

Spotlight

BRIEFS

Volume I

What are the Spotlight Briefs?

The SPA Spotlight Briefs are generated by a group of Technical Assistance and Dissemination (TA&D) Network collaborators, coordinated through the Student Performance and Achievement (SPA) Priority Team of the Regional Resource Center Program (RRCP). The briefs highlight selected promising state and local-level practices that have been shown to impact OSEP Part B performance indicators 1 and 2 (Graduation and Dropout Rates), 3 (Statewide Assessment), and 14 (Secondary Transition and Post-School Outcomes).

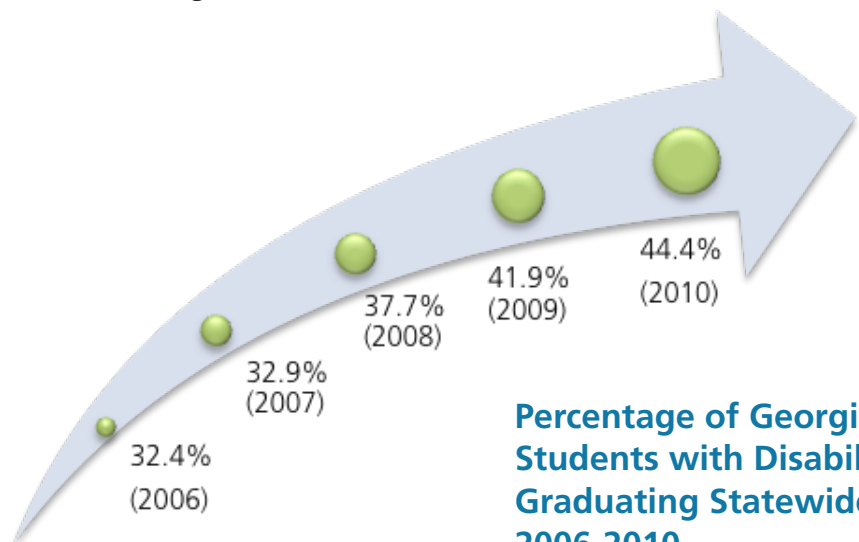
This brief is intended to provide State Education Agency (SEA) and Local Education Agency (LEA) educators with a brief overview of key components of GraduateFIRST, a Georgia program targeting issues impacting school completion for students with disabilities.

For more information, visit Georgia's GraduateFIRST website at www.graduatefirst.org

Spotlight on: GraduateFIRST

Georgia's GraduateFIRST program has redefined the state's approach to raising graduation rates for students with disabilities with dramatic results - an increase of 37 percent in four years.

In 2006, roughly two of every three students with a disability in the state of Georgia failed to graduate from high school with a regular diploma. From 2006 to 2010, the statewide graduation rate for students on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) increased from approximately 32 percent in 2006 to just over 44 percent in 2010. While state officials acknowledge they still have a long way to go, Georgia has made tremendous gains in a short period of time and has positively impacted students in all regions of the state.



Percentage of Georgia Students with Disabilities Graduating Statewide: 2006-2010

What is GraduateFIRST?

- GraduateFIRST is a Georgia statewide initiative that uses a data driven intervention framework developed by the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) to address issues that have negatively impacted school completion rates.
- The program establishes and, with NDPC-SD, trains local school-based teams and team leaders to diagnose the causes of dropout and develop site-specific improvement plans and strategies.
- Program-funded collaboration coaches provide support, training, coaching, and resources to help school teams continuously monitor and support at-risk students.
- GraduateFIRST is funded by a five-year State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs.

How Does GraduateFIRST Work?

GraduateFIRST was designed under the NDPC-SD Dropout Prevention Intervention Framework (DPIF). The DPIF has five-phases; (1) establishment of state and local leadership teams that can develop, sustain and expand efforts; (2) analyses of relevant school data to identify risk and protective factors within the school; (3) identification and consensus of priority areas of needs identified through data analysis; (4) identification and selection of evidence-based interventions/practices to address needs; and (5) development and implementation of effective programs in dropout prevention. In developing the GraduateFIRST program, NDPC-SD and Georgia staff worked together to apply this framework to the needs of Georgia's LEAs and students.

NDPC-SD has a two-level training plan to provide guided practices for SEA or LEA teams implementing the DPIF. Level 1 training is an evidence-based, differentiated course of study comprised of five study modules delivered over six days of interactive training. Level One culminates in the development of an action plan to guide implementation during the first 6-9 months of the initiative.

During Level Two, targeted support for implementation is provided to cohort schools via teleconferences, consultations, coaching, and booster sessions. Continuous evaluation allows schools and their partner TA providers to examine the efficacy of selected interventions, and to identify additional training needs on school sites.

Diagnosing the Problem

After being trained on the use of the NDPC-SD DPIF, middle and high schools participating in the GraduateFIRST program establish school-based teams and team leaders. These teams and team leaders assist in the identification of effective strategies to improve graduation rates, and turn those strategies into site-specific school improvement plans.

School teams begin by conducting a "data probe" to review information about students who fail to graduate. As part of the data probe, teams may analyze student attendance patterns, scores on district or state assessments, course grades, and/or behavior infractions. Teams use the results of their data probes to choose evidence-based dropout prevention strategies recommended by the NDPC-SD or by other participating schools (shared on the program's website at www.graduatefirst.org).

Evidence-based Strategies

The dropout prevention strategies schools choose vary according to the needs identified by the on-site teams. In cases where students at risk of dropping out have expressed a lack of a sense of belonging in their school community, schools have implemented approaches designed to scale up student engagement. This has alternately meant forging a stronger connection to the classroom by

scaling up academic engagement, and reexamining behavioral engagement (are students choosing to engage their peers and teachers and attend school each day)?

One high school team determined that chronic absenteeism was one of the driving factors behind their school's dropout problem. With the support of the GraduateFIRST project, the school developed an action plan to boost attendance and reengage students in the academic experience. Teachers now call families of children who incur five absences or more, and if teachers are unable to make the parent contact, administrators assume that responsibility. The school also instituted an incentive program for good attendance, offering rewards suggested by the students themselves. School staff credit this plan with decreasing the percentage of students who were absent from school for more than 15 days from 21% in 2010 to 5.3% in 2011.

Student Monitoring

In addition to putting strategies and interventions in place schoolwide, school teams continuously monitor up to 50 students identified as being "at risk of dropping out." Teams track students' attendance, behavior (including in-school and out-of-school suspensions), and academic performance (including the number of courses the targeted students are failing). At least half of the students being monitored must be students with disabilities. Currently, more than 4,000 students across Georgia are being supported by this process as a part of GraduateFIRST.

In addition to tracking students' progress, teams use the data collected to determine appropriate student-specific supports and interventions. These interventions generate a lot of excitement when they begin to make an impact on campus, creating an atmosphere where students and school officials become motivated by their own success.

Collaboration Coaches

Following an initial two-day training, school teams receive ongoing support from "collaboration coaches." These coaches, who are critical to the success of the program, assist school teams with data collection and analysis, provide resources on evidence-based strategies, support the implementation of selected strategies, and

work to build the capacity of team leaders through continuous communication and coaching. The half-time coaches are funded by a five-year State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) and are coordinated by the Georgia Learning Resource System (GLRS) Centers, state-funded regional centers designed to support the needs of students with disabilities. GraduateFIRST personnel agree that the coaching component is the most powerful piece of the project, and see this reflected in the depth and breadth of support coaches provide to participating schools.

“ GraduateFIRST personnel agree that the coaching component is the most powerful piece of the project. ”



Students and Team Leaders address attendees at the GraduateFIRST Fall Institute.

Lessons Learned: Voices of Georgia State Officials

We asked Georgia state officials what lessons they have learned implementing GraduateFIRST and what advice they would give to other states interested in developing a similar initiative. Here is what they told us:

1. Determine School Readiness

Not all schools are ready for GraduateFIRST. Some schools have dropped out of the program, and others were not successful because of their structures or administrative turnover. Since GraduateFIRST requires the active involvement of school-based teams, schools need to have a voice in deciding when the timing is right for them.

2. Build Local Capacity to Solve the Problem

NDPC-SD emphasizes that dropout is a complex problem with no single “best” solution. GraduateFIRST’s goal is to help schools build the capacity to identify what they need and to help them decide what strategies will be the best contextual fit for them rather than to prescribe a specific solution.

3. Make Coaching Sustainable

The coaching provided to school teams in GraduateFIRST is one of the keys to its success, but coaching is costly. Georgia officials are already thinking about how to sustain this critical element of the project in the future. Several solutions are currently in place including newly developed data analysis tools that do some of the work formerly assigned to collaboration coaches. Another solution is to provide school team leaders with collaboration coach training sessions to increase the capacity of those leaders to perform coaching tasks.

4. Avoid Silos

Georgia officials caution against creating silos at the state level. Deborah Gay, Georgia’s Director of the Division for Special Education, and members of the GraduateFIRST design team meet regularly with the state’s school improvement division and other divisions to integrate their efforts. This brings greater coordination and coherence to the work of the state department, which is critical to local buy-in and project credibility.

5. Creatively Deploy State Resources

Georgia did not have the necessary staff at the Department of Education to give all school teams direct access to coaches, so they sought the support of the Georgia Learning Resource System (GLRS) Centers network. These regional centers, which focus on improving results for students with disabilities, have relationships with schools and districts in their geographic areas. Each GLRS director hires and supports the GraduateFIRST collaboration coach in his or her region. As a result of this collaboration, state officials can focus on the coordination of the program statewide and on development of tools and resources for coaches and participating schools rather than on the provision of direct services.

6. Utilize Technical Assistance Providers

In addition to their work with NDPC-SD, Georgia also collaborates closely with the IDEA Partnership to embed family engagement into GraduateFIRST. Through the framework of Circles of Adults Focusing on Education (CAFE), schools and families use the IDEA Partnership’s nationally known dialogue guide process, and learn to better address systemic issues related to identifying and supporting at-risk students.

7. Celebrate Success!

State and regional staff agree that the most important piece of advice they can offer to other states interested in starting a project like GraduateFIRST is not to get discouraged. The process evolves each new school year, and each grant year offers lessons about improving the program. While aspects of the project may change, be updated, or be revised, incremental successes need to be celebrated along the way.

Resources

For additional information on GraduateFIRST, please consult:

GraduateFIRST website
<http://www.graduatefirst.org>

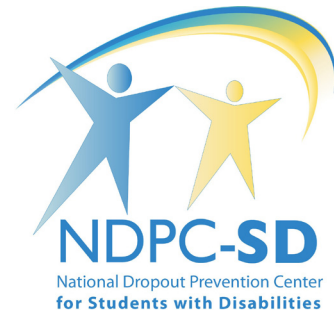
Georgia Department of Education SPDG website
http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/ci_exceptional.aspx?PageReq=CIEXCSIG

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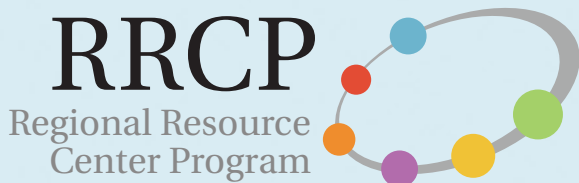
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Student Performance & Achievement



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This Spotlight Brief is developed and distributed by the Student Performance and Achievement (SPA) Priority Team. Membership includes staff from the **RRCP** and the **NDPC-SD**.