An Analysis of States' FFY 2009 Annual Performance Report Data for Indicator 1 (Graduation)

A Report Prepared for the

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by the

National Dropout Prevention Center

for Students with Disabilities

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

NDPC-SD

Indicator 1 – Graduation Rate

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 2009 Annual Performance Reports (APRs) and amended State Performance Plans (SPPs), which were submitted by states to OSEP on February 1st of 2011. 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, the territories, and the BIE.

Last year, 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 2009 APR, use data from the 2008-2009 school year), and compare the results to the target for the 2008-09 school year. 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' Section 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. Once states have all switched to using the new calculation, a major barrier to making valid comparisons of the two rates will have been removed and making such comparisons will be 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. 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. It is adjusted to reflect transfers into and out of the cohort (i.e., out of the school), as well as loss of students to death.

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 five-year cohort or a five-year plus a six-year cohort). Because students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency face additional obstacles to completing their coursework and examinations within the standard four-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. Several states have taken advantage of this option, and it is likely that this provision for using extended cohorts will become more important in years to come, as many states have increased their academic credit and course requirements for all students to graduate.

The 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.

Most were at least able to comply with the new data requirements in the current APR. Only nine states calculated their graduation rate using Section 618 data this year. Three states reported that they did so because they were unable to disaggregate their ESEA data and identify students with disabilities. The 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.

With the changes in calculation and data source, many states still need to set a baseline in the year or years to come. Those states that have yet to adopt the new adjusted cohort calculation will have to undertake this in the year to come, or years to come, if they have received an extension on the deadline from the U.S. Department of Education.

CALCULATION METHODS

States are not required to implement the new adjusted cohort rate calculation until the 2010-11 school year, and most did not. In the FFY 2009 APR, 35 states (58%) reported a leaver rate, 15 states (25%) reported an adjusted cohort rate, six states (10%) reported a cohort rate, and four states (7%) reported an event graduation rate. Figures 1 – 4 show states' graduation rates, based on the type of calculation employed.

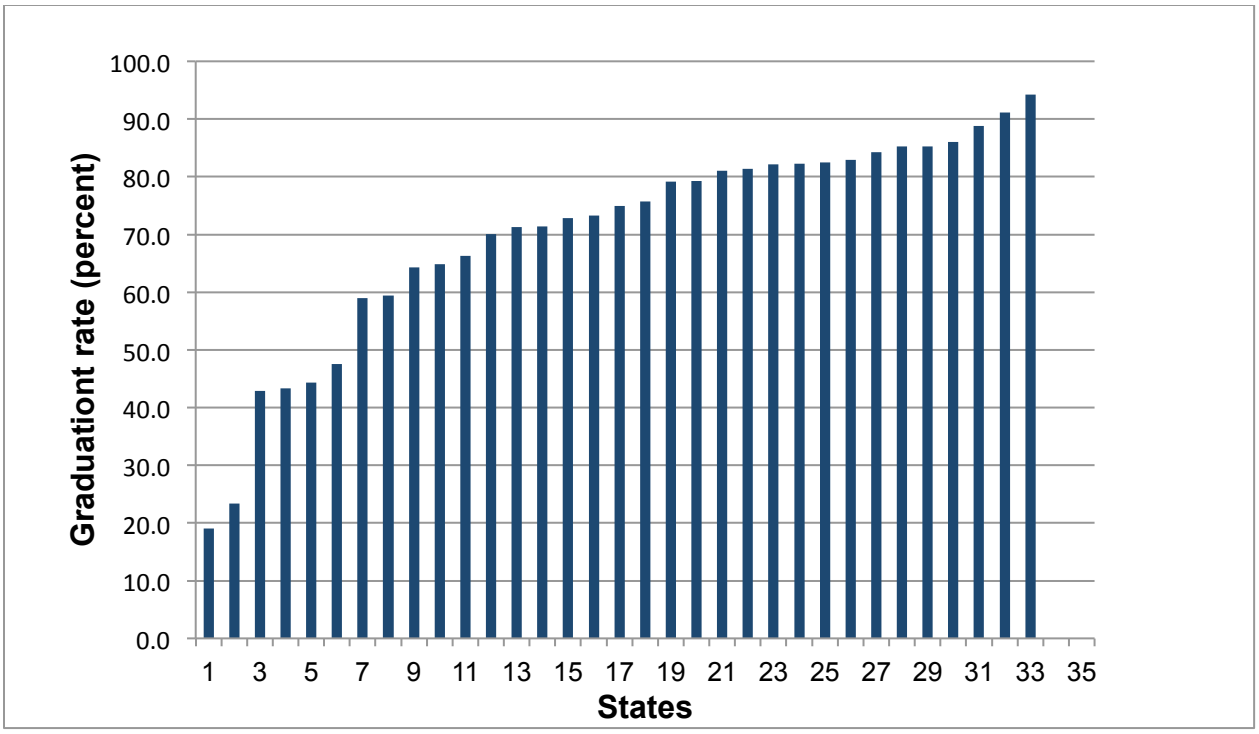

Figure 1
Graduation rates for states calculating a leaver rate

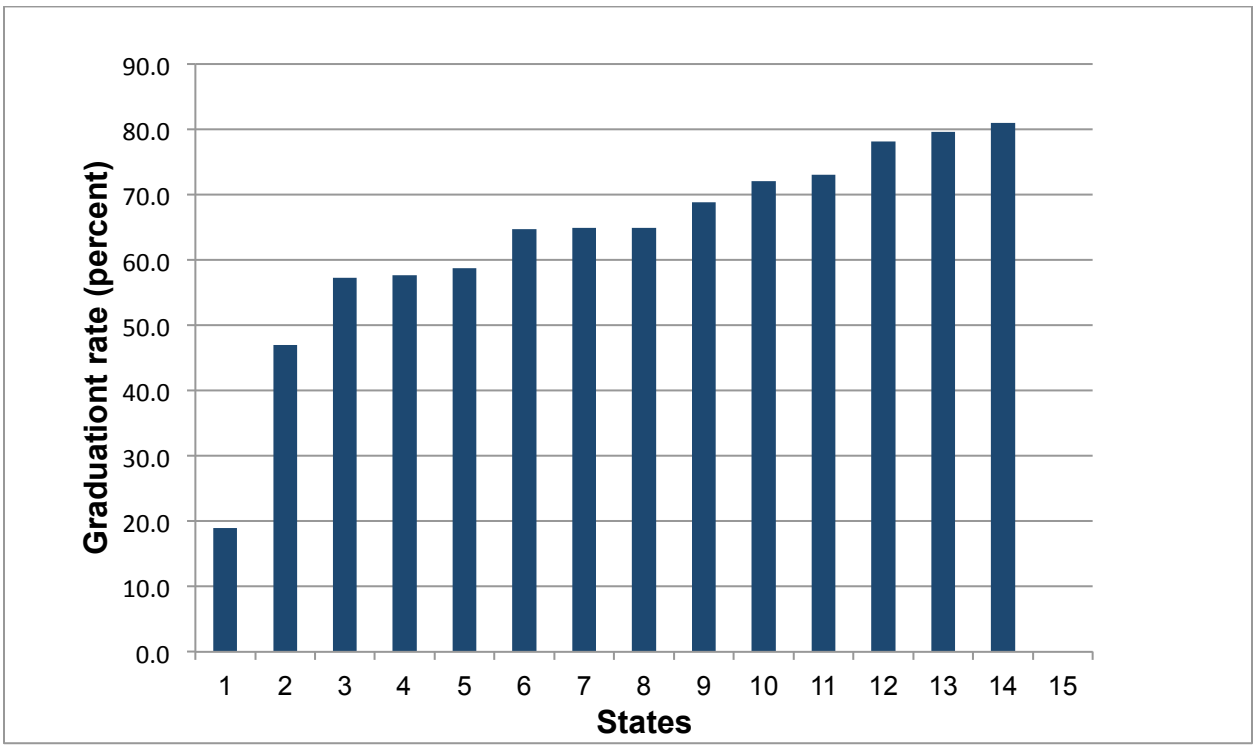

Figure 2
Graduation rates for states calculating an adjusted cohort rate

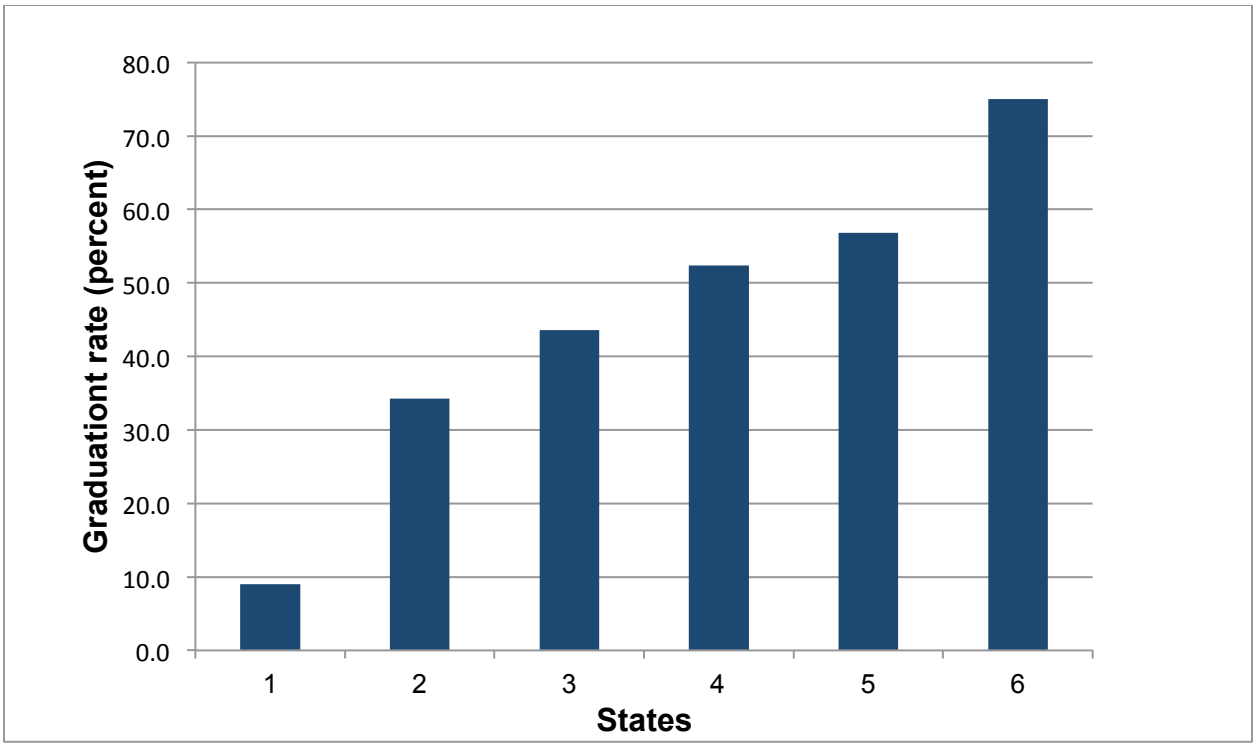

Figure 3
Graduation rates for states calculating a cohort rate

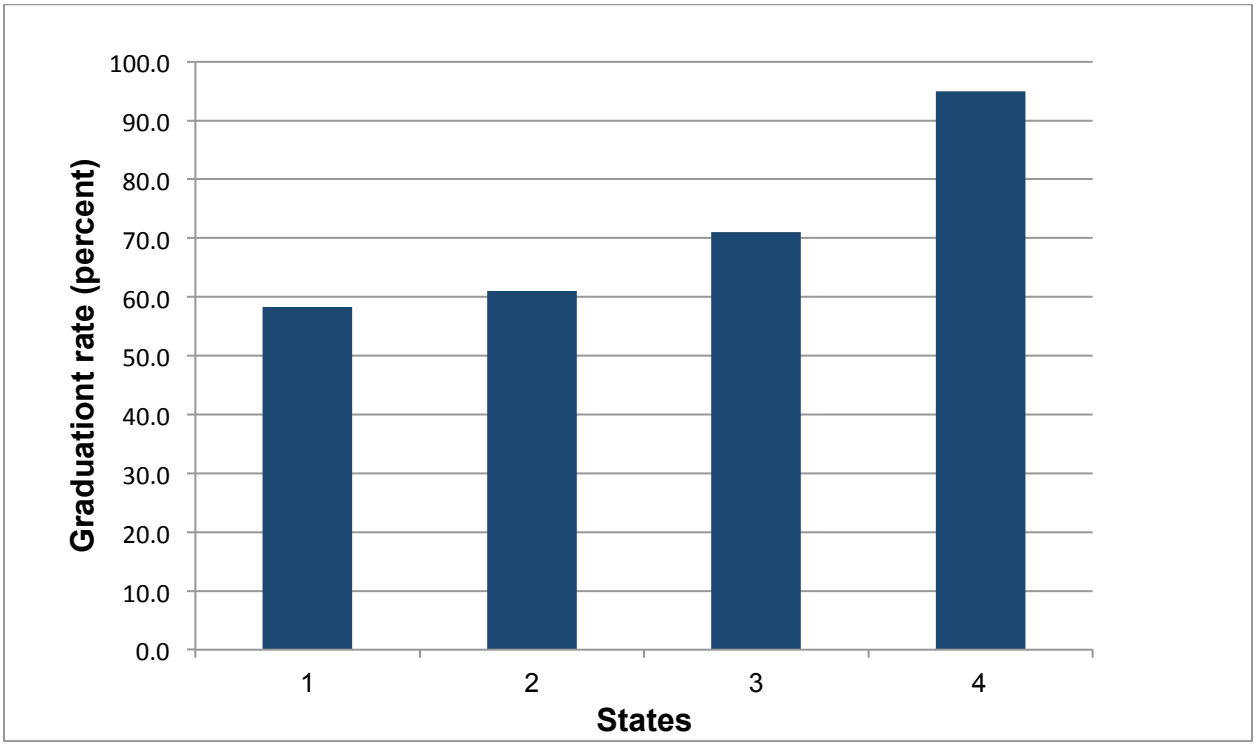

Figure 4
Graduation rates for states calculating an event rate

STATES' PERFORMANCE ON THE INDICATOR

States were instructed to use the same graduation rate targets for students with disabilities that are in place under ESEA. Still, many compared their 2008-09 data—lagged by a year, per ESEA requirements—with their performance targets for 2009-10, rather than with the targets for 2008-09. When OSEP compared states' actual performance with their targets to determine whether targets were met and to assess progress or slippage, this was corrected. The comparisons shown in this summary report were made using graduation targets and data from the 2008-09 school year.

In FFY 2009, 25 states (42%) met or exceeded their graduation rate targets; 32 states (53%) missed their target; and three states (5%) were unable to determine their progress due to missing data. Overall, 34 states (57%) made progress, raising their graduation rate, whereas the rate decreased in 21 states (35%). The rate in five states (8%) remained unchanged from the previous year. Figure 5 compares each state's 2008-09 graduation rate with its 2008-09 performance target for the indicator.

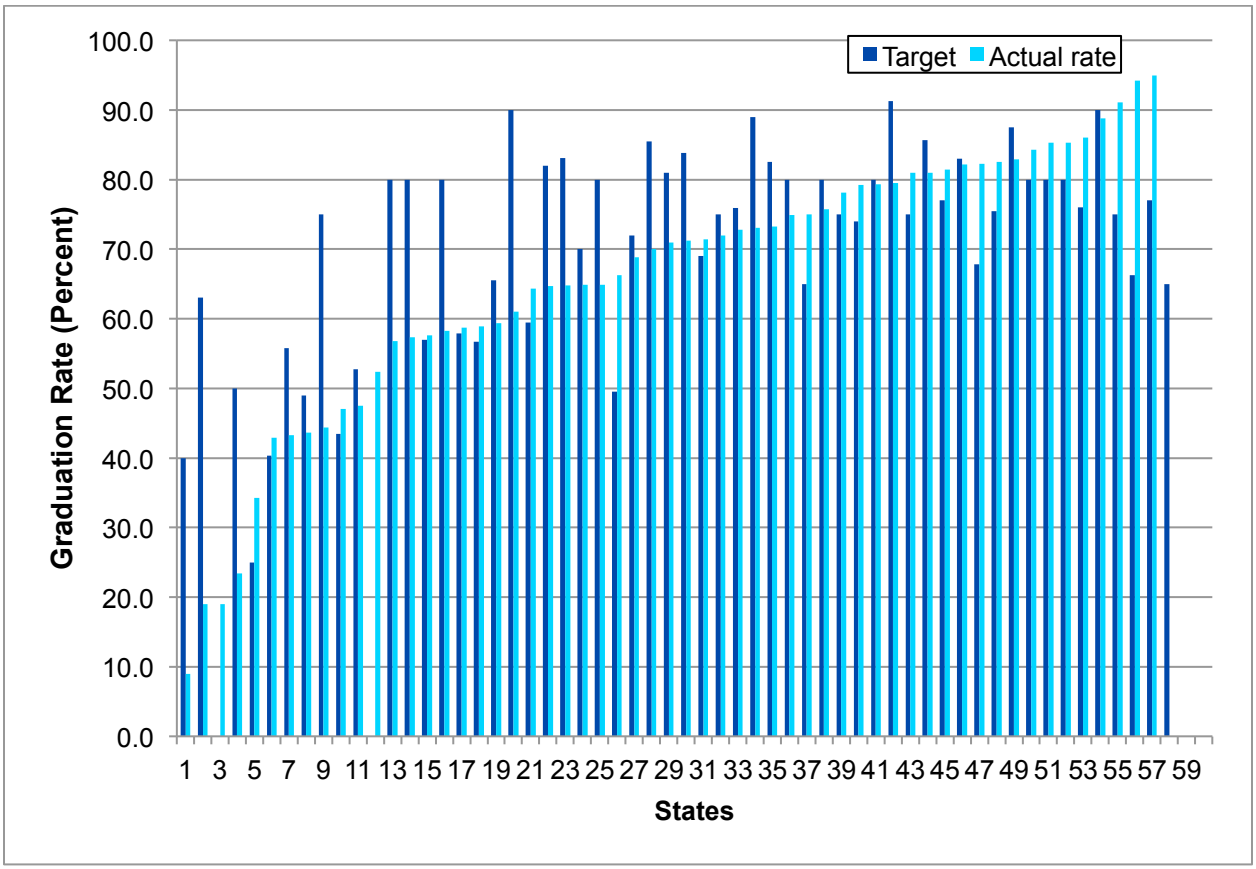

Figure 5
States performance targets compared with their actual graduation rates

Of the 32 states that missed their target for this indicator, 17 states improved their performance over that reported in the previous year, 13 others showed slippage in their graduation rate, and two states' rate remained unchanged from the previous year. Figure 6 shows states sorted by the amount of progress or slippage made on Indicator 2.

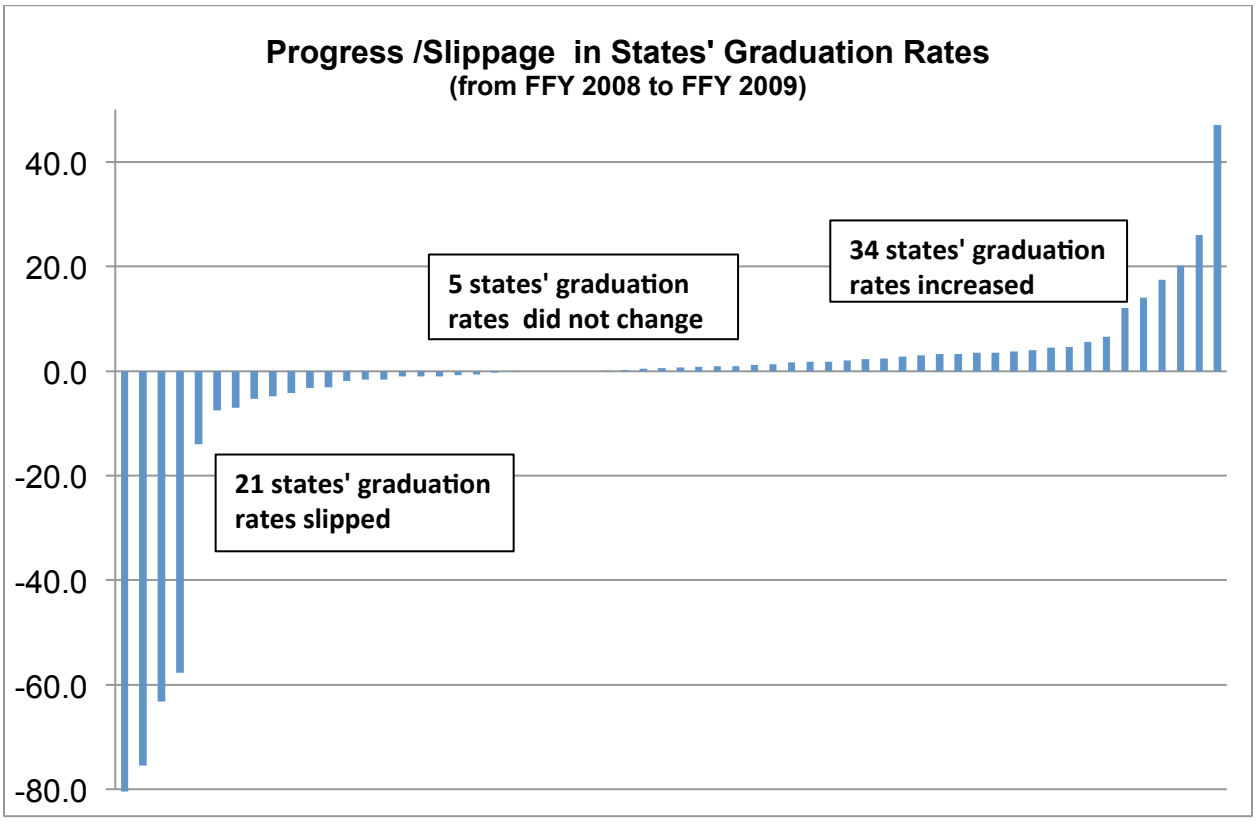

Figure 6
Changes in states' graduation rates from the FFY 2008 APR

In the extended FFY 2009 SPPs, which included performance targets through FFY 2012, 29 states (48%) set their dropout rate targets for students with disabilities at a constant level (flat). Twenty-eight states (47%) reported targets that would continue lowering their rates. One of these states reported that their SPP targets were higher than their ESEA targets, so they would continue with the more rigorous targets. The remaining three states (5%) reported that they were in the process of developing new targets for the remaining years of the SPP.

IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

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, though many states described the use of data-based decision making to guide improvement activities and to identify at-risk youth.

Fifty-two states (87%) acknowledged the connections between their activities for at least Indicators 1 and 2. Forty-one of those states (68%) reported the same set of activities for both indicators. Many states clustered at least some, if not all, of their activities for Indicators 1, 2, 4, 13, and 14: indicators intimately tied to secondary transition. In these states, there was a concerted focus to promote successful secondary transition practices as a means to keep youth engaged in and participating in school-related activities. Many states also reported activities aimed to engage parents and families in becoming partners in educating their children.

The utilization of evidence-based strategies and interventions as well as "promising practices" around school completion continued among states. There are a number of evidence-based school-completion programs that have demonstrated efficacy for students with disabilities. The *IES Practice Guide on Dropout Prevention* (Dynarski, et al., 2008) describes several of these approaches to keeping youth in school and discusses the degrees of evidence supporting each. For example, it recommends the diagnostic use of data systems to support a realistic estimate of the number of students who drop out and to help identify individual students at high risk of dropping out. It also recommends assigning adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out as well as providing academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance. 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 commonly described interventions and the number of states reporting their use in the APR.

Table 1

Evidence-based and promising practices reported in the FFY 2009 APRs

Nature of intervention	**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

Data-based decision making was a widespread activity, reported by 40 states (67%) in this APR. Several states are using or developing early warning systems using their longitudinal data to identify youth who are at risk of dropping out of school. Among the data being employed are information about students' attendance, behavior, grade retention, and academic achievement. Of the states using early warning systems, 15 met their performance target for Indicator 1.

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 Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

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 essential for diagnosing the extent to which schools will need to implement strategies to address dropping out. In addition, the implementation of any improvement strategy must involve continually returning to the individual student data to monitor the success of the strategy and to adjust approaches as needed. It should also be noted that 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.

Kansas, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, Wisconsin, and several other states examined the programs being implemented in their districts that had graduation rates above the state average. They have shared these promising practices among the other districts in the state through various means, including websites, communities of practice, newsletters, and conference presentations.

For example, Kansas conducted a crosswalk of Cluster 1 Indicators (i.e., 1, 2, 4, 13, and 14) data during FFY 2009. The results of the crosswalk data were used to identify those districts that did not meet their target on three or more of the five indicators within the cluster, and those districts that did not meet target on two to three indicators within the cluster. Additionally, data were analyzed to determine which districts consistently did not meet targets for specific indicators over a three-year period. Districts that did not meet three or more of the five indicators within the cluster were identified to receive targeted technical assistance. Districts that did not meet two to three indicators within the cluster were identified to receive technical support. Data analysis demonstrated that

district level interventions positively influenced the number of students who graduated with high school diploma.

Middle school to high school transition

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

Freshman academies keep the incoming ninth 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.

For example, the Arkansas Department of Career Education and their Post-school Outcomes Intervention for Special Education staff continued the collaboration to implement ninth grade redesign statewide. A joint training to support Ninth Grade Academies for drop-out prevention was established with funds being provided by Career education for schools that volunteer to complete the training requirements.

Secondary transition activities

Activities focused on supporting secondary transition have positive effects on school completion. Among the 52 states that reported transition-related activities under Indicator 1 were Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania (the "Tri-State Consortium"), which are working to support youth with disabilities through a joint project.

Delaware reported that the State continues to focus on interagency collaboration, family involvement, and youth leadership through a federal technical assistance grant. The final product (a Transition Slide Guide) from a Tri-State Grant was disseminated throughout the state in spring 2010. The Transition Slide Guide will assist students, parents, schools, and agency personnel through the transition process. Delaware also continues to receive assistance from the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) and the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) in its work to improve school completion outcomes.

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. Washington and Wisconsin have

developed Web-based systems to collect and share transition-related data with their districts.

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, numerous 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. Twenty states reported to have supported parents through parent conferences, trainings, academies, and the development and dissemination of parent-support and transition-related materials.

Reentry programs

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

Statewide initiatives

Broad, concerted, statewide initiatives designed to increase school completion were relatively uncommon in the current APR submissions. Sixteen states reported that they had made school completion a priority, though only a handful had begun a statewide initiative. 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.

In addition, through a 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. These coaches provide ongoing training and support for the members of local school teams.

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 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 Education Agency (SEA) initiatives, including ISTAC and IASPIRE. 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.

In 2010, seven states began new statewide initiatives in collaboration with NDPC-SD and are receiving training and technical assistance to help them develop model sites for dropout prevention initiatives or address state and local data-related needs around school completion. Three additional states will begin working with NDPC-SD in the coming year.

COMMONALITIES AMONG STATES THAT MET THEIR GRADUATION TARGET

Table 2 shows the number of states that achieved their graduation rate target, reported in the FFY 2009 APRs, and how many were engaged in a particular type of activity.

Table 2
Number of states that met their graduation target and engaged in a particular activity

Activity	Number of states
Priority on graduation & dropout	6
Data-based decision making	15
Transition-related activities	22
Using one or more evidence-based programs	19

Filtering the data to select states that met their targets and engaged in all of the above activities narrowed the number of states considerably. Eleven states met their graduation target and all engaged in the following categories of activities: the use of data to inform their programs/policies; placing emphasis on secondary transition; and the use of one or more evidence practices that would impact school completion. Only five of these states also reported statewide efforts to improve their graduation and dropout rates and implementing programs to improve their students' academic achievement. Progress in these states is consistent with the recommendations of the *IES Practice Guide on Dropout Prevention*, which are that a strategic approach that integrates multiple evidence-based strategies or interventions is an effective approach to addressing school completion issues.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the coming years, states that have not already done so will have to establish new baselines and improvement targets for their graduation rates. Some states reported that they were undertaking an evaluation of their definitions and requirements related to school completion as well as their diploma options. With the pressing 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. Having data systems capable of supporting this effort has become de rigueur, as will be the ability to more easily identify students who are in need of support to help them complete school and earn a graduation credential.

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.

While these changes in Indicators 1 and 2 have created some confusion and 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 calculated using the same set of data will afford a more accurate assessment of the progress being made around the country in school completion efforts for students with disabilities. Additionally, using the same metric as established under Title I of the ESEA will allow educators and the public to better understand the need to strive for improvement in the education of our youth with disabilities. Another two or more years will probably pass before all or nearly all states use the adjusted cohort rate with the correct years of data, compare their rate to their new and stable targets, and are able to chart their progress from a meaningful baseline. Nonetheless, the APRs this year showed a marked improvement over last year, when there was considerable confusion over all of the new changes around the Graduation and Dropout indicators.

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