
An Analysis of States' 2008-09 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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INDICATOR 2: DROPOUT RATE

Prepared by NDPC-SD

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 2008 Annual Performance Reports (APRs) and the revised State Performance Plans (SPPs), which were submitted to OSEP on February 1, 2010. 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 the 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, "If a State uses 618 data 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 2008 APR, use data from 2007-2008), and compare the results to the target." States were also to, "provide the actual numbers used in the calculation" and, "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."

The source for dropout data was to be the same as that used for reporting to the Department of Education under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). States were to report the same dropout data they used in the graduation rate calculation (Indicator 1) and to follow the timeline established under the ESEA.

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 from ages 14-21 in the calculation, whereas other States included students of ages 17-21. Still other States based inclusion in calculations on students' grade levels, rather than on their ages. This problem will remain, as States have been instructed to use the same data that they use in their ESEA calculation.

An additional confounding factor is enrollment in a GED program. Many 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 "completers." Nonetheless, they are treated differently in the States' dropout equations.

CALCULATION METHODS

Comparison of dropout rates among States is further 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 2008-09 APRs were generally calculated using one of three methods: an event rate calculation, a leaver rate calculation or a cohort rate calculation.

The event rate 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. 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.

OTHER CONFOUNDING FACTORS

Two additional factors that hamper comparisons of the States' dropout rates for this year's APR submissions are the 1-year lag in data, which not all States observed, and States' use of a variety of dropout targets. Since it is not a requirement under ESEA that States set dropout targets, States did what they could, based on their individual situations. Some States used their SPP targets for the 2007-08 year; whereas others used their 2008-09 SPP targets. Yet others had previously established ESEA dropout targets, to which they compared their dropout rate for students with disabilities.

As with Indicator 1, the changes made to the measurement of the dropout rate (the new data lag this year, issues over definitions, the variety of targets employed and the associated disruption in regular calculations) have hampered the regular calculation of dropout rates enough that it does not seem advisable to attempt comparisons of States' dropout data this year or to discuss their progress/slippage. It is our hope and belief that by the FFY 2010 APR submission, due February 1, 2012, States will have made

any necessary adjustments to their calculations, set new baselines and targets, and generally adapted to the changes in this indicator and Indicator 1.

IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

Rather than focus on the dropout rates reported for this year, it seems more appropriate to discuss some of the improvement activities that States described and, when possible, to note the impact of these activities on the school completion rates of their students with disabilities.

States were instructed to report the strategies, activities, timelines, and resources they employed in order to improve the special education dropout rate. The range of proposed activities was considerable. This year, 52 States reported connections between their activities for at least Indicators 1 and 2. Many of these States linked at least some, if not all, of their activities for Indicators 1, 2, 13, and 14: indicators intimately tied to secondary transition. In these States, there was a conscious focus on promoting successful secondary transition practices as a means to keep youth engaged in and participating in school-related activities.

The utilization of evidence-based strategies and interventions as well as “promising practices” continued to increase among States. This year, 48 States (80%) listed one or more evidence-based improvement activities in their APR, while the remaining 12 States (20%) did not describe any evidence-based improvement activities in the Indicator 1 and 2 sections of the APR. There are a limited number of evidence-based school-completion programs that have demonstrated efficacy for students with disabilities. Nonetheless, the 2008 IES Practice Guide on Dropout Prevention describes several of these approaches to keeping youth in school and discusses the degrees of evidence supporting each. 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 IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITIES

Data-based decision making was a widespread activity, described by many States in this APR. The principle of this is examination of comprehensive, longitudinal student data is to identify youth who are at high risk of dropping out. Among the data to consider are information about attendance, grade retention, academic achievement, and behavior.

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 American Samoa, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Utah, and West Virginia.

Additionally, Alabama and Kansas reported that they engaged in root cause analysis of their school-completion data utilizing the Western Regional Resource Center’s “Tree of

Influence,” which focuses on the relationships among the SPP Indicators. This tool helped them identify Statewide and local needs that could be addressed through professional development, technical assistance and the implementation of suitable research-based programs and interventions.

The State of Washington examined local activities aimed at improving school completion/dropout prevention in the 79 districts that had school completion rates above the State average and compiled a list of these. In descending order from the most commonly implemented, the activities were as follows: (a) collaboration/coordination with other agencies; (b) program development; (c) improving systems administration and monitoring; (d) providing training or professional development to staff; (e) improving data collection and reporting; (f) increasing/adjusting staff (FTE); (g) providing technical assistance to staff; (h) clarifying policies and procedures; and (i) evaluation of data, programs, services, etc. Wisconsin and several other States also took this approach to identifying practices related to school completion in their districts that were successful in this area.

Another approach States undertook to using their data to improve outcomes was to survey recent dropouts to identify factors that might have caused them to leave the school environment. Analysis of these data can inform program development as well as identify needs regarding policies and procedures that impact students’ desire/ability to remain in school. West Virginia was among the States that surveyed dropouts for this purpose. Local examples of this practice took place in Georgia, Maryland and New Mexico, where districts and schools employed a survey developed by NDPC-SD for this purpose.

NDPC-SD developed another survey instrument for States to use in identifying technical assistance needs of their districts. This has been used with success by several States, including Oklahoma, South Dakota and Kentucky.

Thirty-one States reported that they trained staff and have begun implementing Positive Behavior Supports. Youth with emotional/behavioral disturbance are at great risk for dropping out of school. Programs such as this, which help these youth manage their behavior, can contribute significantly to keeping these students in school.

Interagency collaboration can strengthen programs by incorporating the strengths and resources of multiple agencies. It can also result in the sharing of data and other information that can benefit school-completion efforts. Examples of this occurred in Ohio and Vermont, where staff from the respective departments of education collaborated with the staff from the State vocational rehabilitation services agencies. The focus of these collaborative activities was on improving transition outcomes for students with disabilities.

Activities focused on supporting secondary transition also have positive effects on school completion. Among the 37 States engaged in transition-related activities are Delaware, Maryland and Pennsylvania (the “Tri-State Consortium”), which are working to support youth with disabilities through a joint project. 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. 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, 15 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.

Six States described reentry/recovery programs in their APRs. While there are many such programs around the country, the majority of them seem to 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.

Broad, concerted, Statewide initiatives designed to improve graduation and dropout rates were relatively uncommon in the current crop of APRs. 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.

Additionally, Georgia has a Statewide network of 398 graduation coaches in high schools and 424 coaches in middle schools. These coaches work with at-risk students to support their efforts to succeed academically and graduate. For the 2007-08 school year, 78.3% (13,156) of the seniors served by graduation coaches graduated with a regular diploma. In addition, through a State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG), 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 that support students with disabilities.

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 Positive Behavioral Supports and Interventions (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 educational agency (SEA) initiatives, including the Illinois Statewide Technical Assistance Center (ISTAC) and The Illinois Alliance for School-based Problem-solving and Intervention Resources (Illinois ASPIRE). 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.

EVALUATION OF IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITIES

The majority of States did not provide much, if any, information about their efforts to evaluate the impact of their improvement activities; however, there were exceptions.

Twenty-one States described evaluation activities for least one of their improvement activities aimed at increasing their school-completion rates. The degree of organization and sophistication of these evaluation efforts varied markedly across States.

In conjunction with the Evaluation Center at Loyola University in Chicago, the State of Illinois has established an evaluation center to provide an infrastructure with capacity to support the expansion of school-wide systems of behavior and academic support throughout Illinois schools. The Virtual Information Management of Educational Outcomes (VIMEO) system includes data-based decision making systems for all three tiers of implementation of each project. The evaluation center maintains formative databases on fidelity of implementation of structured interventions; and fidelity of professional development and related activities directed toward administrators, general educators, special educators, school staff and families. The evaluation center tracks pupil progress on a wide range of social and academic indicators including the School-Wide Information System (SWIS), the School-Wide Evaluation Tool (SET), curriculum based academic content measures and annual standardized literacy and math assessments on all students in participating sites.

Some of the Regional Resource Centers have begun an effort to assist States in developing appropriate evaluation plans to assess the efficacy of their improvement activities. In March of 2010, the Mid-South Regional Resource Center (MSRRC), in collaboration with the Appalachian Comprehensive Center, held a two-day summit on evaluating improvement activities, which was attended by 11 of the 21 States mentioned above that discussed evaluation of improvement activities. Staff from the NDPC-SD, and National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC)

participated in the summit, serving as facilitators and content resources to the State teams in attendance.

During the summit, States received general information about the evaluation process and began developing an evaluation plan for one of their improvement activities. The intent is that States will ultimately collect evaluation data and use it to assess the efficacy of all of their SPP improvement activities and to plan additional activities to support school completion for their students with disabilities. MSRRRC has begun working with some of the other RRCs to further this effort in other RRC regions.

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 formula will also facilitate comparison of these rates. It is our hope that in time, we will be able to move toward a standard calculation of the dropout rate for students with disabilities, as was done for the graduation rate.

With the change in the data source for calculating the dropout rate, some States will have to establish new baselines and improvement targets for their dropout rates. Additionally, States might examine and revise 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.

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