An Analysis of States' 2008-09 Annual Performance Report Data for Indicator 1 (Graduation)

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

July 2010

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

NDPC-SD

INDICATOR 1: GRADUATION 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 1—Graduation—from the FFY 2008Annual Performance Reports (APRs) and amended State Performance Plans (SPPs), which were submitted by States to OSEP on February 1, 2010. The text of the indicator is as follows:

> Percent of youth with IEPs graduating from high school with a regular diploma.

This report summarizes NDPC-SD's findings for Indicator 1 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.

For this submission, States were advised that the graduation rate measurement and data source would be different than in years past. According to the Part B Measurement Table, States were to use the, "same data as used for reporting to the Department under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)." These data are reported in the Consolidated State Performance Report exiting data**.**

Sampling is not permitted for this indicator, so States must report graduation information for all of their students with disabilities. States were instructed to, "report using the graduation rate calculation and timeline established by the Department under the ESEA" and to, "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. Provide the actual numbers used in the calculation."

Additional instructions were to, "provide a narrative that describes the conditions youth must meet in order to graduate with a regular diploma and, if different, the conditions that youth with IEPs must meet in order to graduate with a regular diploma. If there is a difference, explain why." Finally, States' performance targets were to be the same as their annual graduation rate targets under Title I of the ESEA.

This represents a significant change in the measurement of Indicator 1, moving from the assorted methods that States had previously employed in calculating their graduation rates to the use of a uniform, adjusted cohort calculation. In the past, States were required to provide graduation rate information for both their students with disabilities and all students. Problems arose because the special education data generally came from States' 618 exiting data collection and the all-student data came from their ESEA enrollment counts, which were taken at a different time of the year and generally lagged by a year. The new method that States will use to calculate their graduation rates for

students with disabilities utilizes the same data set and same calculation. This should remove some of the barriers to making valid comparisons of the two rates and make such comparisons more intuitive.

The equation below shows an example of the four-year graduation rate calculation for the cohort entering 9th grade for the first time in the fall of the 2008-2009 school year and graduating by the end of the 2011-2012 school year.

$$\frac{\text{\# cohort members receiving a regular HS diploma by end of the 2011-2012 school year}}{\text{\# of first-time 9th graders in fall 2008 (starting cohort) + transfers in – transfers out – emigrated out – deceased during school years 2008-2009 through 2011-2012}}$$

IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW MEASUREMENT

The new four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate defines a "graduate" as someone who receives a regular high school diploma in the standard number of years—specifically, four years. Students who do not meet the criteria for graduating with a regular diploma cannot be included in the numerator of the calculation, but must be included in the denominator. The new calculation also excludes students who receive a modified or special diploma, a certificate, or a GED from being counted as graduates.

States may obtain permission from the U.S. Department of Education to report one or more additional cohorts that span a different number of years (for example, a 5-year cohort or a 5-year plus a 6-year cohort). Because students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency may not always complete coursework and examinations within the standard 4-year timeframe, the use of such extended cohort rates can help ensure that these students are ultimately counted as graduates, despite their longer stay in school than the traditional four years. It should be noted that States are prohibited from using this provision exclusively for youth with disabilities and youth with limited English proficiency. This provision for using extended cohorts will likely become more important in years to come, as many States have increased their academic credit and course requirements for all students to graduate.

The ESEA requirement to follow every child in a cohort will necessitate the use of longitudinal data systems that use unique student identifiers. Many States have these in place, or are well on the way to developing such systems. Other States may have difficulty meeting this need by the 2010-11 school year and will have to request permission from the Department of Education for an extension on this deadline.

Although States will not be required to implement the new calculation until the 2010-11 school year, most were able to provide data and complete the calculation in the current APR. Three States, however, specified that they were unable to disaggregate their ESEA data to identify students with disabilities. These States reported the same type of graduation rate they employed in the previous year's APR—generally based on their 618 exiting data. All States that reported this issue stated that they would be able to

disaggregate the data and report using the new rate calculation in their 2010-11 APR submission.

For most States, the graduation rate reported in the February 2010 APR represents a new baseline. Because of this, many States set new performance targets, commensurate with the new baseline (22 States did so). Other States, however, deferred the task until next year and compared their graduation rates to the targets they had set in their SPP. Additionally, most States were unable to report progress or slippage in their graduation rates.

Given the changes in the method of calculation, the data source and improvement targets, as well as any additional factors unique to individual States, it would be imprudent to attempt to summarize the "State" of graduation rates for students with disabilities for this most recent APR or to discuss States' progress/slippage in this area. We believe that by the APR submission for the 2010-11 school year, States will have settled into the use of the new data and calculation, set targets as needed, and identified and addressed any remaining issues around the calculation of their graduation rates for their students with disabilities.

IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

Rather than focus on the data around reported graduation rates 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 graduation 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" around school completion continued to increase among States. This year, 48 States (80%) listed one or more evidence-based improvement activities for Indicators 1 and/or 2 in their APR, while the remaining 12 States (20%) did not describe any evidence-based improvement activities. There are a limited number of evidence-based school-completion programs that have demonstrated efficacy for students with disabilities. Nonetheless, the 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.

Table 1 lists several of the more commonly described practices and the number of States employing them.

Table 1: Evidence-based and promising practices listed in the FFY 2008 APRs

Nature of interaction	Number of States
One or more evidence-based practices	48
Positive Behavior Supports	31
Literacy initiatives	18
Response to Intervention	22
Mentoring programs	8
Recovery/reentry programs	6

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 data student data 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 as 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.

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 scientific in nature. 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.

In another example of utilizing data to identify needs, Alabama and Kansas 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 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 doing well in this area.

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 and academic, behavioral and social supports/services available to the students.

Freshman academies keep the incoming 9th grade students together and provide them 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.

Activities focused on supporting secondary transition have positive effects on school completion. Among the 37 States engaged in transition-related activities were 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.

Broad, concerted, Statewide initiatives designed to increase school completion 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) 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.

Another example of a large-scale initiative may be found in Illinois. Since 2008, Illinois has worked with the national State Implementation of Scaling-up Evidence-based Practices Center (SISEP) 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 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. MSRRC 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 rates for this APR, the ultimate outcome will be worth the temporary challenges. 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. This will also be strengthened by the use of a common data source and shared graduation rate calculation for students with disabilities and all students.

In the coming years, States that have not already done so will have to establish new baselines and improvement targets for their graduation rates. Additionally, States might

examine and revise some of their definitions related to school completion as well as their diploma options. 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.

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