of document transfer employed by most schools.

"The basic premise of the NTC is that we're serving like a post office," said Barbara Clements, a company representative who served on the original SPEEDE/ExPRESS committee that developed the EDI standard for education in the 1980s. "The idea is that the student transcript, when it comes to the NTC, is residing there until it goes off to where it needs to go. The only reason it's there is to translate it to a different format."

Before now, no national, easy-to-use, cross-protocol system for the secure electronic transfer of student data had existed, ESP said. Secondary and post-secondary schools can exchange transcripts via EDI, the first electronic transcript standard—but each school must be individually EDI-enabled if it wishes to use the protocol. Though EDI was designed as a protocol to translate between different electronic formats, it has not been widely adopted for a variety of reasons.

Ligon called electronic transcripts "a pretty good idea back in the '80s" when the EDI standard was first being developed. But in today's environment, he said, the protocol is deeply flawed.

"The old EDI standards were too expensive and too confusing," said Ligon. "EDI is very difficult for Fortune 500 companies to implement. You can imagine how difficult it is for schools to get started, [given] their funding and IT manpower issues."

Ligon also noted that, though it seems intuitive that the electronic exchange of transcripts would be in wide use by now, a confluence of security, cultural, and technological conditions had to be present before this happened.

Although people still worry about the transmission of sensitive student data, Ligon pointed out that "people's trust in exchanging confidential info over the web has greatly increased."

"The emergence of XML-based technologies has also helped a lot," Ligon continued. XML is a language for organizing and labeling a document that contains structured information. It makes possible the definition, transmission, validation, and interpretation of data between applications or organizations. XML is now in wide use.

With the exception of exchanges

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## eTranscripts...

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among EDI-enabled institutions, most transcripts still are sent by regular mail. The receiving institution then must re-key the student information from the hard copy, adding another layer of potential human error—or even fraud—that could lead to altered records.

“Unless the institutions are using point-to-point security, there is a security risk with many current transfer methods. With NTC, there is a much higher degree of identity protection and privacy,” said Clements.

Much as FedEx does for a package, NTC generates a unique tracking number for each document sent electronically. No transcript is saved on the company’s server; the documents are merely translated and passed on to the receiving party. Physical security at the server site also is tight, NTC said.

K-12 institutions often have problems receiving student data in a manner timely enough to allow educators to recognize the academic capabilities of students. This makes it difficult to place them in the appropriate learning areas. In many cases, especially with special-education students and those with limited English proficiency, the children must be retested to determine their capabilities.

“School districts spend untold amounts of money retesting for special education, because they don’t have this kind of student information from the other school districts,” Clements said. “It seems that schools will see the value of being able to get good, reputable information as quickly as possible.”

Educators who spoke with *eSchool News* said the solution sounds like a godsend.

“If we could electronically transmit transcripts and have [the process] be secure, it would save our guidance counselors and other members of our guidance staff time. That would be wonderful,” said Deborah Hamm, chief information officer for Richland School District Two in South Carolina. “Security has to be an issue, but if that could be licked, that would be something we would be very interested in.”

Hamm said guidance counselors typically are asked for transcripts at times when a district is either trying to graduate students or—given the early-admission policies of many colleges and universities—get them started in the school year.

“Colleges with rolling admissions may start taking applications from students really early in the school year,” Hamm said. “We start school in August, so you’re trying to be-

gin the school year, and the guidance office is working to make sure students have schedules and all the other things that need to be done, and meanwhile students are coming in saying, ‘I’m doing early admission and I need my transcript sent now.’ ... Anything that can make a big difference is great, but anything that can make even a small difference is also really important.”

Hamm said her district is able to send a type of electronic transcript through SASI, an EDI-enabled student information system made by Pearson Education Technologies, “but none of the colleges or universities we deal with will take our transcripts” that way.

NTC says its system is compliant with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), a federal law that protects the privacy of student education

records. The law applies to all schools that receive funding from the U.S. Department of Education. A spokesman for the department confirmed that NTC representatives approached the Family Policy Compliance Office to find out what’s allowed and not allowed under FERPA.

NTC plans to facilitate record exchange primarily for K-12 and post-secondary institutions. However, it also will provide services to other organizations, such as employers, scholarship organizations, and certifying bodies. The company is betting that large organizations that constantly process new employees will pay for its service, too.

“In the [paper] model, the whole burden [of sending transcripts] was on the sending institution. The receiver gets a free copy,”

said Ligon. “With businesses, we have to create a model where the receiver is joining [to subsidize] the cost to get the transcript. We’ve talked to businesses ... [and] know they’re very excited to get secure, certified electronic transcripts without opening an envelope and keying in the data.”

According to the company, NTC’s service will cost K-12 schools a one-time setup fee of \$500 per campus, plus \$2.50 for each record sent. Colleges will pay a one-time fee of \$1,000 per campus, plus \$2.50 for each transcript sent. Schools then can charge students any fee they want for a transcript, or not charge at all.

NTC says some state education agencies also are considering buying this functionality for their schools. **eSN**



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