An Analysis of States' FFY 2009 Annual Performance Report Data for Indicator 2 (Dropout)

A Report Prepared for the

U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs

by the

National Dropout Prevention Center

for Students with Disabilities

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IDEAs that Work
U.S. Office of Special Education Programs

NDPC-SD

Indicator 2: Dropout Rate

INTRODUCTION

The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) was assigned the task of compiling, analyzing, and summarizing the data for Indicator 2—Dropout—from the FFY 2009 Annual Performance Reports (APRs) and the revised State Performance Plans (SPPs), which were submitted to OSEP in February of 2011. The text of the indicator is as follows:

> Percent of youth with IEPs dropping out of high school.

This report summarizes the NDPC-SD's findings for Indicator 2 across the 50 states, commonwealths and territories, and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), for a total of 60 agencies. For the sake of convenience, in this report the term "states" is inclusive of the 50 states, the commonwealths and territories, as well as the BIE.

CHANGES IN THE INDICATOR

There were changes to the indicator for this submission of the APR, specifically in the source of the dropout data. The OSEP Part B Measurement Table for this submission indicates that, "Sampling is not allowed." Additionally, it advises that states should provide state-level dropout data and that they should, "Describe the results of the State's examination of the data for the year before the reporting year (e.g., for the FFY 2009 APR, use data from 2008-2009), and compare the results to the target. Provide the actual numbers used in the calculation." States were also instructed to, "Provide a narrative that describes what counts as dropping out for all youth and, if different, what counts as dropping out for youth with IEPs. If there is a difference, explain why."

Additionally, the Measurement Table indicates that states must, "Report using the dropout data used in the ESEA graduation rate calculation and follow the timeline established by the Department under the ESEA." The instructions for completing the Consolidated State Performance Report (for ESEA reporting) instruct states to provide the dropout rates calculated using the annual event school dropout rate for students leaving school in a single year determined in accordance with the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) for the previous school year.

THE DEFINITION OF DROPOUT

Because there is not a specified definition for dropout in the context of students with disabilities, states have adopted their own definitions. While many states employ the definition and calculation set forth by the National Center for Educational Statistics, not all states do so.

Some of the past difficulties associated with quantifying dropouts and comparing dropout rates across states were attributable to this lack of a standard definition of what constitutes a dropout. Several factors confounded the arrival at a clear definition. Among these were the variability in the age group or grade level of students included in dropout calculations and the inclusion or exclusion of particular groups or classes of students from consideration in the calculation. For example, some states included students in grades 9-12, others reported on students from ages 14-21 in the calculation, whereas other states included students of ages 17-21. These data should come from states' Consolidated State Performance Report, but several states continued to report Section 618 exiting data because they are not required to report data for ESEA or because their current data systems were unable to disaggregate special education students from the general exiting data.

An additional confounding factor is students' enrollment in a GED program. Most states consider these youth to be dropouts. In other states, however, youth who transfer directly from high school into a GED program are not considered dropouts, but rather transfers to other another setting. In neither of these cases would these youth be considered "graduates." Nonetheless, they are treated differently in the states' dropout equations.

CALCULATION METHODS

Comparison of dropout rates among states is still confounded by the existence of multiple methods for calculating dropout rates and the fact that different states employ different calculations to fit their circumstances. The dropout rates reported in the FFY 2009 APRs were generally calculated using one of three methods: an event rate calculation, a leaver rate calculation, or a cohort rate calculation.

The NCES event rate, reported by the vast majority of states (49 states, or 82%), yields a very basic snapshot of a single year's group of dropouts. While the cohort method generally yields a higher dropout rate than the event calculation, it provides a more accurate picture of the attrition from school over the course of four years than do the other methods. As the name suggests, the cohort method follows a group or cohort of individual students from 9th through 12th grades. Eight states (13%) reported a cohort-based dropout rate. Leaver rates are generally higher than those calculated using the event method. This is attributable to circumstances specific to the states using this calculation as well as to the broadly inclusive nature of the calculation. This year, three

states (5%) reported using a leaver rate and one state was unable to report a dropout rate.

Figures 1 – 3 show states' dropout rates, based on the method employed in calculating their dropout rate for the FFY 2009 APR (using 2008-09 data).

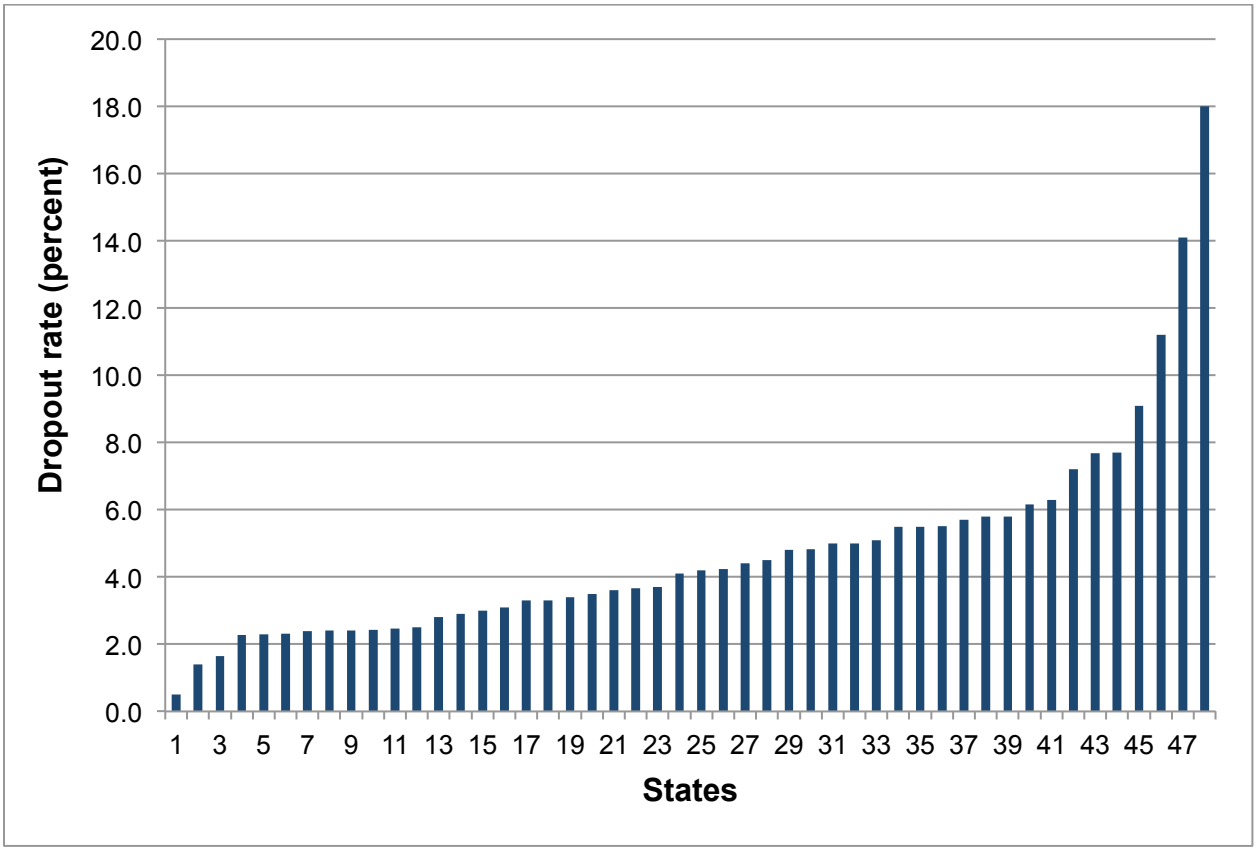

Figure 1
Dropout rates for states calculating an event rate

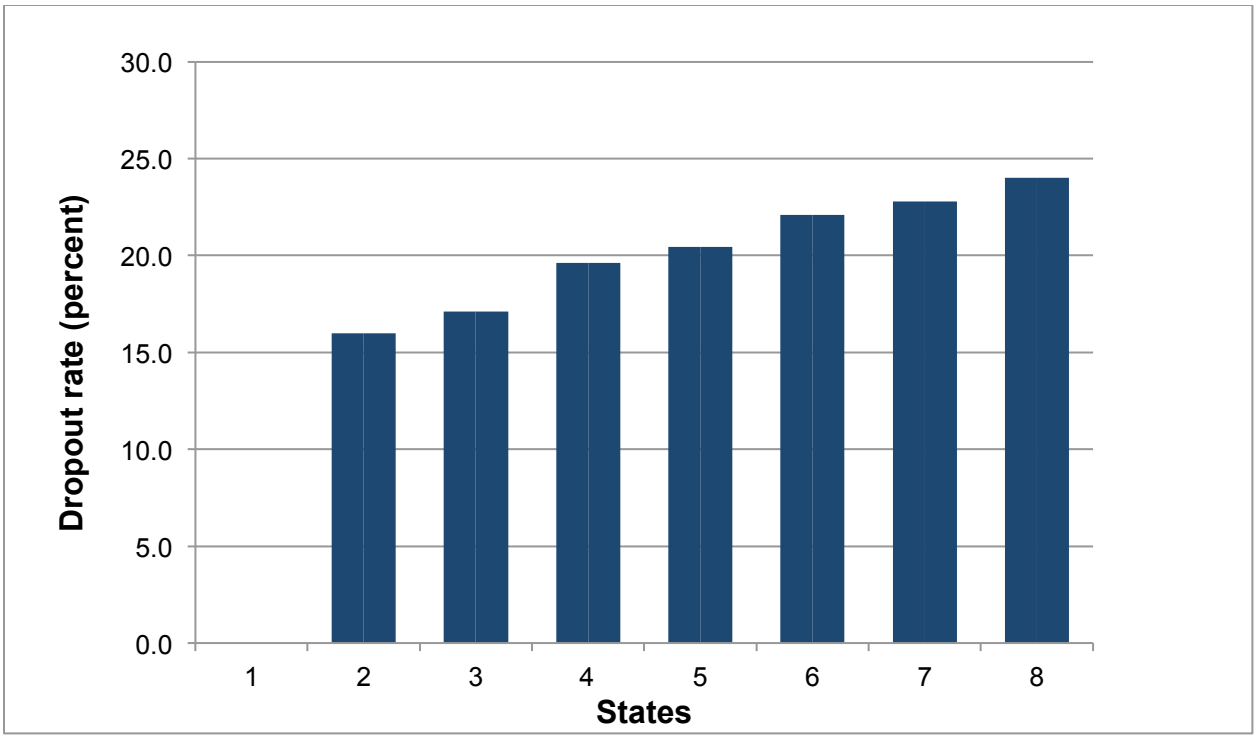

Figure 2
Dropout rates for states calculating a cohort rate

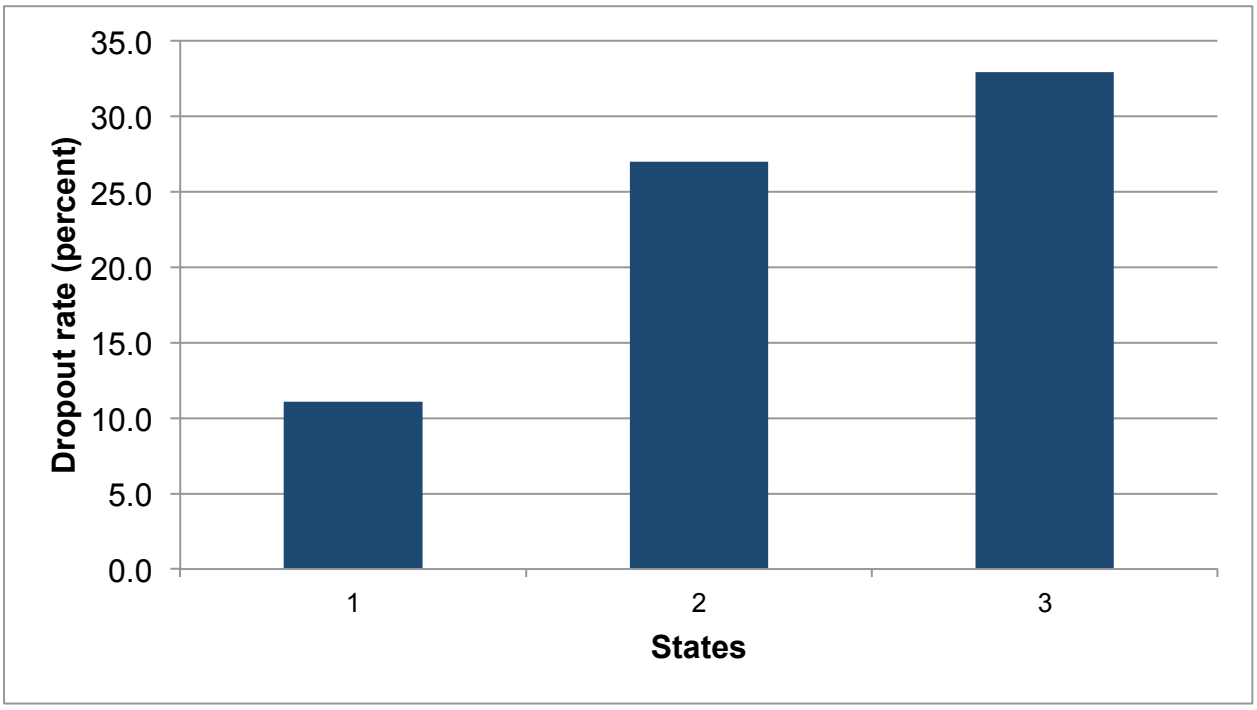

Figure 3
Dropout rates for states calculating a leaver rate

STATES' PERFORMANCE ON THE INDICATOR

As in the case of the Graduation rate indicator, many states compared their 2008-09 data—lagged by a year, per ESEA requirements—with their performance targets for 2009-10, rather than with the targets for 2008-09. When OSEP compared states' actual performance with their targets to determine whether targets were met and to assess progress or slippage, this was corrected. The comparisons shown in this summary report were made using dropout targets and data from the 2008-09 school year.

Most states lack an ESEA target for their dropout rate and continue using their SPP targets. In the FFY 2009 SPPs, which were extended to include targets through FFY 2012, 18 states (30%) set their dropout rate targets for students with disabilities at a constant level (flat). Interestingly, not all the states that did so were among those states that had set constant targets for the Graduation rate indicator. Thirty-nine states (65%) set extended targets that would continue lowering their dropout rates. The remaining three states (5%) reported that they were in the process of developing new targets for the out years of the SPP.

In FFY 2009, 35 states (58%) met their performance target for Indicator 2 and 25 states (42%) missed their target. Overall, 17 states (28%) made progress, lowering their dropout rate, whereas the rate increased in 39 states (65%). The rate in four states (7%) remained unchanged from the previous year.

Figure 4 compares each state's dropout rate with its performance target. In general, states' performance was close to the targets they had set, regardless of whether they had shown improvement or slippage. All but 11 states were within 4 percentage points above or below their target.

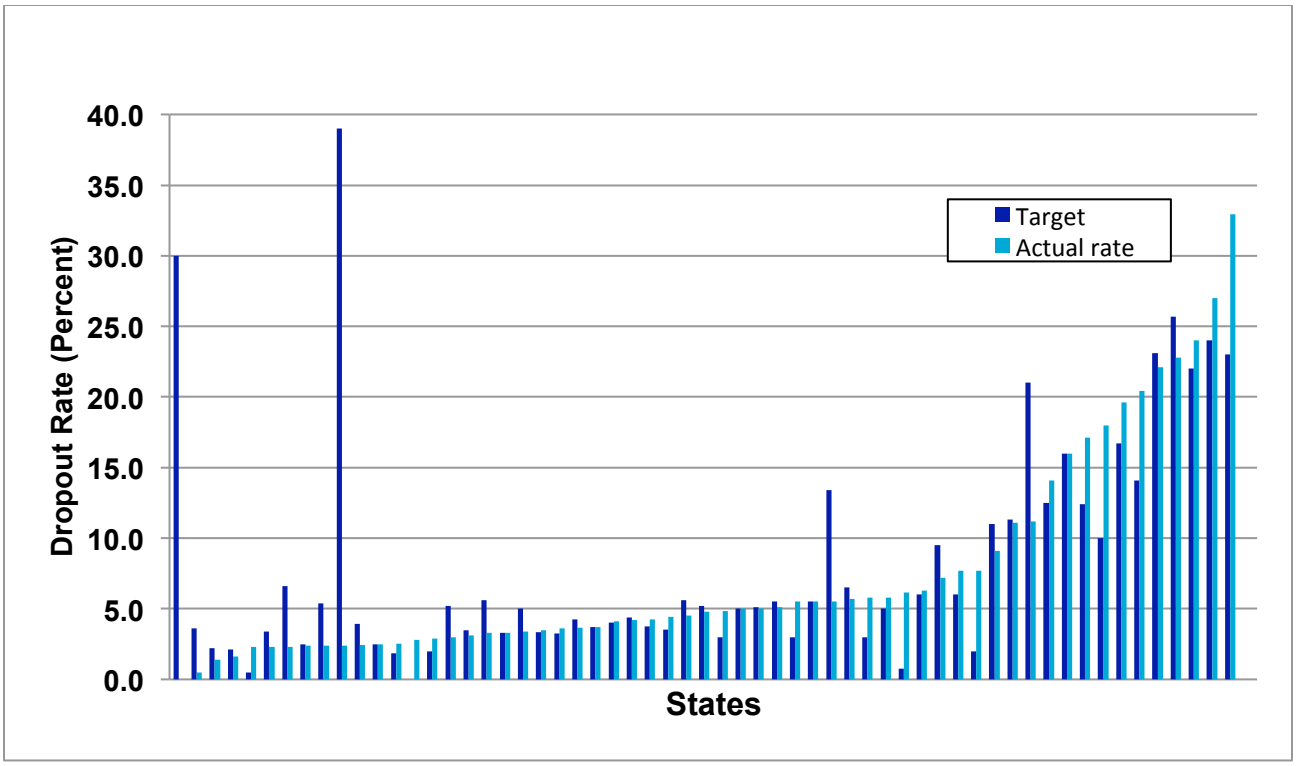

Figure 4
States performance targets compared with their actual dropout rates

Of the states that missed their target, 13 made progress, 10 slipped (the dropout rate increased), and two remained at the previous year's rate. One state was unable to report on progress or slippage. Of the states that met their performance target, the dropout rate decreased in five, increased in 27, and remained unchanged in two. Figure 5 shows states sorted by the amount of progress or slippage they made on Indicator 2.

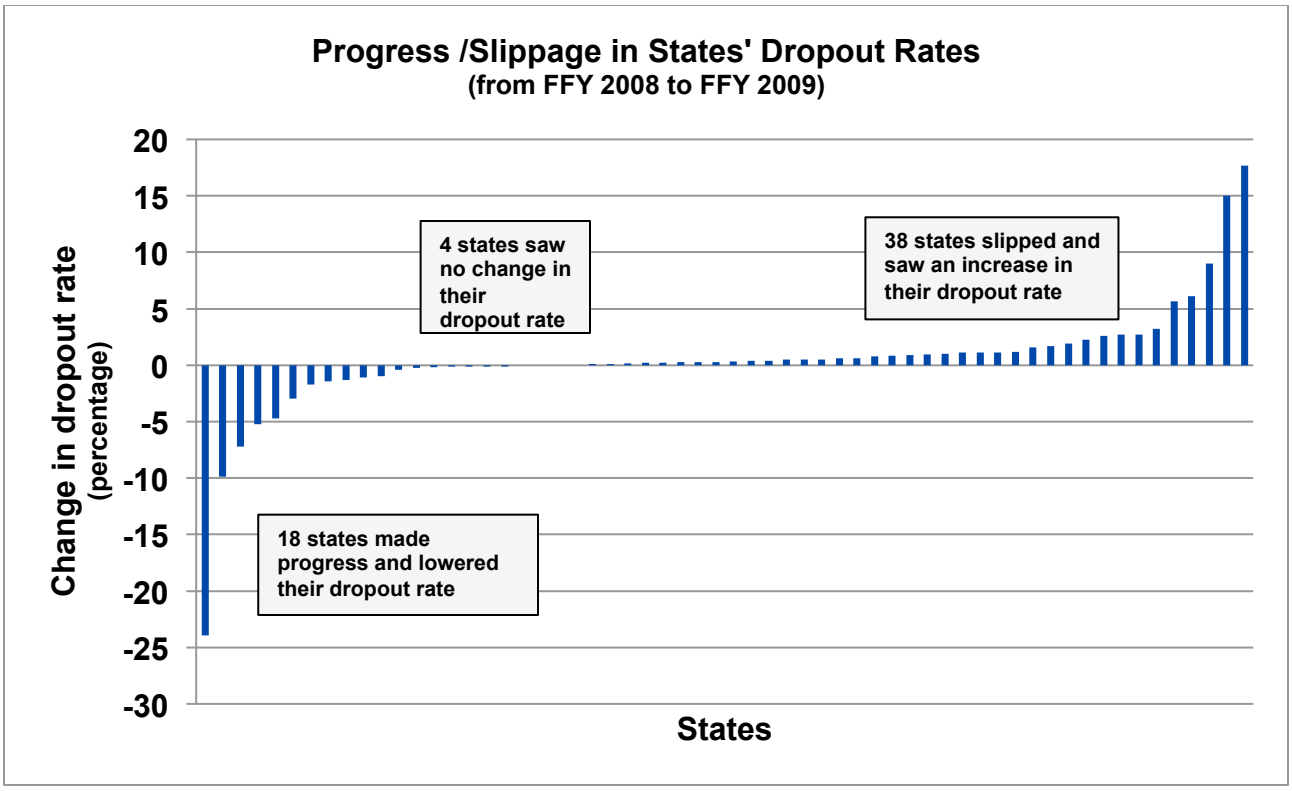

Figure 5
Changes in states' dropout rates from the FFY 2008 APR

IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

Fifty-two states (87%) acknowledged the connections between their activities for at least Indicators 1 and 2. Forty-one states (68%) reported the same set of activities for both indicators. Many states clustered at least some, if not all, of their activities for Indicators 1, 2, 4, 13, and 14: indicators intimately tied to secondary transition. In these states, there was a concerted focus to promote successful secondary transition practices as a means to keep youth engaged in and participating in school-related activities. Many states also reported activities aimed to engage parents and families in becoming partners in educating their children.

The utilization of evidence-based strategies and interventions as well as "promising practices" around school completion continued among states. There are a number of evidence-based school-completion programs that have demonstrated efficacy for students with disabilities. The *IES Practice Guide on Dropout Prevention* (Dynarski, et al., 2008) describes several of these approaches to keeping youth in school and discusses the degrees of evidence supporting each. For example, it recommends the diagnostic use of data systems to support a realistic estimate of the number of students who drop out and to help identify individual students at high risk of dropping out. It also recommends assigning adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out as well as

providing academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance. Additional research is under way to evaluate the efficacy of many of the other promising practices in this area, so additional evidence-based practices are on the horizon.

SELECTED EXAMPLES OF STATES' IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITIES

Data-based decision making

Data-based decision making was a widespread activity, reported by 40 states (67%) in this APR. Several states are using or developing early warning systems using their longitudinal data to identify youth who are at risk of dropping out of school. Among the data being employed are information about students' attendance, behavior, grade retention, and academic achievement. Of the states using early warning systems, 22 met their performance target for Indicator 2.

In general, states that reviewed their data about students' academic performance, attendance, behavior, and other related areas have experienced success in using this information to inform their statewide program development and implementation as well their directed technical assistance efforts. Examples of states that engaged in this type of activity include Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

While data-based decision making has a low level of supporting evidence in the educational literature, as discussed in the 2008 IES Practice Guide on Dropout Prevention, the practice is logical and essential for diagnosing the extent to which schools will need to implement strategies to address dropping out. In addition, the implementation of any improvement strategy must involve continually returning to the individual student data to monitor the success of the strategy and to adjust approaches as needed. It should be noted that the dearth of supporting evidence is more a result of the lack of studies that directly evaluate the effect this practice has on keeping youth in school than to its lack of validity.

Kansas, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, Wisconsin, and several other states examined the programs being implemented in their districts that had graduation rates above the state average. They have shared these promising practices among the other districts in the state through various means, including websites, communities of practice, newsletters, and conference presentations.

For example, Kansas conducted a crosswalk of Cluster 1 Indicators (i.e., 1, 2, 4, 13, and 14) data during FFY 2009. The results of the crosswalk data were used to identify those districts that did not meet their targets on three or more of the five indicators within the cluster, and those districts that did not meet targets on two to three indicators within the cluster. Additionally, data were analyzed to determine which districts

consistently did not meet targets for specific indicators over a three-year period. Districts that did not meet three or more of the five indicators within the cluster were identified to receive targeted technical assistance. Districts that did not meet two to three indicators within the cluster were identified to receive technical assistance. Data analysis demonstrated that district level interventions positively influenced the number of students who graduated with high school diploma.

Middle school to high school transition

Several states described local initiatives designed to ease the transition from middle school to high school. This transition is a critical time for students—particularly youth with disabilities—so having supports in place to help students adjust to ninth grade can help keep these youth in school and put them on a path to a successful graduation. Freshman orientations/ "boot camps" provide incoming students (and parents, in some cases) with information about the school in general as well as about academic expectations, available activities, as well as academic, behavioral, and social supports/services available to the students.

Freshman academies keep the incoming ninth grade students together and provide a sheltered transitional environment to bridge them between middle school and high school life. These academies are designed to provide additional structure and supports to help students manage their workload, succeed academically and get to know and bond with the other youth in their class.

In one example, the Arkansas Department of Career Education and their Post-school Outcomes Intervention for Special Education staff collaborated to implement ninth grade redesign statewide. A joint training to support Ninth Grade Academies for drop-out prevention was established with funds being provided by Career education for schools that volunteer to complete the training requirements. Many other such programs exist, though primarily at the LEA level.

Secondary transition activities

Activities focused on supporting secondary transition have positive effects on school completion. Among the 52 states that reported transition-related activities were Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania (the "Tri-State Consortium"), which are working to support youth with disabilities through a joint project.

Delaware continues to focus on interagency collaboration, family involvement, and youth leadership through a federal technical assistance grant. The final product (a Transition Slide Guide) from a Tri-State Grant was disseminated throughout the state in spring 2010. The Transition Slide Guide will assist students, parents, schools, and agency personnel through the transition process. Delaware also continues to receive assistance from the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities

(NDPC-SD) and the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center in its work to improve school completion outcomes.

Additionally, Arkansas, Colorado, and New Mexico have active statewide transition cadres that meet regularly to share knowledge and address issues around transition, school completion, and post-school outcomes. Washington and Wisconsin have developed Web-based systems to collect and share transition-related data with their districts.

Arizona's transition specialists provided various trainings and technical assistance to schools and adult service agencies. The state has also established community interagency transition teams, held an annual statewide transition conference, and developed and disseminated materials on transition. In the Indicator 1 and/or 2 sections of their APRs, numerous states reported having held statewide transition conferences to further the use of quality transition planning, standards-based IEPs, transition assessments, and other sound transition practices, which support school-completion efforts. Twenty states reported having supported parents through parent conferences, trainings, academies, and the development and dissemination of parent-support and transition-related materials.

Reentry programs

Six states described reentry/recovery programs in their APRs. While there are many such programs around the country, the majority of them operate on a local level, rather than statewide. These programs generally involve a school system and a combination of one or more community agencies, businesses or business organizations, colleges or community colleges, or faith-based organizations. The focus of these programs varies, depending on their genesis and the population they serve. One commonality is that reentry programs frequently offer options for credit-recovery—a necessity if the goal is to obtain a high school diploma, as the majority of returning students are credit deficient. Another common characteristic of these programs is their flexibility. The needs of the populations they serve are often quite diverse, so flexibility in scheduling, venue for instruction, mode of instructional delivery, and entry/exit from the program are beneficial elements that help them serve their audiences adequately.

Statewide initiatives

Broad, concerted, statewide initiatives designed to increase school completion were again uncommon in the current APR submissions. This year, nine states reported that they had made school completion a priority, though only a handful had begun a statewide initiative. One such effort though is that of the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE). Georgia's course of action is reflected in its "Innovative High School Opportunities": (a) The High School Redesign Advisory Panel, (b) Innovative High School Programs, (c) Georgia Virtual High School, (d) Performance Learning

Centers, and (e) Alternative High School Programs. These programs are designed to operate in concert to increase the state's graduation rate and decrease its dropout rate.

In addition, through a SPDG grant, Georgia and NDPC-SD have trained a network of collaboration coaches, each of whom is assigned several schools in which to develop local school completion initiatives for students with disabilities. These coaches provide ongoing training and support for the members of local school teams.

Another example of a large-scale initiative may be found in Illinois. Since 2008, Illinois has worked with the national SISEP center on the implementation and scaling-up of evidence-based practices. This process has built upon the infrastructure of the state's technical assistance center to ensure implementation with fidelity in all of Illinois' schools. The purpose of the SISEP is to promote students' academic achievement and behavioral health by supporting implementation and scaling-up of evidence-based practices in education settings. SISEP will provide the critical content and foundation for establishing a technology of large-scale, sustainable, high-fidelity implementation of effective educational practices. It also will improve ISBE's capacity to carry out implementation, organizational change, and systems transformation strategies to maximize achievement outcomes of all students.

The project in Illinois is being built on the infrastructure already in place for the Illinois PBIS Network, which currently reaches 1,000 schools in the state. The scaling up process will expand this infrastructure to allow Illinois to reach all schools in the state with evidence-based programs designed to improve outcomes for all students. The focus of SISEP will be on braiding together all of the technical assistance currently being provided through a variety of State Education Agency (SEA) initiatives, including ISTAC and IASPIRE. This will allow ISBE to provide a single implementation and evaluation process for schools which incorporates the core requirements of both behavioral and academic multi-tiered evidence based practices.

Seven states (AR, BIE, NE, SD, UT, WV, and WA) have begun new statewide initiatives in collaboration with NDPC-SD and are receiving training and technical assistance to help them develop model sites for dropout prevention initiatives or address state and local data-related needs around school completion. Three additional states will begin working with NDPC-SD in the coming year.

COMMONALITIES AMONG STATES THAT MET THEIR PERFORMANCE TARGETS

This year, as in years past, states engaged in a various combinations and permutations of activities intended to lower their dropout rates. Determining the effectiveness of such activities is confounded, at least in part, by the recent changes some states made in calculating their dropout rate, as well as by the lag in data to match ESEA reporting requirements. Additionally, there is generally a delay between the implementation of

practices designed to reduce dropout and/or improve graduation rates and the time when their effects become visible. Examining correlated interim indicators of progress, such as attendance, behavior, and academic performance, will provide information about the general direction things are going; however, seeing a change in the dropout or graduation rate will take one or more years.

The table below shows the number of states that achieved their dropout rate targets, reported in the FFY 2009 APRs, and how many were engaged in a particular type of activity.

Table 1
Number of states that met their dropout target plus engaged in a particular activity

Activity	Number of states
Priority on graduation & dropout	9
Data-based decision making	23
Transition-related activities	31
Using one or more evidence-based programs	14

Filtering the data to select states that met their targets and engaged in all of the above activities narrowed the number of states considerably. Four of the states that met their dropout rate target also emphasized graduation and dropout prevention as a statewide priority, engaged in improvement activities that involved data-based decision making/development and implementation of an early warning system, emphasized secondary transition, and implemented at least one evidence-based program or intervention. Two of these states also focused on behavior, implementing PBIS or other behavioral interventions. Progress in these states is consistent with the recommendations of the *IES Practice Guide on Dropout Prevention*, which are that a strategic approach that integrates multiple evidence-based strategies or interventions is an effective approach to addressing school completion issues.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the changes in Indicators 1 and 2 have created some disruptions in states' calculations and reporting of their graduation and dropout rates for this APR, the ultimate outcome will be worth the temporary upset. Having a uniform graduation rate and more consistency in the definition of what constitutes "graduation" will allow us all to assess more accurately the progress being made around the country in school completion efforts for students with disabilities. The use of dropout data from the same year as that used in the graduation rate will also facilitate comparison of these rates.

NDPC-SD recommends that states should, if possible, report both an event and a cohort dropout rate, as each provides a unique piece of information (i.e., short-term and longer-term data) about student performance. The event rate is useful as a snapshot of a year's performance related to dropout and can inform states about the efficacy of improvement activities in targeted districts or subgroups of students. The cohort rate provides an indication of how many students remain in school for four years and how many exit prematurely. It is an overall indication of the holding power of a state's schools. One state that employed such dual calculations was California.

With the change in the data source for calculating the dropout rate, states will have to establish new baselines and may need to revise their improvement targets for their dropout rates. A logical way to approach this would be to base the new targets on the amount of improvement seen in previous years' submissions of dropout rate data.

Another logical approach would be to consider the state graduation targets and the dropout rate. Because the graduation rate and dropout rate are inversely related, lowering the dropout rate should yield an increase in the graduation rate. States might consider the amount of improvement from year to year that is specified in the graduation targets and use that information to inform their new dropout targets.

States might also benefit from examining and revising some of their definitions related to school completion. With the more urgent requirement to be able to chart the progress of individual students as they pass through the educational system, it will become increasingly important to have clear policies and procedures around the entry, analysis and reporting of student-level data as well as clear definitions for student exiting codes.

Given the growing focus on improvement activities and the need for states to compete for external funding, it will also become increasingly important for states and their LEAs to conduct more rigorous evaluation of the impact of the initiatives and programs they adopt/develop and implement in support of school completion for students with disabilities.

There is no magic bullet to decrease school dropout or increase school completion. The problem seems best addressed through careful examination of data related to school completion in the context of individual states and the development of state policies and procedures, regulations, and effective practices that will foster and support local efforts to improve graduation and dropout rates. More in-depth analyses of data are feasible at the local level than are practicable when examining data for an entire state. Intensive school completion initiatives are best customized to fit an LEA's own particular needs, as identified by a close examination of local school-level data and when considered within the context of the local community.

For additional information, contact:
The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities

209 Martin Street
Clemson, SC 29631-1555
864-656-1253
mklare@clemson.edu
www.ndpc-sd.org