An Analysis of State Performance Plan 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

April 2006

INDICATOR 1: GRADUATION

INTRODUCTION

The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) was assigned the task of summarizing Indicator 1—Graduation—for the analysis of the 2005 – 2010 State Performance Plans (SPP), which were submitted to OSEP in December of 2005. The text of the indicator is as follows.

> Percent of youth with IEPs graduating from high school with a regular diploma compared to percent of all youth in the State graduating with a regular diploma.

In the SPP, states reported and compared their graduation rates for special education students and all students, set appropriate targets for improvement, and described their planned improvement strategies and activities.

This report summarizes the NDPC-SD's findings for Indicator 1 across the 50 states, commonwealths and territories, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), 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 BIA.

The evaluation and comparison of graduation rates for the states was confounded by several issues, which will be described in the context of the summary information for the indicator. The attached Excel file contains summary charts and tables that support the text of this report.

The definition of graduation

The definition of graduation is not consistent across states. Some states offer a single "regular" diploma, which represents the only true route to graduation. Other states offer two or more levels of diplomas or other exiting document, (For example, some states offer a Regular diploma, a High School Certificate, and a Special Ed diploma.). Some states include General Education Development (GED) candidates as graduates, whereas the majority of states do not. Until a consistent definition of graduation can be established and effected, making meaningful comparisons of graduation rates from state to state will be difficult, at best.

Within-state comparisons—consistency

States were instructed that the measurement for graduation rates for special education students should be the same as the measurement for all youth. Additionally, they were directed to explain their calculations. Forty-seven states (78%) were internally consistent, using the same method to calculate both their rates. Five states (8%), however, used different methods for calculating the two rates. Eight states (13%) did

not specify how they calculated one or both of their rates, though all did reiterate the OSEP statement that measurement was the same for both groups.

The states that employed two different calculations generally cited a lack of comparable data for the two groups of students as having forced the use of different methods. For example, as required under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), states generally calculate average daily membership (total enrollment) per grade in September or October of the year. Special education student counts, however, were usually derived from the 618 data and reflected the number of students between ages 14 – 21 (or 17 – 21 in other states) enrolled in school on December 1st of the year. Several states that used disparate calculations acknowledged that comparisons of the rates should not be made.

Types of comparisons made

The graduation indicator requires a comparison of the percent of youth in special education graduating with a regular high school diploma to the percent of all youth in the state graduating with a regular diploma. The majority of states (56%) made the requested comparison. Twenty-two percent of the states compared special-education rates to general-education rates. Twelve percent made both comparisons. The remaining states (10%) were unable to make comparisons because they were lacking either their special education or all-student graduation rate.

Between-state comparisons—calculation methods

Even for those states that were internally consistent in calculating graduation rates, comparisons among the states were often not possible because the method of calculation was variable from state to state. The graduation rates included in the SPPs were generally calculated using one of two methods: the method recommended by OSEP or that recommended by NCES. The OSEP formula used by states generally followed the form below.

$$\frac{\text{\# of graduates receiving a regular diploma}}{\text{\# of graduates + \# of students receiving GED + \# of dropouts + \# who maxed out in age + \# deceased}}$$

The NCES formula provides a graduation rate for a 4-year cohort of students. This method, as applied in the SPPs, generally followed the form below.

$$\frac{\text{\# graduates receiving a regular diploma}}{\text{\# graduates receiving a regular diploma + the 4 year cohort of dropouts}}$$

Graduation rates calculated using the OSEP formula cannot properly be compared with those derived using the NCES formula. The OSEP method tends to over-represent the graduation rate, providing a snapshot of the graduation rate for a particular year that

ignores attrition over time, whereas the NCES method provides a more realistic description of the number of students who actually made it through four years of high school and graduated.

Thirty-five states (58%) used the cohort method for calculating special-education graduation rates. Sixteen states (27%) used the OSEP method; 8 states (13%) did not specify how this rate was calculated; and the Bureau of Indian Affairs used the method employed by each state in which one of its schools was located. While many states began switching to a cohort rate several years ago and were able to report a true cohort rate for 2004-05, others reported that they were in the process of adopting a cohort-based graduation calculation and would not have their first complete set of cohort data until a year or two from now.

A prerequisite to adoption of a cohort system is the establishment of a means by which a state can track individual students within the school system, across schools and districts. This requires that each student have a unique student identifier. While several states indicated that they are in the process of setting up such systems, many states have yet to take this step.

Baseline year

States were directed to provide baseline graduation-rate data for the 2004-05 school year and to set graduation targets for the out years of the Performance Plan based on these data. Forty-one states (68%) complied and provided data from the 2004-05 school year. Seventeen states (28%) reported baseline data from the 2003-04 school year because the 2004-05 data were not available when the SPP was written. One state (2%) reported its baseline data from the 2002-03 school year and one other state (2%) did not provide baseline data at this time.

GRADUATION RATES

Across the 60 states, the highest reported graduation rate for special education students was 92.5% and the lowest was 4%.

Figure 1 shows those rates for states that used the OSEP method; Figure 2 shows the all-student and special education graduation rates for those states that calculated using the cohort method; and Figure 3 shows those states that did not specify the method(s) used in calculation their rates. Note that all figures in this report are included in the attached Excel file.
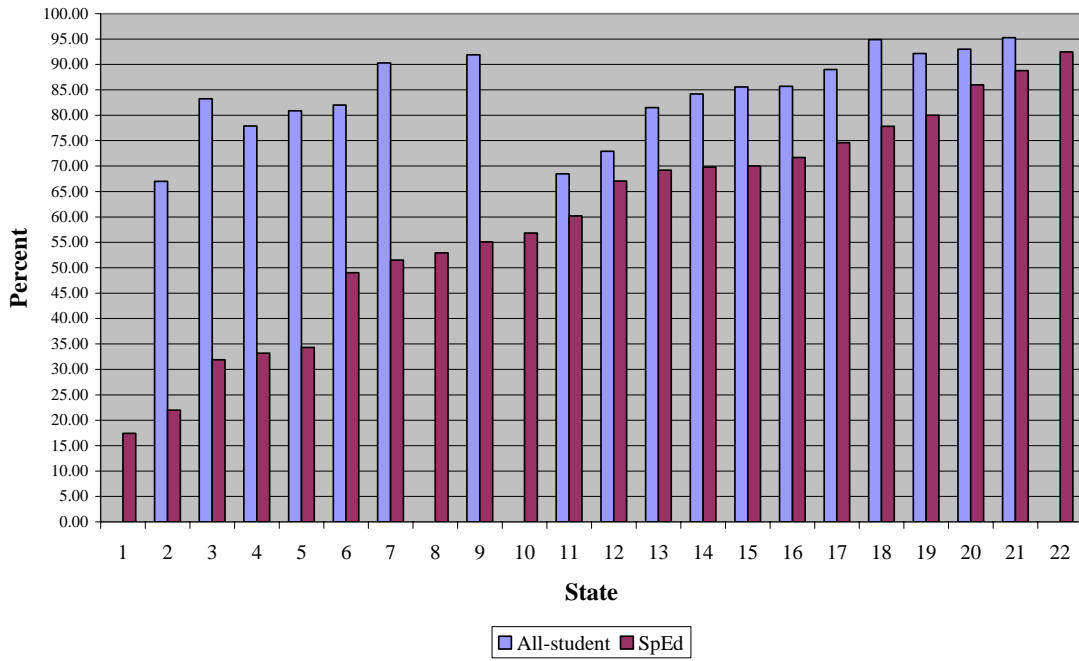
Graduation Rates in States that Used the OSEP Method

Figure 1

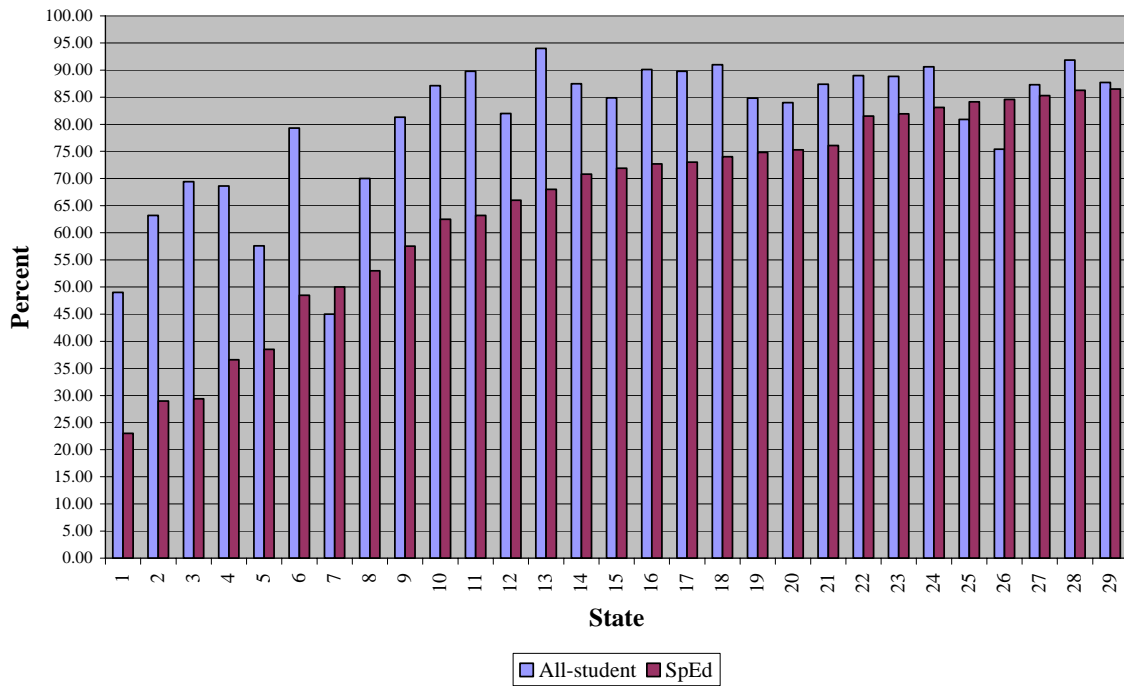**Graduation Rates in States that Used a Cohort Method**

Figure 2

Graduation Rates in States that Did Not Specify a Method of Calculation
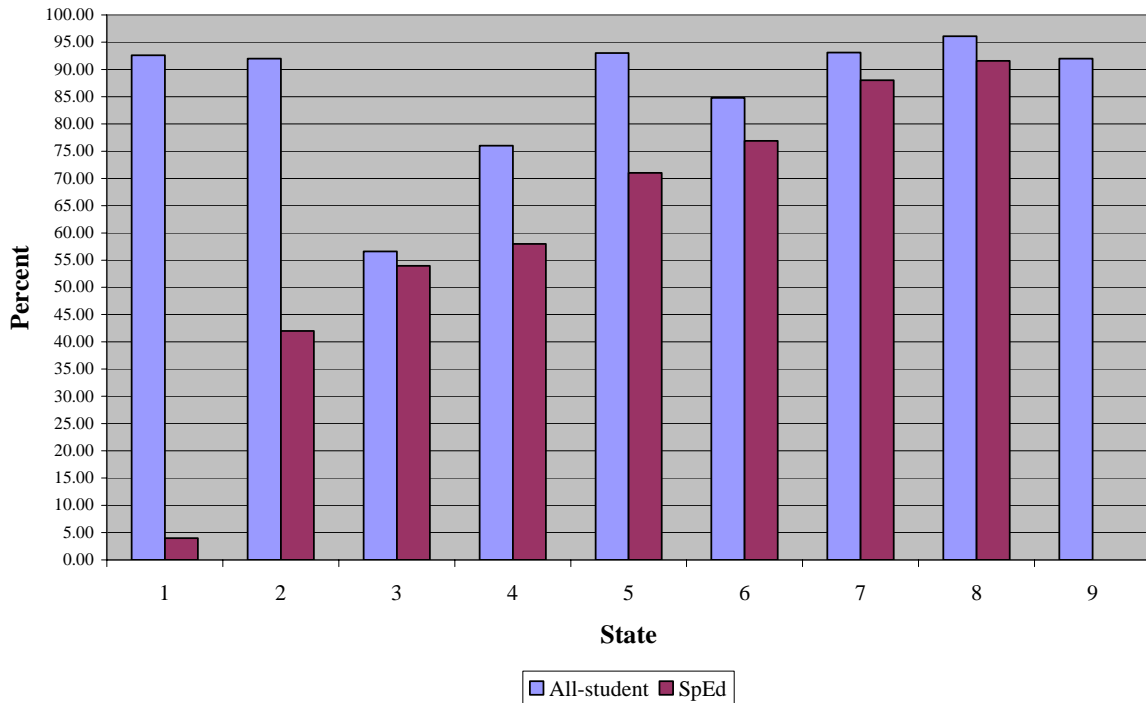

Figure 3

GRADUATION GAP

States were instructed to identify and address any gap that exists between the all-student graduation rate and the rate for special education students. To calculate that gap, the special education rate is subtracted from the all-student rate. If a gap exists and has a positive value, this indicates that the all-student graduation rate is higher than the rate for special education students. Conversely, a negative value for a gap indicates that special education students graduate at a higher rate than the entire population of students in the state.

Figure 4 shows the graduation-rate gap for the states. Those states for which a gap value is missing did not report one of the two graduation rates required to calculate the gap value.

Graduation Rate Gap
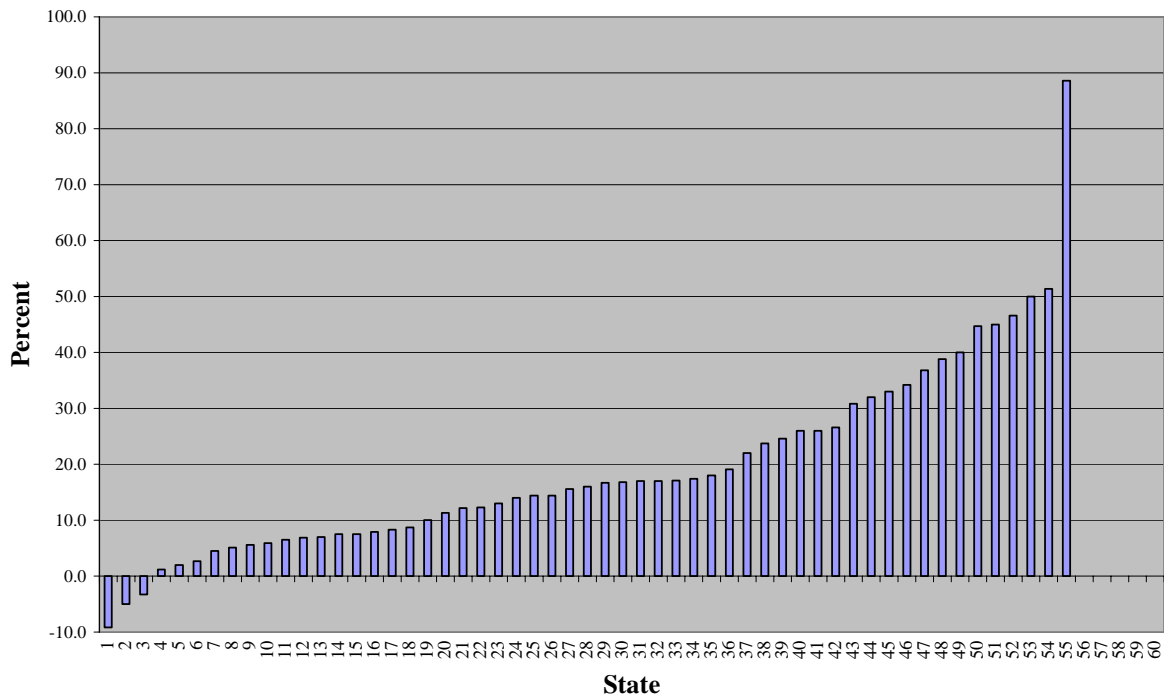**(All-student Graduation Rate - Special Education Graduation Rate)**

Figure 4

GRADUATION RATE TARGETS

Most states described their graduation targets in terms of a graduation rate that they plan to achieve during each year of the SPP. Of the 60 states, 51 (85%) specified their targets in this manner. The remaining states described their targets in a variety of ways that can be categorized as 1) improving over the previous year by x%, 2) decreasing the graduation gap by x% per year, 3) improving the graduation rate within a certain range each year, or 4) moving a specified number or percentage of districts to a particular graduation rate. The distribution of states, by method, is summarized in Table 2.

While OSEP instructed states to set measurable and rigorous targets for their special-education graduation rates, the definition of rigorous was perhaps not clearly communicated clearly enough to the states. The proposed amount of improvement across the years of the plan ranged between 0.8% and 30%. Not surprisingly, this value was negatively correlated with the baseline graduation rate ($r = -0.4835$). States reporting relatively high baseline graduation rates generally proposed less ambitious increments of improvement than did states with lower rates. A breakdown of targeted improvement across the years of the SPPs is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

*Proposed amounts of improvement in special education graduation rates
by the end of the 2010-11 school year*

Range of improvement	Number of states
0% - 5.0%	24
5.1% - 10.0%	11
10.1% - 15.0%	5
15.1% - 20.0%	3
20.1% - 25.0%	4
>25%	2
Unable to calculate because of method of specifying targets	11

IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

States were instructed to report the strategies, activities, timelines, and resources they plan to employ in order to improve the special education dropout rate over the years of the SPP. The range of proposed activities was considerable. Some activities employed evidence based practices, while others were of a more basic nature. Thirteen states (22%) cited the same activities for the Dropout and Graduation indicators, saying that the two indicators are so tightly intertwined that combining the efforts made sense.

In order to facilitate comparison of efforts across states, NDPC-SD coded the activities into 11 subcategories, which were summed by content into 5 major categories: data, monitoring, technical assistance, program development, and policy. Center staff then calculated the percentage of effort directed toward each of the major categories.

Figure 5 shows the overall distribution of activities, by major category, across all states. A list of the categories and subcategories appears in Appendix A with examples of activities for each.
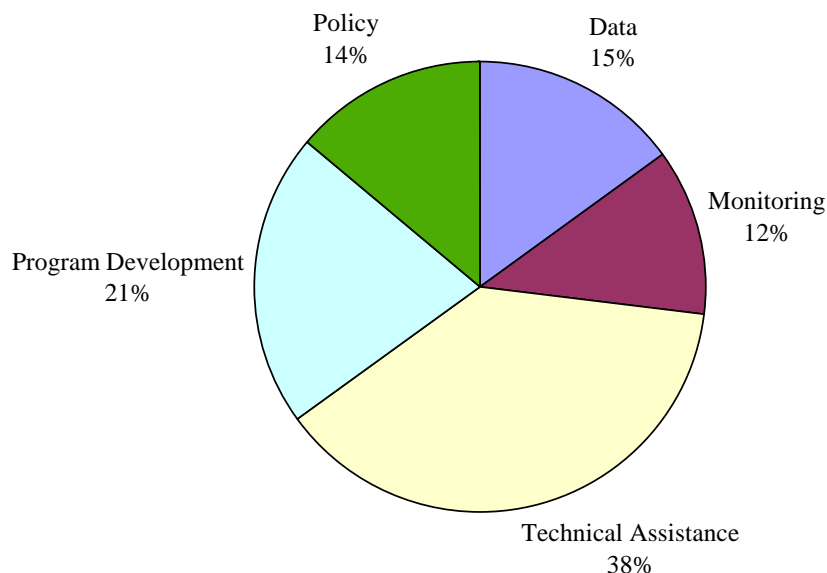
Distribution of Activities (for all states)

Figure 5

Level of specificity and assertion of effectiveness

Most of the activities were general in nature and did not provide a level of specificity sufficient to make decisions regarding the likelihood that their efforts would result in substantial improvement. On a promising note, thirty-two states (53%) included at least one activity with some evidence of effectiveness. Among these activities were training and technical assistance for school districts in positive behavioral supports to reduce suspensions and behavioral infractions; service learning and mentoring; academic support for struggling adolescent readers; universal design for learning; cognitive behavioral interventions; parent training; and early efforts to improve instruction at the middle-school level. SEA-sponsored initiatives also include Project GRAD, Gear Up, and transition initiatives.

Several states structured their activities in a capacity-building framework to support the meeting of future targets. These frameworks generally included the following activities:

1) Organize an interagency task force or work group study, including local education agency (LEA) personnel and parents to review literature, analyze district data, identify factors that encourage students to stay in school, and make recommendations on how to build local district capacity for improving graduation rate.

2) Convene a representative focus group of secondary-education students (middle and high school) with disabilities to collect feedback on protective factors to help students stay in school and graduate.

3) Adjust/revise monitoring system to establish triggers for causal analysis and develop key performance indicators and monitoring probes (focused monitoring).

4) Using products from the TA&D Network specialty centers to develop technical assistance materials relevant to their populations and disseminate to all LEAs.

5) Train district-level teams on research-based programs and strategies for effective school completion drop out prevention.

6) Identify a small number of districts and create building-level models.

7) Evaluate the results of activities and, based on those data, determine the effectiveness of the efforts as well as the need for additional activities.

8) Consider policy and legislative recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) States should, as much as possible, obtain their all-student and special education data using comparable methods at comparable times of the year. This may be difficult, as the December 1 Child Count generally serves as the source for the special-education data and states' total enrollment is usually collected earlier in the fall. Until the timing of these counts can be reconciled, the data cannot be compared accurately.

2) In order to make comparisons among states possible, the manner in which graduation rates are calculated must be standardized. Many states are moving toward the use of a cohort-based calculation method, though not all states are there yet. This move, toward what most feel is a more accurate method, should yield a fairly realistic picture of graduation.

3) Comparisons of graduation rates would also be facilitated if it were possible to standardize what constitutes graduation (i.e. whether a GED or a certificate may be counted, and how to address students that take more than 4 years to graduate). At this point, different states sanction different credentials as official proof of graduation. This confounds accurate comparisons across states.

4) In the next round of APRs and SPPs, it would be helpful to have states report the exact calculation(s) used in arriving at their graduation rates as well as the exact source of the data used in both the all-student and special-education rate calculations.

5) In the next round of APRs and SPPs, it would be very helpful for OSEP to specify and provide an example of the exact manner in which states should describe their targets for improvement.

6) In comparing the 2005 SPPs with the 2005 APRs, the benefit of OSEP's guidance through providing a template for submission, definitions and descriptions of calculations and data-analysis strategies is apparent. In the next round of APRs and SPPs, it would be very beneficial to provide states with similar templates and additional guidance that would assist them in identifying improvement activities, timelines, and resources. This should include more specific guidelines regarding what constitutes measurable and rigorous targets; effective, evidence-based activities; and capacity-building activities.

APPENDIX A – ACTIVITY AND STRATEGY CATEGORIES WITH EXAMPLES

Data activities

1. I*mprove the accuracy of data collection and school district accountability via technical assistance, public reporting/dissemination, or collaboration across other data reporting systems. Developing or connecting data collection systems.*

   Examples:

   A. Aligning statewide calculation and graduation rates for students with and without disabilities using cohort approach.

   B. Providing guidance to all school districts regarding the state's graduation rate calculations and data points.

   C. Providing training to LEAs to increase consistency in their methods of reporting graduation and dropout rates.

   D. Examining the use of "Transferred, not Known to be Continuing" category and develop methods to ensure accuracy of reporting (E.g., unique student identifiers, implement and monitor procedures for timely and accurate reporting of transfer students).

   E. Implementing a system for providing and tracking unique student identifiers across the state.

2. *Analyzing state level graduation-rate data and identifying school districts with high /low rates to plan for future focused analysis.*

   Examples:

   A. Identify school districts for analysis of cause that would result in systematic problem solving for low performers and identification of potential improvement strategies in districts with high graduation rates.

   B. Disaggregate state level data by disability categories, ethnicity, and geographic regions and identify trends in data to inform improvement activities.

   C. Analyze data across indicators related to graduation (dropout, transition, parental involvement, suspensions and expulsions) to establish corollary relationships for focused monitoring.

Monitoring activities

3. *Refine/ Revise monitoring systems including focused monitoring*

Examples:

A. Include specific performance indicators/measures for continuous monitoring of graduation and dropout rates

B. Establish performance triggers for focused monitoring

C. Require improvement/corrective actions plans and follow up visits to evaluate effectiveness of improvement efforts

D. Require LEAs with low graduation rates to engage in analysis of causes

E. Insure that transition plans for each student address unique challenges for meeting graduation requirements

F. Survey a sample of students of students with disabilities about challenges faced in the school setting and factors that help them stay in school

Technical assistance

4. *Provide technical assistance/training to LEAs on effective practices and model programs*

Examples:

A. Provide technical assistance on effective practices (e.g., struggling adolescent readers, PBIS, problem solving, UDL, progress monitoring) to help students achieve success in middle and high school

B. Provide training on high school reform models on effective math and literacy instruction

C. Compile and disseminate effective practices/strategies from districts that have made progress in improving graduation rates

5. *Provide technical assistance to promote early student and family involvement*

Examples:

A. Train parents and students on self- determination and self- advocacy skills

B. Train parents, school personnel, and students on strategies to increase parental involvement at the local level

6. *Receive technical assistance from TA&D network projects*

Examples:

A.   Collaborate with the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities to identify effective strategies/interventions to support school completion

B.   Collaborate with the Youth in Transitions Partnership to implement Transition to Independence Process (TIP)

C.   Receive technical assistance from NSTTAC to identify effective transition models

D.   Receive TA from BPIS to develop school wide sites in high schools

Program development

7.   *Develop new statewide initiatives in school completion*

Examples:

A.   Project 720- High School reform initiative, Project 720 (which refers to the number of days in a High School student's career). This program will result in significant redesign of instruction at the secondary level. Its goals are to create High School environments that are student-centered, results focused, data informed, and personalized in a way that seamlessly supports systems, resources, technology and shared leadership. Schools that are part of Project 720 will commit to implementing reform strategies over a three year period. Data collected as part of Project 720 will be analyzed and included in future target settings for improving graduation rates.

B.   Project FOCUS Academy. This program is focused on creating professional development programs to help students with disabilities build sound career goals and learn skills to ensure successful post-secondary outcomes. The content covered in this program (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Universal Design for Learning, post-secondary planning, and family engagement) could have a long-term impact reducing dropout rates for students with disabilities.

C.   Abbott Secondary Education Initiative (Grades 6 through 12) – A three-year project intended to strengthen the academic performance of students in grades six through twelve in targeted districts via development and implementation of plans to transform their high schools into smaller leaning communities that have stronger connections to the school and community.

8. *Create incentive to publicly recognize exemplary school districts and use school districts as mentors*

A. Publicly recognize exemplary school districts for their work in developing data systems

B. Provide incentives for exemplary school districts to serve as mentors to districts of like demographics

9. *Target existing projects/programs to increase school completion efforts, including recruit and retain highly qualified teachers and personnel*

A. Use the State Improvement Grant staff (SIG) to target the improvement of special education students' performance at the middle school level in Math and English/Language Arts.

B. Use the Transition Outcomes Project (TOP) to develop and implement best practices leading to graduation and successful transition to post secondary roles.

C. Scale up Urban Literacy Initiative/Secondary Education Initiative: Literacy is Essential to Adolescent Development and Success (LEADs) model. The LEADs model serves students in Grades 4-8 and emphasizes working across disciplines, using interesting and contemporary literature, frequent writing, diverse texts, and targeted interventions for students reading two or more years below grade level.

D. "Dare to Dream" Student Leadership Regional Conferences provides training and guidance to students, parents, and school personnel in the areas of self-advocacy, IEP preparation, and legal rights and responsibilities and futures planning. The conference features presentations by youth and young adults with disabilities.

E. APEX Program – A recent award from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education for $2,143,000 is a 3 year dropout prevention grant (APEX II). APEX II will be implemented in 11 high schools and their feeder middle schools. This project combines positive behavioral supports with a focus on students at high risk of dropping out as well as those not attending. The state will adopt many of the APEX strategies to assist in the reduction of the graduation gap for students with and without IEPs.

F. SIGNAL Program – State Improvement Grant, Nurturing All Learners began August 1, 2004. The objectives of SIGNAL are to: create state-level systems change, through improved capacity of state-level transition personnel and staff

at postsecondary settings to support students with disabilities; increase the knowledge of education and related personnel, through the dissemination of transition resources; improve the skills and capacity of teachers through multiple professional development opportunities.

Policy activities

10. *Develop, convene, or participate in focus group/task force to study school completion issues*

    Examples:

    A. Organize/convene SEA level task force including (Special Education, Student Services, Counselor Education, Curriculum and Assessment, Migrant Education, Foster Care, Career and Technical Education, Safe Schools, and Corrections Education) to analyze district level data, identify factors that facilitate school completion, and make recommendations on building local capacity for improving graduation rates for all students.

    B. Convene representative focus group of middle and high school students with disabilities to collect feedback on factors that serve as facilitators, challenges, and barriers to school completion.

    C. Encourage LEAs to engage in self assessment, utilizing local action teams(including community agencies and business leaders) to examine programs, policies, and school climate variables that promote graduation and decrease dropout.

11. *Develop/revise policies to promote school completion; interagency collaboration*

    Examples:

    A. Review and revise current graduation rule requirements to establish clearly defined graduation and diploma requirements that:
       - include specific, objective criteria and are available to all students;
       - provide appropriate advance notice to allow reasonable time to prepare to meet the requirements or make informed decisions about alternative options, and consider the needs of individual students on a case-by-case basis; and
       - provide for additional alternative options for students with disabilities to earn the standard high school diploma.

    B. Revised state attendance policy to require an interagency protocol committee to require an interagency protocol committee to develop a comprehensive student attendance strategy aimed at reducing unexcused absences and interim monitoring, and ensuring the coordination and cooperation among officials, agencies, and programs.

C. Establish High School Redesign Commission and work groups to recommend policy level actions and assist state in redesigning high schools that promote academic achievement and address academic needs of all students.