What Technical Assistance States Need to Collect Post-School Outcome Data for Youth with Disabilities

Summary of Technical Assistance Conference Calls Conducted by the National Post-School Outcomes Center and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education

NASDSE — National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Incorporated

RRFC network — RRFC Regional Resource & Federal Center Network

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

University of Oregon
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Post-School Outcomes Center (NPSO), in conjunction the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) and the Regional Resource Centers (RRCs), held a series of conference calls with states to assess their needs for technical assistance on the new requirements for collecting and reporting post-school outcome data for students with disabilities as required by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). The major concerns expressed by the states had to do with data collection, including sampling techniques that produce reliable and valid post-school outcome data. States were also concerned about the costs involved, the burden placed on local education agencies and a need to learn about practices currently in place that are producing good data. Additionally, states expressed concern that key terms, such as "rigorous targets" and "meaningful employment" have not been defined by OSEP.

This paper summarizes the issues raised by the states on the conference calls. The states' comments suggest areas for further policy and practice considerations, including the following:

1. A "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ) or other document from OSEP (perhaps prepared by NPSO) that addresses the definitional questions and some of the sampling questions.
2. A document sharing "best practices" from those states that have demonstrated success in collecting post-school outcome data.
3. A mechanism for sharing/comparing among states of similar size or states with similar concerns. (This could be facilitated at the March NPSO conference.)
4. Conference calls with "experts" in developing post-school outcome questionnaires and sampling procedures.
5. Issues of conflict between federal and state laws regarding data collection need to be recognized and addressed by OSEP (e.g., providing added flexibility).

INTRODUCTION

The National Post-School Outcomes Center (NPSO), in conjunction with the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), conducted a series of conference calls in August 2005 with state directors of special education, state transition coordinators and RRC transition coordinators. The purpose of the calls was to share information about the new NPSO Center and to solicit comments from the states about their concerns, challenges, and issues involved in collecting meaningful post-school outcome data and suggestions as to what kinds of technical assistance the new center might provide.

The calls were held on August 2, 2005 and August 15, 2005. The following states participated in the calls: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Wisconsin, Wyoming and the Virgin Islands. The following regional resource centers also participated in the calls: Mid South (MSRRC); North East (NERRC); Mountain Plains (MPRRC); North Central (NCRRC); South East (SERRC) and Western (WRRC).

The calls were each structured around a series of questions, which were preceded by an overview of the Center and a review of materials that the Center has produced to date or is in the midst of developing. These materials/activities are:

- sessions at the upcoming OSEP Summer Institute;
- a checklist, case study and sampling paper all related to the State Performance Plans (SPP);
- an application template for General Supervision Enhancement Grants (GSEGs);
- the Community of Practice on post-school outcomes; and
- a possible national conference in late February 2006.

(NOTE: All documents produced by the Center are now available on the Center's website at http://psocenter.org.)

The remainder of this report summarizes the responses to the questions posed during the conference calls.

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS AND RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS

Comments on the conference calls clustered around several areas, including the following: (1) definitions; (2) concerns over cost and burden of data collection; (3) data collection, including validity of data and coordination with other agencies; (4) sampling; (5) follow-up with students after they leave the system; and (7) best practices. Specific comments in each of these areas are listed below. Unless otherwise noted, each of these comments was posed by one state.

Definitions

- How is "enrolled in program" defined?
- What are "rigorous targets" (1 state) and how should they be connected to measurable post-schools goals and post-school outcomes? (1 state)
- How can differing definitions from different agencies be integrated and useful for purposes of collecting post-school outcome data?
- How is "competitively employed" defined?

Concerns over cost and burden of data collection

- There is concern about the reporting burden on the local education agencies (LEAs).
- There is a need for tools that can be used by LEAs and other local agencies to ease the data collection burden for them (because the data collected at the state level may not be able to be disaggregated at the local level and thus may be of little value to local agencies).
- There was concern expressed over the cost of collecting data—both in terms of personnel time and programming costs—and interest in strategies for streamlining data collection. (several states)

Data collection, including validity of data

- One state (OR) noted that state law requires the state education agency (SEA) to inform LEAs of any new data collection one year prior to actually collecting the data. These deadlines cannot be met with respect to the SPP data collection requirements.
- One state questioned how it could require LEAs to collect data on students once they have left the system. (This issue relates to the burden being put on LEAs as well.)
- One state wanted to know how to ensure that it has collected sufficient data to report.
- One state expressed interest in designing a system that will include goals and outcomes upfront so that the data collected can be used to document progress.
- Six states specifically asked questions about how to collect the data, how to ensure its validity and reliability and what to do with it once they collected it. For example, how can the data be used to pinpoint where help is needed and what kind of help is needed. How can the data be made meaningful across LEAs that are very different in size—ranging from 1-2 exiting students per year to thousands and ranging from urban to extremely rural? One state commented that just because someone is "involved" in a program doesn't mean that the person is attending the program and that doesn't equate with success or completion of the program. This state asked "how many days should an individual be employed for it to equate with success and what kind of employment is considered adequate or gainful?"
- Two states wanted to know how to use the data to improve transition services. One of these states expressed concern about establishing effective programs based on what they are learning about students one year out of school.
- Two states specifically expressed concern about the difficulties associated with sharing data across agencies and one of them wondered if this data collection could be integrated into any other data sets that other state

and/or local agencies are currently collecting. A third state noted the importance of ensuring a cross-agency perspective in the data collection.

Sampling

- One state expressed concern that sampling would not be useful in holding LEAs accountable for their outcomes. One state (WI) noted that it samples the entire state every other year and has created a website so LEAs can do their own local outcomes using the same procedures that the state uses. The state does a random sampling of LEAs, not of individuals.
- One state expressed concern that it is difficult to "sell" sampling to LEAs because it generates a lot of paperwork and it is difficult for LEAs to see the value in sampling.
- One state asked how many students need to be sampled.

Follow up

- At least five states expressed concerns related to following up with students. One state wanted to know how to track down students. (NC indicated that it has integrated a post-school data collection piece into an exit document so that when students respond to questions about exiting, the data will be entered and the students will be followed up on at one and three years post exiting.)
- One state commented that it formerly used social security numbers to collect follow-up information, but can no longer do so and expressed concern that follow-up would be more difficult as a result.
- One state expressed concern that it would be difficult to collect information on dropouts because it would be difficult to locate them and wondered if this is required by the SPP.
- One state wanted to know how to track down students—by sending a letter or calling them.
- One state expressed interest in the development of a "script" that could be used by LEAs when contacting students or their parents for follow-up.
- One state expressed concern about how to track mobile students in the 16-21 age range who move frequently back and forth from school to work and from job to job.
- One state expressed concern about the low response rate from surveyed students and asked for help on ways to improve this.

Best Practices

- Several states agreed that it would be helpful if NPSO could collect information on what states are currently doing and whether they think it has been effective or not. (It was noted that the state profiles that NPSO plans to develop would address this.)

NPSO

The Center is considering developing state profiles about post-school outcome data systems. The Center will compile a common set of information across all of the states and create some mechanisms for states to be able to find out, for example, which states contract with universities, which states contract with other organizations, etc. The purpose is to get a common picture about how all of the states gather and use information, who their partners are, etc. These might include, for example, post-school outcome data collected, timing, description of sampling procedures, reporting and use of data for improvement. Other information states would like to see included in the profile:

- all of the above examples;
- leveraging across offices;
- the instruments used;
- posting frequently asked questions;
- demographic information—including size, population, number of students exiting per year;
- whether states used sampling or attempted to contact all exiting students;
- metrics on cost of outsourcing; and
- identifying response rates.

MISCELLANEOUS COMMENTS
- How does the summary of performance connect, or should it connect, to the post-school outcomes (e.g., linking mechanisms, linking questions or linking components)?
- Should SEAs and LEAs consider beginning to collect data when students are in the 9th grade, to make better use of it and make it easier to track students once they exit?
- How can we build a data system that is attractive and marketable to other customers (e.g., other agencies)?
- It is important to leverage these requirements with other education initiatives such as high school reform.
- Comments on existing data collection systems:
    - Montana has a web-based system for LEAs to report exiting data.
    - New Mexico contracts with an outside entity to compile and analyze data—they have trained interviewers.
    - Alabama contracts with Auburn University.
- Post state contacts on the Center's website so states can contact each other.
- What states already have good systems in place for collecting data? (Jane Falls provided the following examples. She does not intend it to be an exhaustive list.)

- Alabama has a sophisticated system and is working on increasing the response rate.
- Idaho uses a web-based exit survey. It contracts with Life Track in Clarkson, WA, to do follow-up and interview students one, three and five years out. It also tries to contact all students— about 1,200 graduates per year.
- Washington State has 96% of its LEAs engaged and has about a 75-78% response rate and has a mechanism in place to feed information back to the LEAs.

POLICY/PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The issues and concerns raised by the states suggest that technical assistance by the Center should focus on the "nitty-gritty" of data collection, sampling, how to ensure the validity and reliability of the data collected and how to use the data once it is collected. In addition, the issues raised suggest specific policy and guidance issues that could be addressed by some of the following:

1. A "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ) or other document from OSEP (perhaps prepared by NPSO) that addresses the definitional questions and some of the sampling questions.
2. A document/website summaries/state profiles that share "best practices" from those states that have demonstrated success in collecting post-school outcome data.
3. A mechanism for sharing/comparing among states of similar size or states with similar concerns. (This could be facilitated at the March NPSO conference.)
4. Conference calls with "experts" in developing post-school outcome questionnaires and sampling techniques.
5. Issues of conflict between federal and state laws regarding data collection need to be recognized and addressed by OSEP (e.g., providing added flexibility). NASDSE could play a role in collecting this information and working with OSEP on areas of clarification and flexibility.

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