

# Your Guide to Choosing a College and Career Readiness Platform

# Introduction

Nineteen years ago, the first college and career readiness platform hit the market. Students and counselors were now able to leverage software to replace paper and pencil planning, tracking, and exploration processes. These tools increased district efficiency and accountability.

Fast forward 19 years to 2022: web technology has become a ubiquitous part of student's daily life. Today's students are digital natives. They are comfortable using the latest technology for social interaction, academic work, shopping, entertainment— really everything.

The most ubiquitous and compelling web experiences that today's young people have embraced are not simply digital and software-based reincarnations of offline and paper-based processes; they are fundamentally new. Many of the interactive digital experiences that command the most attention from students (and educators) leverage an interactive and visual nature.

Similarly, your College and Career Readiness platform should include features and functionality that move beyond merely digitizing paper surveys and guidebooks. You need a solution that provides an experience to students, an experience that enables them to explore their future interactively and engagingly while also empowering their counselors and career directors.

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**In this guide, we'll present **six key recommendations** for choosing the best **college & career readiness** platform:**





# Coming up

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# Align District **College & Career Goals** with Platform Features

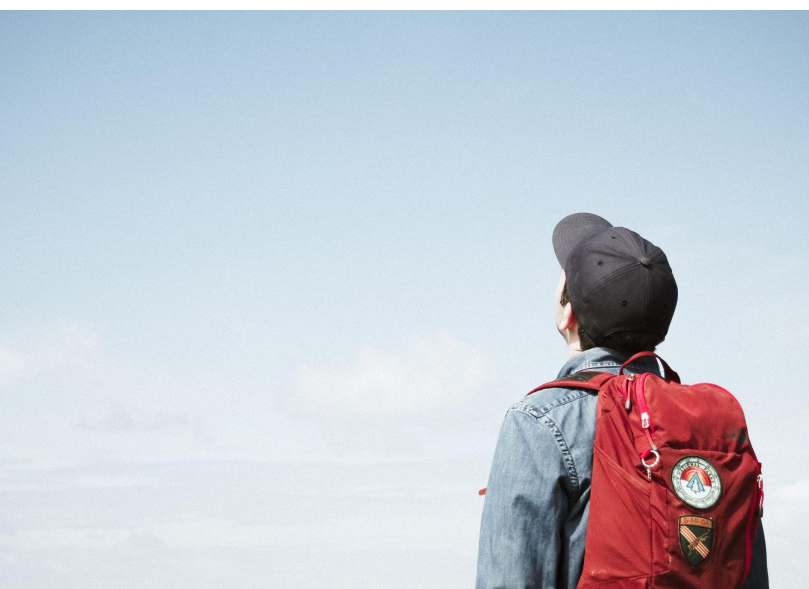
K-12 leaders who have successfully selected, implemented and supported a college and career readiness platform understand that the selection process starts with districts understanding their goals and needs. Then they can select a platform to fit their district.

Since its inception in 2015, SchoolLinks' mission has been building and leveraging the latest technology, such as virtual reality and machine learning, to develop a platform that helps students achieve success in college and career readiness.

SchoolLinks offers a comprehensive college and career readiness platform that provides students in grades K-12 with an experience that allows them to explore their future paths interactively and engagingly. The SchoolLinks platform provides a comprehensive suite of tools for the entire lifecycle of a student - exploration, learning, planning, and execution.

**Start your evaluation process by asking the following questions:**

- **Does our district strive for consistency and equity by using one CCR Platform?**
  - Is the CCR Platform we are evaluating a full K-12 platform that's equitable for all students whether they are intending to pursue a 4 year degree, 2 year/technical degree, military or joining the workforce directly?
  - Does the CCR Platform we are evaluating provide a user experience that's designed with students in mind that enables students to take agency to navigate the platform without direct guidance from the counselors?
- **What are our district-wide needs related to college and career readiness and success?**
  - Is the CCR platform we are evaluating data-rich, can generate reports and has dashboards for counselors as well as other support staff for faster intervention?
- **Does our district currently use multiple tools, platforms, resources, and manual processes that are siloed and cumbersome when it comes to college and career readiness?**
  - Does the CCR Platform we are evaluating breakdown silos between departments - such as counseling, CTE, advanced academics, SEL, and school leadership - in order to consolidate student support in one platform?
- **What district stakeholders need to be part of the evaluation process in order to connect our district's college and career readiness goals directly to your implementation?**
  - Does the CCR platform we are evaluating provide an easy setup yet configurable compliance framework that meets our state and district requirements, such as 4-year graduation requirements, college, and career readiness indicators?



## Prioritize a Robust Experience at Any Age With Technology that **Rewards Student Ownership**

When college and career readiness initiatives feel like drudgery, that is how students will treat them. Students cannot benefit from programs if they see those programs as barely tolerable, "busy work" at best, and something to be dreaded — and therefore ignored — at worst. Just because something should be taken seriously does not mean it must be colorless or tedious to navigate.

Planning for the future can be exciting, so why not get kids excited about it? An innovative platform serves up an engaging user experience that's alluring and familiar enough to make the process of choosing a path accessible and — dare we say it — fun to do.

**To fully realize the potential of a robust CCR platform, an evaluation team should ask themselves the following questions:**

- Is the CCR platform we are evaluating designed to be Student First?
- Will the CCR platform reduce friction between students and administrators?
- Is the CCR platform intuitive to use with gamified assessments and activities?
- Can students easily set-up their own to-do lists, favorite college, programs, and careers?
- Does the CCR platform user experience match the most popular apps and systems used by students and educators today?

Imagine a scenario where you aren't forced to drag students into experiences that don't resonate with them.

SchooLinks makes that scenario possible, and it's one where those same students seek out opportunities to explore even more about what interests and excites them — all on their own.



## Look for Broader Possibilities that Sees **Every Outcome as Worthwhile**

Traditionally, enrollment and graduation from a four-year college or university have been considered the gold standard in positive student outcomes. Over time, that broadened even further to accommodate the concept of "prestige" higher education institutions. Traditional and Legacy CCR platforms have come to reflect the multitude of desired outcomes.

**30 M**

Over **30 million jobs** that don't require a college education pay \$55K or more a year



Chasing (and attaining) an Ivy League education is the perfect pathway for some students. Others might require a more nuanced approach to finding a college that will fit their skills and desired outcome just right.

Then there are the groups that might benefit from an advanced Associate's degree through an early college high school program followed by professional certification.

Furthermore, what about the students who have their sights set on a military career? How about those who have the work ethic to pursue training in skilled labor fields right after graduation, bringing their much-needed expertise to companies like Tesla and industries like healthcare and construction?

Each of them deserves the same kind of attention, preparation, and guidance. District-wide access to an Innovative CCR platform like SchoolLinks means prioritizing this kind of equity.

**Your CCR platform evaluation team should ask themselves the following question:**

- Does the CCR platform we are evaluating work from the beginning to understand students as individuals, doesn't create a hierarchy of desired outcomes, destigmatize pathways that don't focus on college, and consider the entire spectrum of possible post-secondary experiences, including military enlistment?

# Turn Compliance Activities Into **Meaningful, Actionable Data**

Compliance activities are in place to keep students from falling through the cracks. Sometimes, they create a paradox instead.

Guidance counselors and educators, two of the most potent forces for better student outcomes, often have to function as data entry clerks instead of applying their expertise where needed most, and students fall through the cracks.

If both could operate in tandem instead of opposition, maybe the "cracks" we hope to keep students away from could shrink significantly.

**Your CCR Platform evaluation team should look for the following considerations**



**Adopt an modern and innovative CCR platform to:**

1. Make compliance measurement easy
2. Generate robust data in real-time as students move through activities
3. Prioritizes student outcomes over ticking a set of boxes



As students complete assessments and learning modules, counselors can track their real-time progress.



See a caseload snapshot as well as drill down by school, grade, or to the individual student level.



Early Detection and Intervention



Historical Data Tracking



Data that works for you, not the other way around



## 05

### Demand Security, Reliability, and Scalability

Technology is increasingly becoming the vehicle for district college and career readiness frameworks, including delivering and tracking student outcomes.

If you think of your CCR platform tech as a *literal* framework, imagine what would happen if you set it up and then never touched it again.

Would it be just as functional and robust in a year? Five years? A decade or more? Probably not.

As with any other solution, college and career readiness technology has to be enhanced, maintained, secured, and upgraded from time to time.

As a district, you need to have confidence that your CCR platform of choice is reliable, secure, and agile to meet the changing needs of your students and staff.

**Your CCR platform evaluation team should not settle but demand security, reliability, and scalability**

- SchoolLinks has maintained more than a **99.99% up-time** over the past three years ... and counting
- SchoolLinks has **extensive monitoring protocols** in place along with disaster recovery plans, engineers on call 24/7/365, and hourly backups of production data
- SchoolLinks is a multi-tenant system hosted on Amazon Web Services that is **designed to scale**
- SchoolLinks undergoes **third-party security audits** to ensure the security of our application and adjacent service offerings

## 06

### Choose a Partner, Not a Vendor

*"SchoolLinks is the best College and Career Readiness application for school districts. It helps counselors provide exceptional services for students. The platform is extremely friendly and their customer service is outstanding." - Monica Garcia, Director of Counseling*

Your relationship with an EdTech company should be more than just client and vendor—you need a *partner* on this journey. SchoolLinks is built and supported by educators, innovators, counselors, data scientists, interventionists, and thought leaders in EdTech.

We understand that strong, collaborative relationships are crucial to our students' long-term success and growth. That's why all SchoolLinks district partners receive a dedicated Implementation Manager, virtual training, year round live chat, online training courses & certification, access to a robust and easy to use self-serve help center, invite only communal training webinars, direct email support, as well as regular vision & goals check-ins and discussions.

Our school districts put the work in every day to advocate for student success and confront and correct inequities. We're proud to be a part of that, and as long as there's work to do, we'll never stop innovating for every student from every background.





# Evaluation Rubric

## Overall Platform

	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>User Experience</b>	A user experience that's designed with students in mind that enables students to take agency to navigate the platform without direct guidance from the counselors	User experience allows students to navigate after training and guidance from district staff	User experience is not friendly and requires a lot of training	
<b>Support for All Student Outcomes</b>	A full K-12 platform that's equitable for all students whether they are intending to pursue a 4 year degree, 2 year/technical degree, military or joining the workforce directly	Focused mostly on 4-year and 2-year degree with some career exploration	Only focused on college application management with little regard for other student outcomes	
<b>Support for students, parents/guardians, and staff</b>	Single platform for communicating student activities between all stakeholders - students, parents/guardians, and district staff	Supports communication between students and district staff with no parent logins	Does not have real-time communication between students and faculty	

## Alumni Access and Support

	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>Alumni Access and Support</b>	Platform allows districts to track alumni by letting students transition to personal email address prior to graduation and transitioning accounts to alumni access	Platform enables district to track alumni through outside registration of students after graduation	Platform does not support alumni tracking	
<b>Alumni Transcripts</b>	Alumni are able to access and request transcripts be sent directly to other institutions	Alumni are able to access transcripts created prior to their graduation but cannot make transcript requests	Platform does not allow for access to transcripts	
<b>Alumni Career and Job Exploration</b>	Alumni can explore careers and industries as well as see existing job opportunities	Alumni can explore careers but does not offer current job openings	Platform does not allow alumni to explore careers or jobs	
<b>Alumni Case Management</b>	Student case files become alumni case files allowing for the continuation of help and dialogue after graduation	Student case files are locked upon graduation allowing for access but without updates	Student case files are deleted upon graduation	

# Evaluation Rubric

## Alumni Access and Support cont'd

	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>Alumni Social Network</b>	Automatically create an alumni network by allowing 12th graders to automatically convert to free alumni accounts	Alumni must claim their accounts	Alumni accounts can only be created by district administrators	
<b>Life Time Usage</b>	Provider allows for alumni to use the platform for free forever	Platform charges the district for alumni use	Platform charges the alumni for use	

## College Planning and Management

	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>College Exploration</b>	Students can search for 4-year, 2-year degree, and non-degree programs and find a breadth of information about the programs	Students can search for 4-year and 2-year degree programs with some information available	Students can only find 4-year degree programs with information linking to external websites	
<b>College Profiles</b>	College profiles have a full breadth of information including virtual reality tours, scattergram information with the probability of getting in based on their school's historical data, student club and support, college applications, and a net price estimation calculator	College profiles offer a lot of information including college applications, student clubs and support	College profiles don't include information but link to college websites	
<b>Matching Needs with College Programs</b>	Students are matched with relevant programs based on self-assessments, estimated test scores and probabilities of admissions	Students are matched with programs based on test scores	Students are not matched with programs	
<b>College App Integration</b>	Full integration including automatically pre-filling information in Common App forms that is already in CCR platform, handling document tracking, and real-time alerts for students, counselors, and guardians of status	Limited integration allowing for pre-fill of requirements but without document tracking or real-time alerts	Does not integrate with Common App	

# Evaluation Rubric

## Social Emotional Learning (SEL) & School Sentiment

	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>Customizable Student Check-ins</b>	All students - from kindergarten through 12th grade - can do check-ins customized by the district	Student check-ins are not customizable by the district	Check-ins are not part of the college and career readiness platform	
<b>Automatically Scheduled Check-ins</b>	Check-ins frequency is created by the district based on student demographics including school, grade, and other tags	Check-ins are only scheduled based on grade	Check-ins cannot be automatically scheduled	
<b>District-wide Customizable Surveys</b>	Customizable surveys can be pushed to all major stakeholders - students, faculty, parents/guardians, and alumni	Surveys are not customizable and can only be pushed to faculty and students	Platform does not support surveys	
<b>District Alerts Based on Student Input</b>	Districts can be alerted based on keywords lists	District alerts are not customizable by faculty	Does not offer real-time alerts based on student information	
<b>Check-in and Survey Data Combined with CCR and Academic Data</b>	Centralized student data - sentiment surveys, personality assessments, career exploration activities, academics, and outcomes - in a single platform with prebuilt activities	Check-in and survey data are siloed within their own platform and only available via browser based reports and data export	Check-in and survey data is only available via browser	
<b>Lesson Library of Prebuilt Activities</b>	Platform contains CASEL aligned, grade-level appropriate activities and automatically recommends proper activities for students based on their social emotional data	Platform contains activities which must be pushed to students by teachers and faculty	Platform does not contain student activities	

## Career Discovery & Planning

	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>Self-Student Exploration</b>	Platform provides built-in engaging career interest inventory assessments to help students discover their interests and recommend careers and clusters	Platform provides career inventory assessments but in an un-engaging way for students	Platform does not provide assessments	
<b>Career Profiles</b>	Career profiles present career information and statistics in an easy to understand and visually appealing way to students and families	Career Profiles present career information in mostly text with limited engaging experiences	Career Profiles do not offer much information to students interested in those careers	

# Evaluation Rubric

## Career Discovery & Planning Cont'd

	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>Self-Student Exploration</b>	Platform provides built-in engaging career interest inventory assessments to help students discover their interests and recommend careers and clusters	Platform provides career inventory assessments but in an un-engaging way for students	Platform does not provide assessments	
<b>Career Profiles</b>	Career profiles present career information and statistics in an easy to understand and visually appealing way to students and families	Career Profiles present career information in mostly text with limited engaging experiences	Career Profiles do not offer much information to students interested in those careers	
<b>Career Mentorship and Support</b>	Platform allows students to ask their own questions and get industry mentor advice anonymously	Platform has pre-recorded information about careers to answer commonly asked questions	Platform does not allow for the in depth career information	
<b>Career Opportunities</b>	Career profiles link to relevant opportunities, such as internships, apprenticeships, part-time jobs, and volunteering opportunities. Students can search for virtual opportunities to engage with the real-world	Opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, part-time jobs, and volunteering opportunities are housed in a separate part of the platform	Opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, part-time jobs, and volunteering opportunities are not available within the platform	
<b>Digital Support for Industry Partners</b>	Industry mentors and employer representatives can sign up for visits and participate in guest speaking workshops and career fairs	Industry mentors and employer representatives can see upcoming events but must sign-up with the school directly outside the platform	Platform does not have an section for industry mentors and employer representatives	

## Students Growth Documentation & Wellness

	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>Student Goal Setting</b>	Students can set their own goals, such as future career goals and SMART goals	Students can input goals based on predefined district layout	Students cannot input their own goals	
<b>Student Tracking for Non-Core Areas</b>	Students can track experiences such as track volunteer hours, work-based learning experiences, and SEL progress	Students can track SEL progress	Does not support for student tracking outside of classwork	
<b>Career Documentation</b>	Platform automatically builds and exports resumes	Platform offers a template for students to use when manually building their own resumes	Platform does not support resume creation for students	
<b>Elementary SEL Support</b>	K5 students can check in on their socio-emotional state of the day using an elementary specific experience	K5 students can check in on the socio-emotional state of the day using the same experience as 6-12	Platform does not track daily socio-emotional state	



# Evaluation Rubric

Academic Planning				
	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>Automatic Graduation Requirement Verification</b>	Platform can easily support district and state compliance framework such as 4-year graduation requirements, college and career readiness indicators	Platform can handle district compliance but requires customization to track state requirements for graduation	Platform cannot track state requirements	
<b>Public Course Catalog</b>	A user-friendly 4-year course planner, with public facing catalog, that guides and shows students how to meet their graduation requirements	Course catalog module allows for students to view requirements but offers little interaction into planning	Course catalog is static after setup by district counselors	
<b>Automatic Student Alerts</b>	Platform flags students who do not meet graduation requirements and presents them to counselors automatically	Platform flags students but does not automatically alert counselors	Platform requires counselors to build out a report to see students who are in jeopardy	
<b>Early Warning Indicators</b>	Counselors are able to filter for students that are furthest behind and drill down in order to help them first	Counselors can filter into pre-defined reports created by district personal	Counselors must look through multiple excel sheets to determine students who are falling behind	
<b>Endorsement and Pathway Career Mapping</b>	Platform offers a structured experience for matching student interests with courses, including recommending pathways based on student assessments, activities, and interests	Platform maps courses to pathways but requires students to understand pathway options by consulting PDFs and other data sources outside the platform	Platform does not offer pathways	
Financial Literacy				
	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>FAFSA Education for Students and Parents/Guardians</b>	Platform includes videos and resources that educate students and families about FAFSA and FAFSA applications	Platform supports 3rd party videos about FAFSA support and applications	Platform does not support FAFSA education and literacy	
<b>FAFSA Tracking</b>	Platform allows for digital tracking of FAFSA application and verification process of non-completers	Platform allows for manual tracking of FAFSA completion by counselors	Platform does not track FAFSA completion	
<b>Automatic Scholarship Identification</b>	Platform automatically identifies national scholarships that the student might qualify for based on academic and/or demographic criteria, and suggest to students	Platform allows for counselors to identify scholarship opportunities via reports of student activities	Platform does not enable scholarship tracking	

# Evaluation Rubric

## Financial Literacy Cont'd

	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>Scholarship Database</b>	Platform comes pre-loaded with scholarship information while also allowing counselors to upload and manage a list of scholarships themselves	Platform does not come pre-loaded with scholarship information but does allow counselors to upload it themselves	Platform does not allow for the tracking of scholarships	
<b>Financial literacy support</b>	Platform comes pre-loaded with interactive modules to help students and families make sense of potential debt and financial outcomes based on career and education goals	Platform does not come preloaded with financial literacy support but supports 3rd party financial literacy content	Platform does not support financial literacy content	

## Counselor Productivity Tools

	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>Caseload Management</b>	Counselors can view their entire caseload in aggregate as well as easily drill in to an individual student's caseload	Counselors can view their entire caseload in aggregate as well as individual student case files but it is difficult to move between them	Counselors cannot view their entire caseload	
<b>Support for Virtual and In-Person Meetings</b>	Counselors can set up calendar availability and have students book meetings through the platform	Counselors can send out calendar invites but the management is done via a 3rd party	Counselors cannot setup virtual and/or in-person meetings via the platform	
<b>Single Place for Tracking Interactions</b>	Counselors can easily log interactions with students including meetings notes and activities to keep track of student progression	Counselors can track student interactions via activity progress but cannot enter one-off notes	Counselors track student interactions in a 3rd party system	
<b>Customized Surveys for Student Tracking</b>	Counselors can build customized surveys, including but not limited to Senior Exit Surveys	Only District Administrators can custom surveys for counselors to use	Platform does not support custom surveys	
<b>Document Tracking</b>	Students can upload award letters for counselors to verify college acceptance	Student award letters must be manually given to counselors for tracking and verification	College acceptance is not tracked	
<b>Full Circle Communication - student, teacher, staff, and parent/guardian</b>	Counselors can message students and families via email and SMS (text message) notifications	Counselors can message students and families via email	Counselors cannot message parents/guardians	

# Evaluation Rubric

CTE/Work-Based Learning Productivity Tools				
	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>Single Platform for Career and College</b>	Platform offers the same experience and investment for college management and career exploration	Platforms is more weighted towards either college management or career exploration	Requires 2 separate experiences for college management and career exploration	
<b>Industry Partner Management</b>	Platform offers industry partner management including a comprehensive dashboard to track all industry partner information and customizable feeds, and allow internal staff to leave comments and collaborate	Platform allows for some industry partner management similar to a spreadsheet	Platform does not support industry partner management	
<b>Industry Certification Tracking</b>	Students can add certifications with verification from counselor or career advisor	Career Advisors can manually add certifications to a students profile	Platform does not allow for the tracking of industry certifications	
<b>Industry Internships and Opportunities</b>	Industry Partners can upload opportunities including internships, apprenticeships, part-time jobs, and volunteering opportunities	Industry Partners can alert Career Advisors of opportunities which the district can upload into the platform	Districts cannot promote industry internships and opportunities via the platform	
<b>District Run Internship Placement</b>	District's can create programs to match company requirements with student interests and place students in the opportunities that are right for them	District's can message companies about internship requirements but platform does not offer workflow tools to manage the internship placement process	District's can capture student interests and send communications to companies outside of the platform	
<b>Internship/WBL Experience Document Management</b>	All documentation and reporting - company requirements, student applications, parent/guardian permission, etc. - are captured in a customizable, digital workflow without requiring paper and pencil	Documentation must be captured on paper-and-pencil and then scanned in to the platform	Documentation is not managed within the platform	

# Evaluation Rubric

Data Reporting and Compliance				
	8 points - Advanced	3 points - Average	1 point - Fair	Points
<b>Student Adoption and Usage</b>	Platform offers a real-time view of student usage rate and activity completion	Platform offers scheduled reports of student usage rate and activity completion	Platform cannot offer visibility into both student usage rate and activity completion	
<b>Reporting College &amp; Career Readiness Indicators</b>	Platform offers real-time dashboard view of College & Career Readiness Indicators at aggregate with drill down to individual student for intervention	Platform offers reports to be downloaded	Platform offers some reports	
<b>Personalized Graduation Plan Tracking</b>	Ability to pre-populate Personalized Plan for students based on the activities they've already completed in the platform including ability for parents to provide electronic signatures to acknowledge students' Personalized Plan	Platform has a document manager to host the uploads of plans or a manual digital form for students and/or counselors to fill out	Platform does not track students' Personalized Plan	
<b>Reports Management</b>	Staff can customize reports, favorite reports and schedule reports to be delivered	Staff can customize some elements of the reports to be downloaded or scheduled	A set of reports can be downloaded	
<b>Teacher Demand</b>	Ability to produce reports that help the district and school forecast teacher demand based on course requests	Multiple reports can be combined to help forecast teacher demand based on course request	Teacher demand for individual courses cannot be forecast	
<b>Data to Understand Post-Secondary Results</b>	Platform pulls in data from National Student Clearinghouse Data to understand where students are	Platform allows for single-click integration with National Student Clearinghouse Data to understand where students are	Platform does not integrate with National Student Clearinghouse Data	