



Director: Deanne Unruh • 541-346-1424 • dkunruh@uoregon.edu

Coordinator: Jane Falls • 541-346-0354 • jafalls@uoregon.edu

OSEP Project Officer: Selete Avoke • 202-245-7260
selete.avoke@ed.gov

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NASDSE Roundtable Discussion: Collecting and Using Post-School Outcome Data on Dropouts and Other Hard-to-Locate Former Students

Nancy Reder, Esq.
Deputy Executive Director
National Association of State Directors
Of Special Education (NASDSE)

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Disclaimer

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BACKGROUND

This roundtable discussion was led by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) as part of our subcontract with the National Post School Outcomes Center (NPSO). The purpose of the discussion was to support to state directors by facilitating collegial sharing of information about post-school outcomes. NPSO provides technical assistance and support to state education agencies (SEAs) targeted to Indicator 14 of the Part B State Performance Plan (SPP) and Annual Performance Report (APR). This indicator states:

Percent of youth who had IEPs, are no longer in secondary school and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in some type of postsecondary school, or both, within one year of leaving high school. (20 U.S.C. 1416(a) (3) (B)).

Since its inception, NPSO has worked with NASDSE to outreach to the state special education directors and provide opportunities to discuss the challenging issues related collecting and using Indicator 14 data.

METHODOLOGY

NASDSE organized and led a roundtable discussion of state special education directors (and, in a few cases, their staff members) on May 15, 2008. The subject was specifically selected because it had come to NASDSE's attention that many states were struggling with collecting data about students who, collectively, fall into the category of 'dropouts.' This group includes: students who have been or are incarcerated, those who have moved away without leaving forwarding permanent addresses, or do not have telephones or email addresses. The structure of the roundtable discussion gave state directors an opportunity to share ideas among themselves regarding challenges to reaching these students and strategies that appear to be working to reach this group of former students. NASDSE and NPSO jointly developed the discussion questions.¹

A total of 25 states participated in the roundtable discussion.² Unfortunately, several states were unable to join the teleconference because NASDSE ran out of telephone lines to accommodate all those who wished to participate. Directors were given an opportunity to offer comments to the discussion via email. This document provides a summary of the discussion.

¹ For a list of discussion questions, see Appendix A.

² For a list of participating states, see Appendix B.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Who works on Indicator 14 for your state and is that approach working well for you?

States use a variety of approaches including the following:

- Personnel from three entities within the SEA collaborate on Indicator 14; this cross-section approach is working well.
- Team working on related indicators – 1, 2, 13 and 14 (an approach that NPSO has encouraged); this worked well.
- Contractor makes multiple attempts to contact youth, returns a list of youth who have not been located to the local education agencies (LEAs) to either follow up or provide updated contact information.
- State agency links state and federal databases to obtain information about former students' including: enrollment in postsecondary school, education or training; engagement in the military; employment status and salary (based on tax records); receipt of public assistance; involvement in correctional system. Confidentiality agreements are in place to allow appropriate cross agency exchanges. This is the only state that has this extensive tracking capacity. Another SEA indicated it has tried a similar approach but ran into confidentiality barriers.
- Use of a web-based system to conduct a census survey which includes an exit survey and repeated surveys at one, three and five years after youth leave school. Exit data is collected via telephone/ cell phone and/or email. Individual schools conduct the exit and one year surveys; the three and five year surveys are contracted to a university. Response rates appear better when teachers contact former students. Caller ID may be a hindrance to reaching people.
- One state mentioned use of "Face Book" as a means of locating former students.

What were the major problems that you encountered in trying to reach school dropouts?

States mentioned the following problems:

- Phone lines being disconnected;
- Caller ID blocking calls;
- Moving without leaving a forwarding address;
- Dropouts do not go through a formal process when leaving; and
- Dropouts may not want the school to find them.

What tools did you find particularly helpful? What would you suggest to your colleagues?

States provided a variety of helpful suggestions:

- Conduct interviews at various times to increase possibilities of reaching former students (e.g., in the early evening or on weekends). A challenge with this approach, however, is that school personnel don't get paid to do this work at those times. University or call centers do not have this issue.

- For an online survey, include questions beyond the three required questions; use the information for program improvement when conducting training for LEAs.
- Use web-assisted telephone interviews or provide students access to a web link to complete surveys; provide incentives to students.
- Provide incentives to the LEAs for completed surveys (e.g., \$15 per completed survey). Several states said that they used Part B discretionary funds. Compensation could be based on receipt of timely and complete surveys.
- Have district transition teachers gather post-school information and provide the data to SEAs.
- Conduct a census for small LEAs and sampling for larger LEAs.
- Train those who collect the data.
- Participants also discussed whether someone other than the student (e.g., a parent) could respond. Six states participating in the roundtable require the student to respond, but the student can request assistance from a parent. One state allows family members to respond, but asks specifically who is responding.

How can you lower the cost of surveying this target group?

States offered a variety of cost reducing strategies:

- Use State Personnel Development Grant funds. Two approaches were: 1) contract with a university to collect and analyze post-school data, and 2) bring high school teachers together to pool their data and discuss successful collection strategies and results. Teachers explore post-school outcome successes and how students were helped to reach their goals while still in high school.
- Use teachers without additional compensation for doing this work. States vary regarding union concerns.
- Send the survey questionnaire to the schools and not directly to students' homes, thus reducing the cost to the state (but not necessarily to the LEA).
- Consider whether collecting data through a web-based program is more efficient than using a paper-based survey. The participants generally seemed to feel that paper-based surveys create more work, but there was no consensus expressed as to which type of survey resulted in better response rates.
- To address concerns regarding who actually responds when conducting web-based surveys: take it on good faith that the person responding is the individual the SEA or LEA is trying to reach. This is true whether it is a telephone, mail-in or web-based survey. One way to address this concern may be to mail a survey to the former students, but tell them they can respond either by mailing in the survey or completing the survey on Survey Monkey (online).

What is your state doing with the data once collected?

States are working with their data in a number of ways:

- Teachers may hear from their own students so there is direct feedback.
- Contracted university compiles the state and district reports.
- States communicate results to each LEA using a secured online website.
- SEA report back to all LEAs using charts and graphs. One state sets up discussion meetings with each LEA and together decides what the LEAs will further explore. Another state provides summary data to LEAs who must include the data in their LEA Part B fund application.
- A state may keep the data in the LEAs' profile for up to three years and link its post-school outcomes to other indicators (e.g., graduation).
- One state is exploring how to use post-school outcome data in the context of self-determination issues to see whether there is any impact.
- Look at LEAs that are having difficulty with transition planning in conjunction with their post-school outcomes data.
- Data are provided to the regional transitional specialists who use this as one data point for the state's interagency transition planning group to be used to help students stay in school.

What are your top tips for surveying 'hard-to-reach' former students?

Many states seemed to rely on similar strategies, including the following:

- Using a variety of approaches, including telephone and online surveys.
- Having teachers reach out to their former students.
- Ensuring that contact information is always up-to-date *before* a student leaves school.
- Involving a mix of LEAs/SEAs and consultants helps to implement a variety of approaches.
- Compensating those who gather the data based on the number of completed surveys they are able to gather.

Other concerns

States expressed concerns and issues specifically related to dropouts:

- Several states have noticed an increase in dropouts and are concerned that this may be related to No Child Left Behind because of the focus on academics and lack of alternatives.
- The increase in dropouts might be due to the state's more stringent requirements.
- Some concern was expressed by participants that some special education students are being pushed out.
- Losing alternate courses that might help some of these students because of the focus on academics and not being proficient.
- With a change in the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18 the expectation is that dropout rates will decrease.
- High school redesign initiatives are starting with the hope of seeing some changes in its high school population as a result.

- A number of states are tying the data back to their school improvement activities.
- Most participants said that they are not doing comparison studies with general education because there is no mandate to collect the data for general education students. Participants generally agreed that there is no way of knowing if the same issues cause both general and special education students to drop out of school.

Concluding Discussion

Suggestions were not made for future roundtable discussions but the broad participation suggests that this format lends itself well for state sharing.

Summary and Conclusions

States are working hard and using a variety of techniques to gather and analyze post-school outcome data for students with disabilities. There is no 'magic bullet' for locating some former students, including dropouts, those who move frequently or have not left any forwarding contact information.

The overwhelming response to participating in this roundtable discussion demonstrated that states are eager to learn from one another and they are willing to share their strategies with their state colleagues. States are not as far along with planning how to use the data at the state level, although most states are providing data summaries to LEAs and encouraging them to use the data to increase their transition activities and to inform their school improvement initiatives.

APPENDIX A — PROPOSED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who did you assign to work on Indicator 14? Did that work out well for you?
2. What were the major problems that you encountered in trying to reach school dropouts?
3. What were the strategies that you used? Were they successful? Why did you pick that particular strategy (ies)?
4. How can you lower the cost of surveying this target group?
5. How can you increase the response rate?
6. What are your top 10 tips?

APPENDIX B — PARTICIPATING STATES

Arizona
Arkansas
Bureau of Indian Education
CNMI
Connecticut
Florida
Hawaii
Indiana
Iowa
Kansas
Kentucky
Louisiana
Michigan
Missouri
Montana
Nebraska
New Hampshire
New Jersey
Oklahoma
Oregon
Pennsylvania
South Carolina
South Dakota
Texas
Wisconsin