An Analysis of States' FFY 2010 Annual Performance Report Data for Indicator B2 (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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Indicator B2: 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 2010 Annual Performance Reports (APRs) and the revised State Performance Plans (SPPs), which were submitted to OSEP in February of 2012. 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.

MEASUREMENT

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 2010 APR, use data from 2009-2010), 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.

In the FFY 2010 APRs, most states followed the above guidance. The major exceptions were territories and commonwealths, which are not required to submit data under the ESEA. These states reported using their §618 exiting data.

CALCULATION METHODS

Though it is less of an issue now than in the past, comparisons of dropout rates among states are 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 2010 APRs were generally calculated using one of three methods: an event rate calculation, a cohort rate calculation, or an adjusted cohort rate calculation.

The NCES event rate, reported by the vast majority of states (47 states, or 78%), 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 the most accurate picture of the attrition from school over the course of four years than do event or adjusted cohort methods. As the name suggests, the cohort method follows a group or cohort of individual students from 9th through 12th grades. Nine states (15%) reported a cohort-based dropout rate. Leaver rates provide an estimate of the dropout rate for a cohort of students. Calculations of this type generally result in higher rates than do event-rate calculations. This year, four states (7%) reported using a leaver rate.

Figures 1 – 3 show states' dropout rates, based on the method employed in calculating their dropout rate for the FFY 2010 APR (using 2009-10 data).
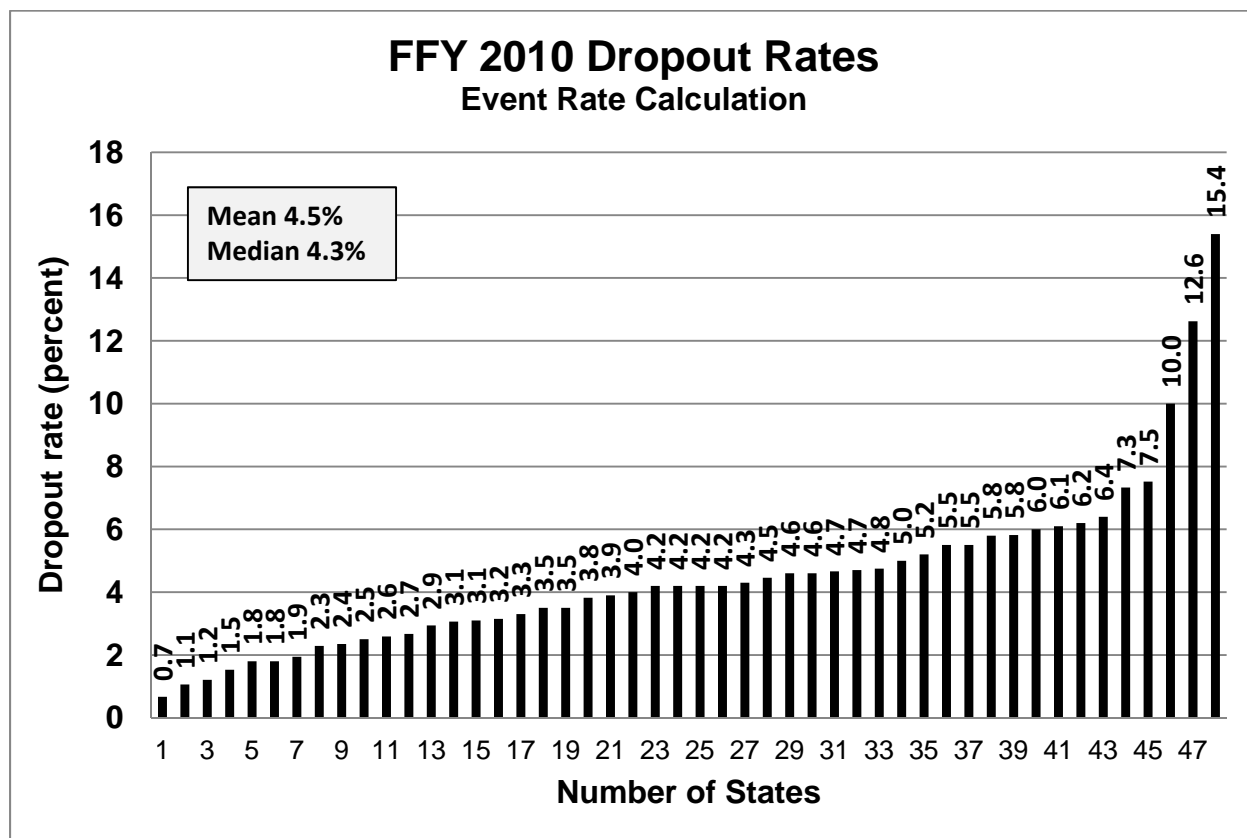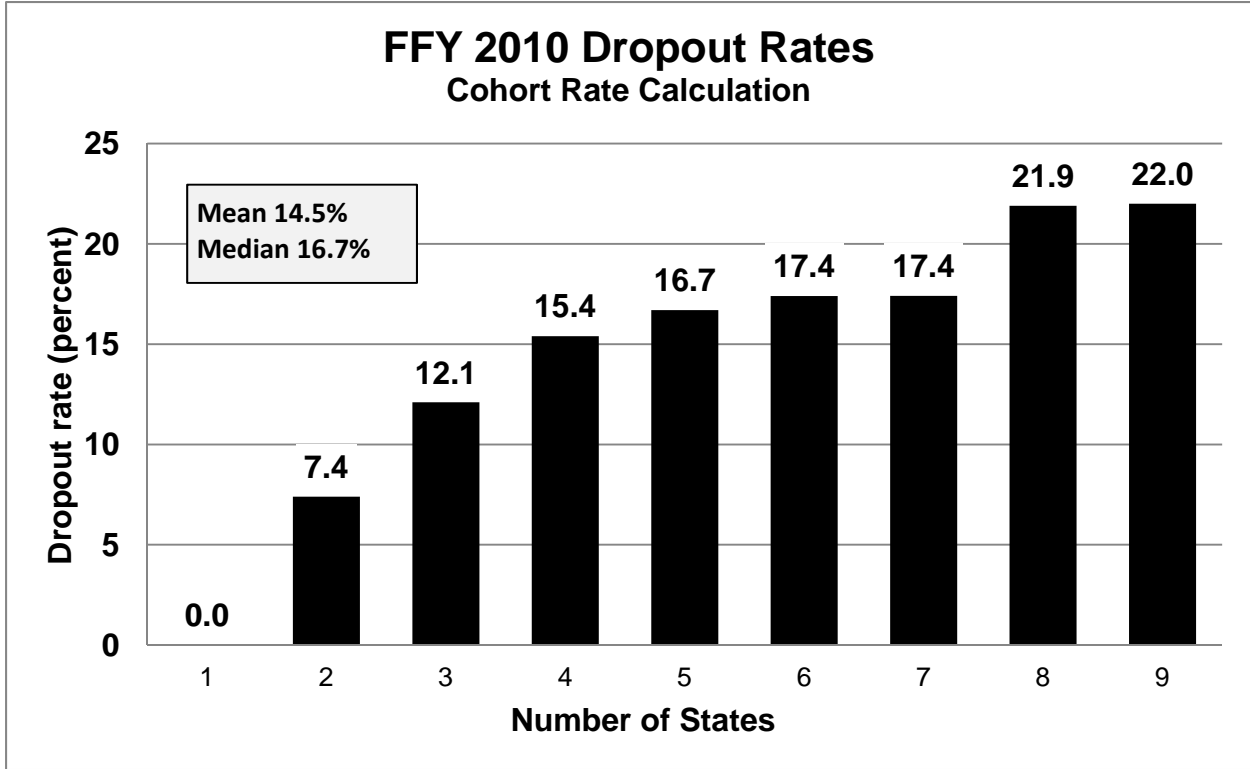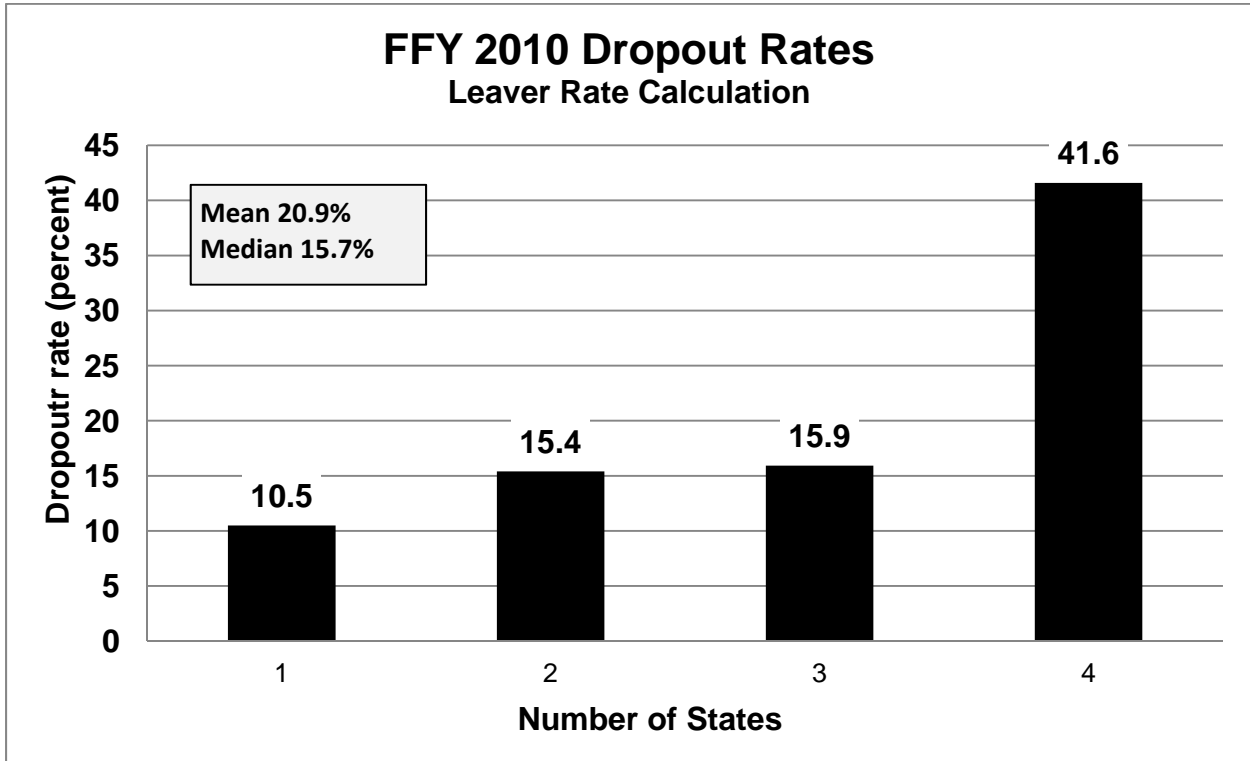
Figure 1

Figure 2

FFY 2010 Dropout Rates
Cohort Rate Calculation

Mean 14.5%
Median 16.7%

Figure 3

FFY 2010 Dropout Rates
Leaver Rate Calculation
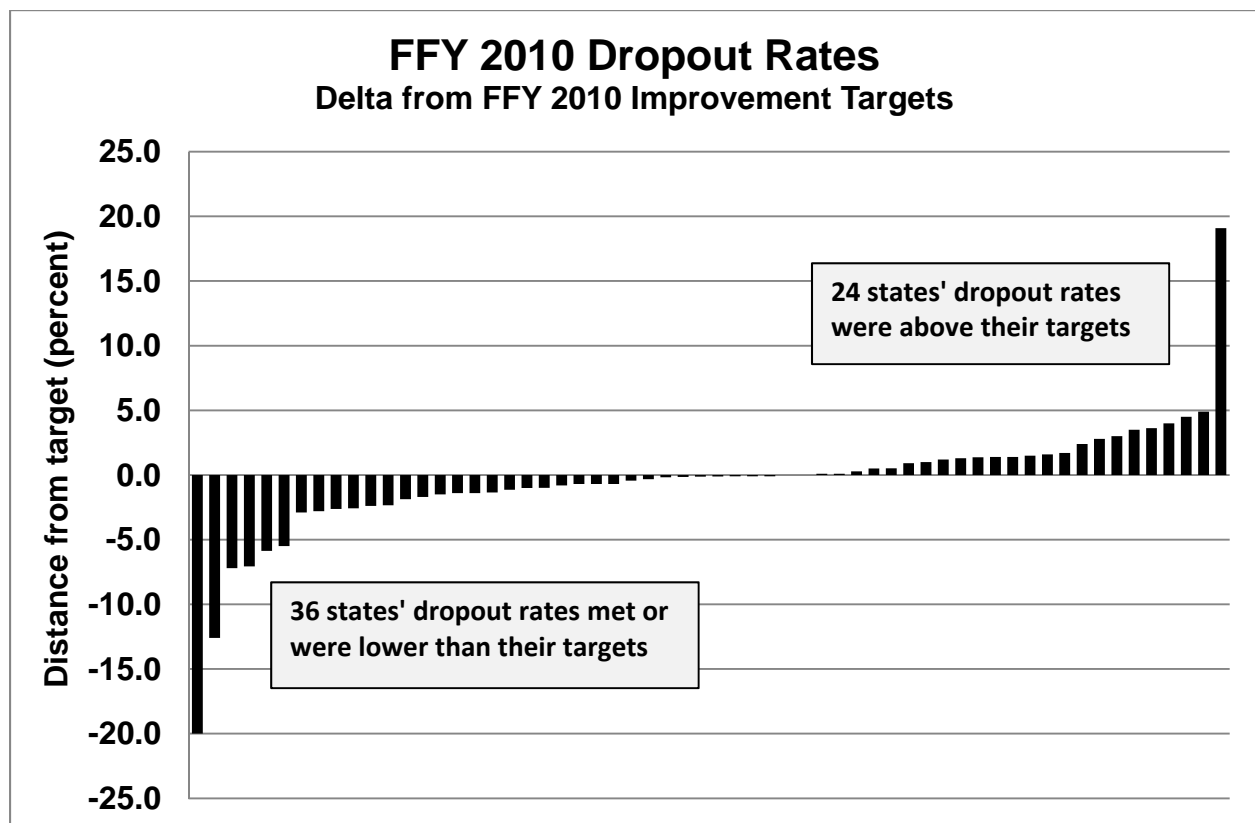
Mean 20.9%
Median 15.7%

STATES' PERFORMANCE ON THE INDICATOR

Because states are not required to specify dropout-rate targets under ESEA, they have continued using their SPP targets for improvement. In FFY 2010, 36 states (60%) met their SPP performance target for Indicator 2 and 24 states (40%) missed their target. These are nearly the same proportions as in FFY 2009, in which 35 states met their target and 25 states missed the target.

In FFY 2010, 44 states had the same performance against their target as they did in FFY 2009—that is, they either met their target during FFY 2009 and FFY 2010, or missed their target during both federal fiscal years.

Over the years of the SPP, states have generally improved at setting realistic, achievable targets for improvement. Most states' performance was quite close to the target they had set, regardless of whether they met or missed that target. Only seven states (12%) performed more than five percentage points above or below their target. Figure 4 compares each state's dropout rate with its target. Note: to meet the target on this indicator, a state must be <u>at or below</u> the target value they specified in the SPP.
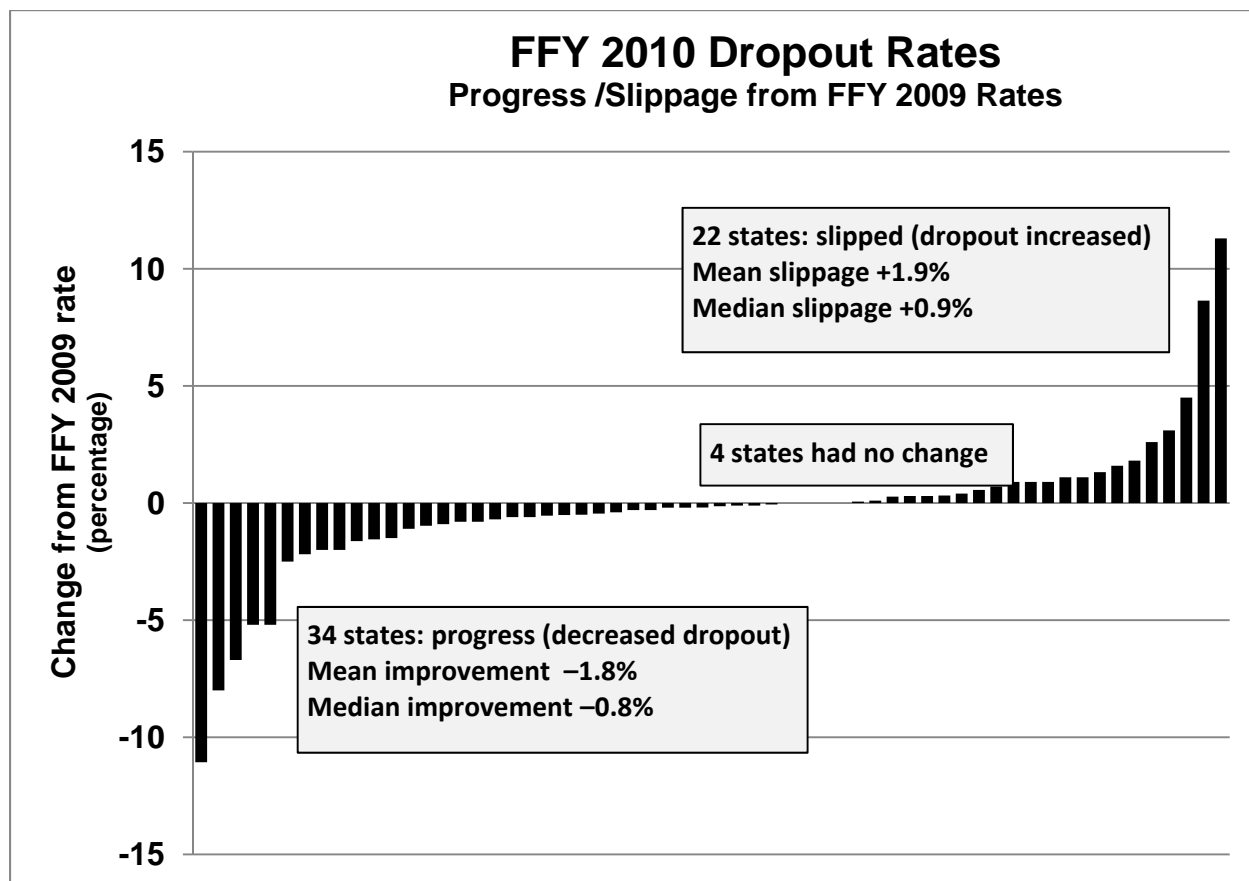
Figure 4

FFY 2010 Dropout Rates
Delta from FFY 2010 Improvement Targets

24 states' dropout rates were above their targets

36 states' dropout rates met or were lower than their targets

As illustrated in Figure 5, 34 states (57%) made progress, lowering their dropout rate. The mean amount by which these states lowered their dropout rates was –1.8%, with a median value of –0.8%. This was an improvement over FFY 2009, during which only 17 states made progress. The mean amount of improvement in FFY 2009 was –3.4%, with a median value of –1.2%, so while fewer states made progress in FFY 2009, their progress was greater than that of states in FFY 2010.

In FFY 2010, 22 states (37%) experienced slippage and saw dropout rates increase. The mean amount of increase in these states was 1.9%, with a median value of 0.9%. In four states (7%) dropout rates remained unchanged from the previous year. To contrast this, in FFY 2009, dropout rates increased in 38 states, with a mean increase of 2.3% and a median value of 0.9%.

Figure 5

FFY 2010 Dropout Rates
Progress /Slippage from FFY 2009 Rates

22 states: slipped (dropout increased)
Mean slippage +1.9%
Median slippage +0.9%

4 states had no change

34 states: progress (decreased dropout)
Mean improvement –1.8%
Median improvement –0.8%

IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

States were instructed to report the strategies, activities, timelines, and resources they employed in order to improve the special education graduation rate. The range of proposed activities was considerable, though many states described the use of data-based decision making to guide improvement activities and to identify at-risk youth.

Most states acknowledged the connections between their activities for at least Indicators 1 and 2. Thirty-eight states (63%) reported the same set of activities for both indicators. Another nine states (15%) described activities common to 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. Additionally, 28 states (47%) also reported activities aimed to engage parents and families in becoming partners in educating their children.

The utilization of research-based/evidence-based strategies and interventions as well as "promising practices" around school completion continued among states. Twelve states (20%) mentioned statewide efforts to identify (and subsequently disseminate) effective practices in their LEAs that focused on school completion. A handful of states described various efforts to develop a toolkit or suite of resources that LEAs could use to develop and support local school completion initiatives.

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. The practice guide 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 that address school completion, so additional evidence-based practices are on the horizon.

Table 1 lists several commonly described interventions and the number of states reporting their use in the APR.

Table 1

Evidence-based and promising practices reported in the FFY 2010 APRs

Nature of intervention	Number of states
Used research/evidence-based practices	48
Response to Intervention	44
Positive Behavior Supports	32
Parental engagement efforts	28
Academic initiatives	27
Vocational education / CTE	17
Credit recovery programs	11
Mentoring programs	9
Recovery/reentry programs	6

Statewide initiatives

Thirty-seven states (62%) reported that school completion was a state priority, though only 24 (40%) reported that they were developing or implementing any sort of statewide initiative that would impact their graduation, dropout, and/or reentry/recovery rates.

Georgia

One statewide initiative continues in the State of Georgia, which has implemented its GraduateFIRST initiative since 2007. The program currently has three cohorts of schools, for a total of 131 schools, all of which have developed and are implementing local school completion initiatives for students with disabilities. One reason for the success of this program is the ongoing support and follow-up provided to each participating school via Georgia's network of collaboration coaches. The coaches, who were trained by NDPC-SD and State personnel under Georgia's SPDG, are each assigned several schools in which they support the local work, serving as trainers, mentors, content resources, and cheerleaders for the ongoing work. Additionally, the program is briefly described in a brief developed by the Regional Resource Center Program's Student Performance and Achievement Priority Team, which may be found at http://www.ndpc-sd.org/documents/12.Spotlight_GraduateFirst.pdf.

Kentucky

Kentucky is also implementing a statewide initiative focused on school completion. The State's continuous improvement monitoring process requires every district in which one

or more students with disabilities drops out to conduct a root-cause analysis of their data at the district, school, and student level to identify the cause(s) of the dropout.

While this effort is focused only on youth with disabilities, the Kentucky Department of Education also developed the Kentucky College and Career Readiness (CCR) delivery plan to address school completion for all students. The plan focuses accountability at the school/district level to increase the rate of its students who leave high school ready for college, career or both. One of the strategies of the CCR delivery plan is the collection and use of data. This has resulted in the development of the Persistence to Graduation Tool, an early warning tool that identifies students who are at risk of dropping out. Accompanying the data tool is a suite of evidence-based practices to address any needs identified in the school.

Alabama
Alabama's First Choice Initiative is a program designed to increase the graduation rate and to improve the post-school outcomes of Alabama youth with and without disabilities. It provides multiple pathways to graduation and provides a variety of safeguards and supports to assist struggling learners. The components of the program are: credit recovery, credit advancement (earning credit in non-traditional ways), graduation coaches for at-risk students, and multiple diploma options.

NDPC-SD intensive states
In collaboration with NDPC-SD, ten states (AR, BIE, LA, MI, MO, NE, NC, UT, WA, and WV) are currently working on statewide initiatives to improve their school completion rates. SEA and LEA staff in these states are receiving training and technical assistance from NDPC-SD to help them develop model sites for dropout prevention initiatives or address other state/local data-related or other needs around school completion. Additionally, the State of Georgia and Miami-Dade County Public School District in Florida are continuing the work they initiated with NDPC-SD under its first round of OSEP funding.

OSEP Results work
Several states chose topics related to school completion for the Results portion of their OSEP continuous improvement visits in 2011. Among those states was Nebraska, which was already working intensively with the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities to develop, pilot, and disseminate a toolkit of resources and materials for schools to use in designing and developing local school completion initiatives. Nebraska wanted to leverage their work with NDPC-SD and reengage youth with disabilities who had dropped out of high school. Getting these youth back into educational programs can be an effective strategy for improving the post-secondary outcomes for these youth.

In September 2011, Nebraska held its first stakeholder meeting, at which information about dropout, graduation, reentry/recovery, and other related topics was presented to

and discussed with a broad stakeholder group. A product of that meeting was a 4-year strategic plan, which has the goal of developing, piloting, and disseminating (statewide) a reentry program for youth with disabilities in Nebraska.

Among the strategies Nebraska has chosen to support this goal are:
1) Increasing awareness at state and local level regarding dropout reentry strategies;
2) increasing capacity of current programs focused on dropout prevention to target students with disabilities who have left school but remain eligible for special education;
3) developing partnerships with other entities that can have statewide impact on providing reentry services to students with disabilities; and
4) partnering with general education initiatives to increase graduation rates.

The State has posted information about their efforts and progress on this work at the following link: http://www.education.ne.gov/sped/reentry.html.

Examples of other improvement activities

Data-based decision making
Data-based decision making was a nearly ubiquitous activity, reported by 54 states (90%) in this APR in one form or another. States are examining their school completion data and considering that information when targeting technical assistance to LEAs, awarding LEA improvement grants, looking for effective practices, and identifying topics for professional development.

Eleven states (18%) described work on an early warning system using their longitudinal data to identify youth who are at risk of dropping out of school. The data being employed include information about students' attendance, behavior, grade retention, and academic performance on state assessments. In general, states that reviewed this sort of information about their students have experienced success in using it to inform their work. Examples of states that examined such risk and protective factors related to school completion include Alabama, Arkansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, and West Virginia.

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 examining the factors within the school environment that contribute to dropout and 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 also 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.

As discussed above, while the use of data analysis is critical in identifying areas of need, it is not a strategy or intervention, *per se*, for keeping youth in school, but rather a tool to support the greater effort. Once the students' needs have been identified, it is necessary to provide rigorous instruction in academics, career skills, and self-advocacy in order to keep at-risk youth engaged in school and to foster their success.

Identification of effective practices
Kansas, Missouri, North Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Wisconsin were among the ten states that reported efforts to identify and examine the programs being implemented in their LEAs that had graduation rates above the state average. They are working to share these promising practices among the other districts in the state through various means, including websites, communities of practice, newsletters, and conference presentations.

Eleven states (18%) indicated in their APRs that they are actively engaging in evaluation of their improvement activities to identify those which yield measurable improvements in the desired impact area. The states incorporating evaluation into their improvement activities are Georgia, Hawaii, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, and Vermont.

Reentry programs
Including Nebraska, six states (17%) described reentry/recovery programs in their APRs. While there are many such programs around the country, most operate on a local level, rather than statewide, as Nebraska intends for their initiative. This makes it difficult to locate and identify them. Reentry programs may be operating in many states, but because of their local nature, they simply do not get reported in states' APRs.

Reentry 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. Their focus 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 reentry 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 all beneficial elements that help them address their audiences effectively.

COMMONALITIES AMONG STATES THAT MADE PROGRESS OR MET TARGETS

Table 2 shows some of the school completion activities states engaged in and indicates whether they made progress from FFY 2009 or achieved their FFY 2010 targets for Indicator 2.

Table 2
Performance of states that engaged in certain activities

Improvement activity	Number of states that made progress	Number of states That met dropout target
Transition-related activities	32	34
Data-based decision making	33	33
Indicated graduation & dropout were a priority	22	25
Using one or more evidence-based practices	28	30
Statewide initiative related to school completion	15	16

Filtering the data using the above criteria leaves eight states (13%) that made progress, met their dropout target, and engaged all of the activities in the table above.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall quality of states' APRs for FFY 2010 was the best since the SPP/APR came into existence. States generally provided the required information about their definitions, calculations, and data in a clear form. The descriptions of improvement activities were generally more concise than in years past as well. As more states switch over to using the adjusted cohort rate calculation, it will continue to become easier to quantify states' improvements and compare progress for the nation overall.

While Indicators B1 and B2 are performance indicators (as opposed to compliance indicators), in these lean fiscal times, there is increasing importance being placed on the identification of activities that will improve states' graduation and dropout rates for students with disabilities. The difficulty of judging what activities were most beneficial based solely on the brief amount of information contained in the APR is a difficult task at best. Without knowing the particulars about each activity or intervention, its implementation within a state, and having some impact data for the activity, there is basically no way to determine what worked well and what did not.

To advance "the work" of improving school completion rates in the nation, more states need to engage in meaningful evaluation of their SPP improvement activities and to report on what worked in particular contexts for their students with disabilities. Information of this nature can benefit other states struggling with similar issues. The

Regional Resource Center Program has posted resources to support states in their evaluation of improvement activities at the following URL: http://www.rrcprogram.org/content/view/191/288/.