An Analysis of State Performance Plan Data for Indicator 2 (Dropout)

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

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INDICATOR 2: DROPOUT RATES

INTRODUCTION

The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) was assigned the task of summarizing and analyzing the data for Indicator 2—Dropout—from the 2005–06 Annual Performance Reports (APRs) and the revised State Performance Plans (SPPs), which were submitted to OSEP in February of 2007. The text of the indicator is as follows.

> Percent of youth with IEPs dropping out of high school compared to the percent of all youth in the State dropping out of high school.

In the APR, each state reported its dropout rate for special education students, compared its current dropout rate with the state target rate for the 2005-06 school year, discussed reasons for its progress or slippage with respect to the target rate, and described any improvement activities it had undertaken during the year.

In the amended SPP, each state revised its baseline data, measurement of the indicator, targets for improvement, and improvement strategies/activities, deemed necessary by the state or by OSEP. A breakdown of the revisions made to the SPPs is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Revisions to the State Performance Plans as submitted in February 2007

Type of revision made	Number of states
Baseline data	15
Measurement of dropout rate	11
Improvement targets	17
Improvement activities	25
None	21

This report summarizes the NDPC-SD's findings for Indicator 2 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.

The evaluation and comparison of dropout rates for the states was confounded by several issues, which will be described in the context of the summary information for the indicator. Given the limited data that is currently available as well as the number of revisions that states made to their baselines, measurement of the indicator, and targets, only very limited generalizations can be made about states' progress on Indicator 2 at this time.

The definition of dropout

Some of the difficulties associated with quantifying dropouts can be attributed to the lack of a standard definition of what constitutes a dropout. Several factors complicate our arrival at a clear definition. Among these are the variability in the age group or grade level of students included in dropout calculations and the inclusion or exclusion of particular groups or classes of students from consideration in the calculation.

For example, some states include students from ages 14-21 in the calculation, whereas other states include students of ages 17-21. Still other states base inclusion in calculations on students' grade levels, rather than on their ages. Some states count students participated in a General Education Development (GED) program as dropouts, whereas other states include them in their calculation of graduates. As long as such variations in practice continue to exist, comparing dropout rates across states will remain in the realm of art rather than in that of science.

Timing of data collections for all-student and special-education data

The timing of data collections is another factor that has the potential to cause discrepancy between the all-student dropout rate and the rate for special education students. The special-education data reported in the SPPs were generally derived from the 618 data collection, which occurred on December 1 of the year, whereas all-student enrollment data were generally collected earlier in the fall.

Types of comparisons made

States were instructed to compare their dropout data for special education students with that for all students. Forty states (67%) made this comparison. Eight states (13%) compared special education to general education rates. Eight states (13%) made both comparisons. The remaining four states (7%) were unable to make comparisons because they lacked either their special-education or all-student dropout rate.

Methods of calculating dropout rates

Another factor that confounded comparisons of dropout rates across states was that three methods exist for calculating dropout rates and different states employed different ones. The dropout rates reported in the APRs were calculated as event rates, status rates, or cohort rates.

In general, states employing an event or status rate reported lower dropout rates than states that used a cohort rate. This is, in large part, due to the nature of the calculations and the longitudinal nature of the cohort method. While this method generally yields a higher dropout rate than the event or status calculations, it appears to provide a more accurate picture of the nature of attrition from school over the course of four years than do the other methods.

As reported in the APRs, 44 states (73%) calculated special education dropout using some form of an event rate. Calculations of this type were generally stated in the following form.

$$\frac{\text{\# SpEd dropouts from Grades 9 - 12}}{\text{Total enrollment in Grades 9 - 12}}$$

Two states (3%) reported a status rate. These calculations generally followed a form like that of the equation below.

$$\frac{\text{\# of SpEd dropouts}}{\text{\# SpEd enrollment}}$$

Ten states (17%) used some form of a cohort method in calculating their special education dropout rates. These calculations generally follow some form of the equation shown below.

$$\frac{\text{\# of SpEd dropouts}}{(\text{\# SpEd grads} + \text{\# G9 SpEd dropouts in 2002-03} + \text{\# G10 SpEd dropouts in 2003-04} + \text{\# G11 SpEd dropouts in 2004-05} + \text{\# G12 SpEd dropouts in 2005-06})}$$

Finally, four states (7%) did not specify the method used to calculate their special education dropout rates.

A number of states reported that they are in various stages of moving from the use of an event rate to using a cohort rate. Most of these added a caveat about the potential necessity of adjusting their dropout targets in years to come. In this submission, 13 states revised their targets and updated their rate calculation, baseline year data, or both.

Baseline year

In the instructions for completing the 2005 SPP, OSEP instructed states to provide baseline dropout data for the 2004-05 school year. While the majority of states (42 states or 70%) were able to provide this, another 16 states (27%) used data from the 2003-04 school year because data from the 2004-05 year were not available when the report was being compiled. One state (2%) used data from 2002-03 and another (2%) did not specify the year of its baseline data.

In the revised SPPs, submitted in February 2007, one state (2%) reported baseline data from 2002-03 and two states (3%) reported data from 2003-04. The overwhelming majority of

states (93%) reported baseline data from the 2004-05 school year. Finally, one state (2%) reported data from 2005-06 as baseline, explaining it was necessary because they had changed their method of calculating dropout rates and had improved the accuracy of their reporting methods, which would have invalidated comparison of current data with prior years' data.

DROPOUT RATES

Across the 60 states, the highest special-education dropout rate reported in the SPPs was 47.7% and the lowest rate was 0.57%. It is interesting, but not surprising that the highest rate was arrived at using a cohort calculation and the lowest rate was calculated using the event method.

Figure 1 shows the special education dropout rates for all of the states. Note that states are grouped by the method used to calculate their special education dropout rate. Additionally, the states for which a rate is not graphed had not provided OSEP with data for the 2005-06 school year at the time of this report.
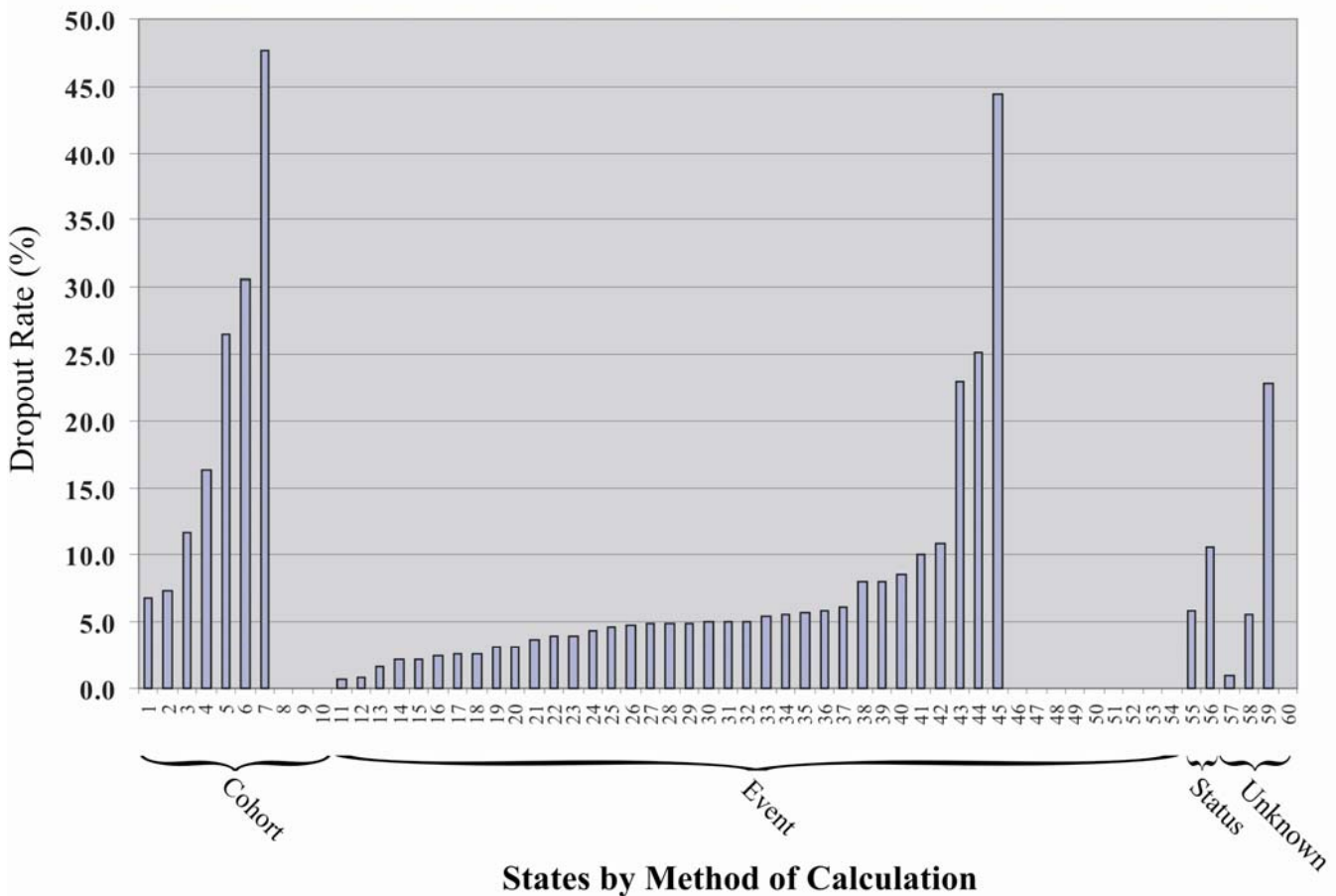

Figure 1

The states were sorted based on the method employed in calculating their special education dropout rates. The sorted data were then plotted as Figures 2– 5. Figure 2 shows the all-student and special-education dropout rates for states that used an event method; Figure 3 shows the data for states that calculated a status rate; Figure 4 shows the data for states that used the cohort method of calculation; and Figure 5 shows the data for states that did not specify their method of calculation. Note that the scales of the four graphs differ.

2005-06 Dropout Rates
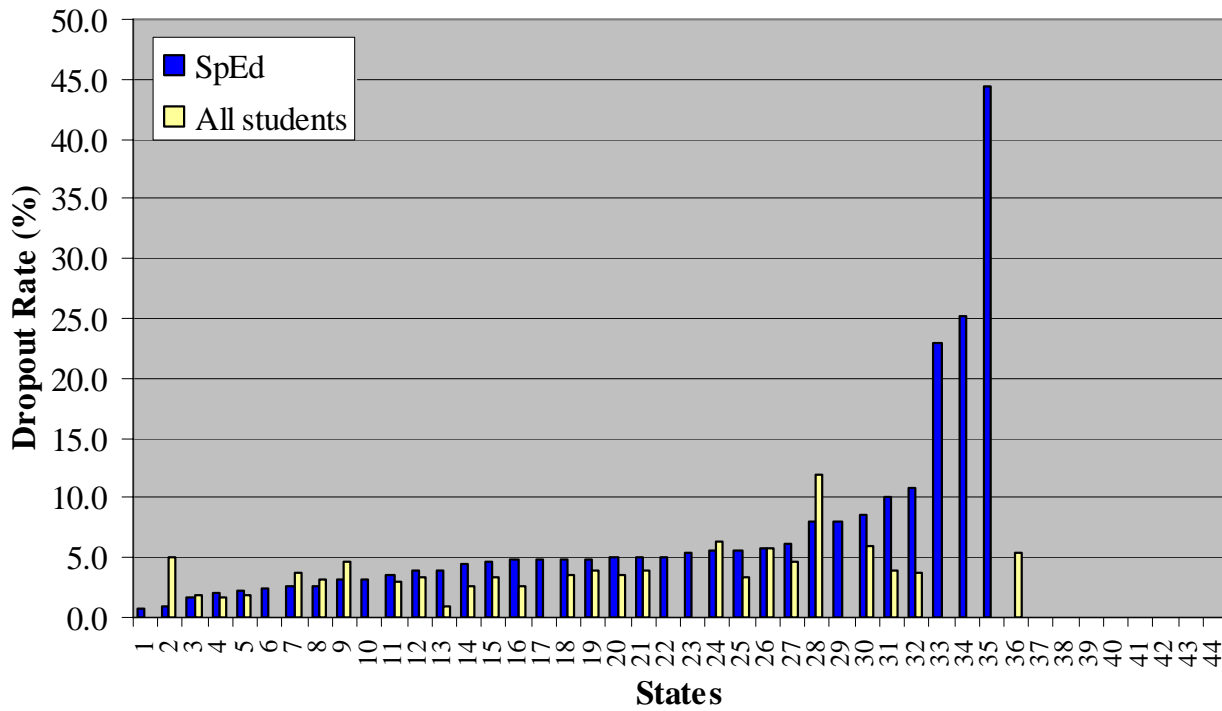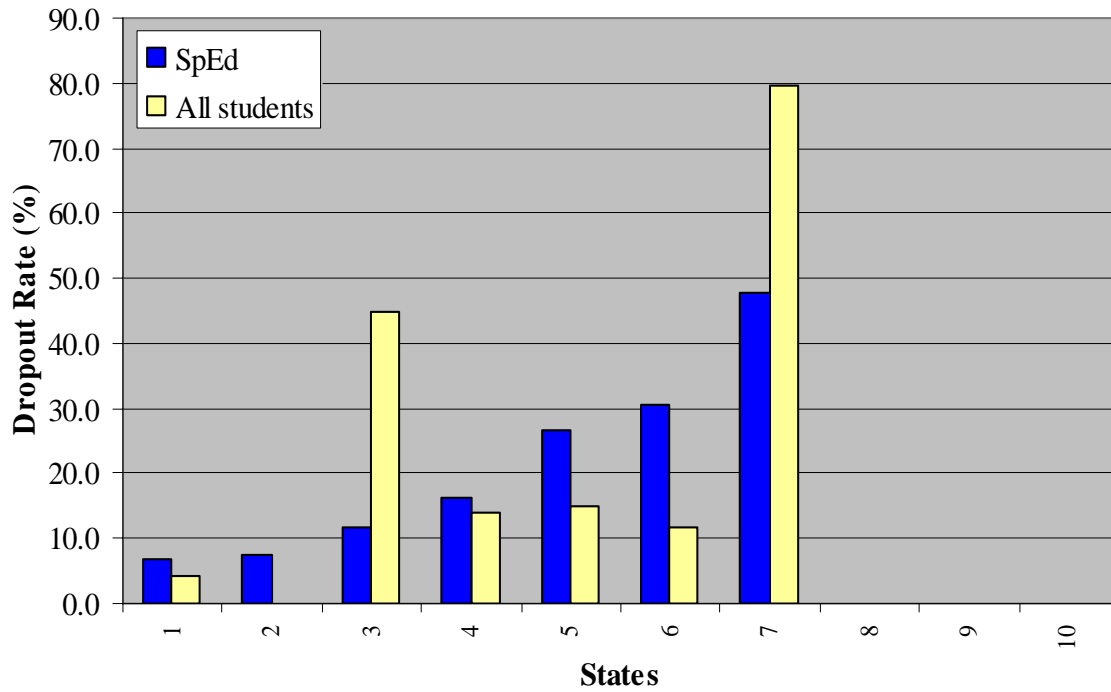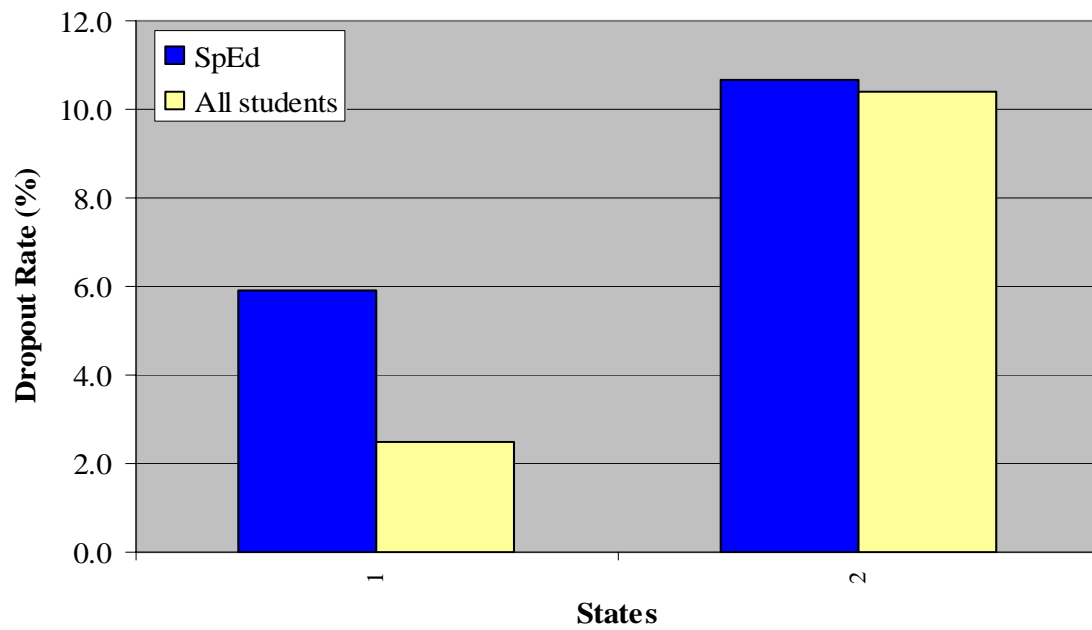**(Event Method States)**

Figure 2

**2005-06 Dropout Rates
(Cohort Method States)**

Figure 3

**2005-06 Dropout Rates
(Status Method States)**

Figure 4

2005-06 Dropout Rates
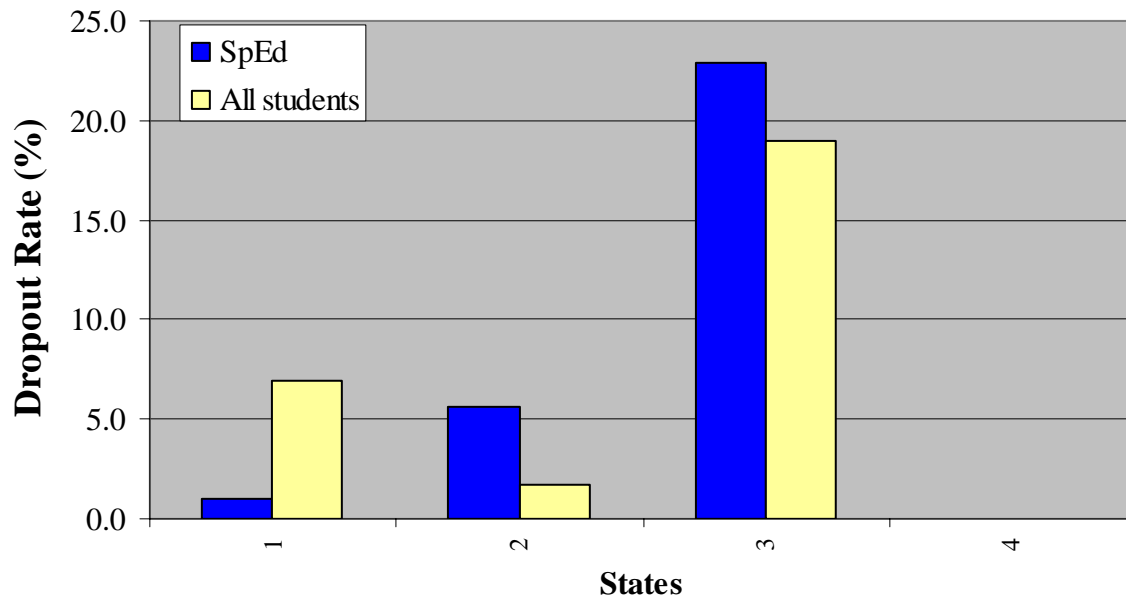## (States That Did Not Specify a Calculation)

Figure 5

DROPOUT GAP

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

Forty-three states (72%) of the states calculated dropout rates for all students and special education using the same basic equation. Fifteen states (25%) did not specify the method used for one or both of the rates. The remaining two states (3%) derived their special-education and all-student dropout rates using different methods of calculation, making comparisons of the two rates ill-advised. One of those states lacked one rate or another, so a gap was not calculated. The other state showed a gap of 3.4%.

Of the 60 states, nine (15%) showed a negative gap, 28 states (47%) showed a positive gap, and 23 states (38%) were missing data, making it impossible to calculate a gap. Figure 6 shows the dropout-rate gap for the states. Those states for which a gap value is missing on the chart did not report one of the two dropout rates required to calculate the gap value.

2005-06 Dropout Rate Gaps
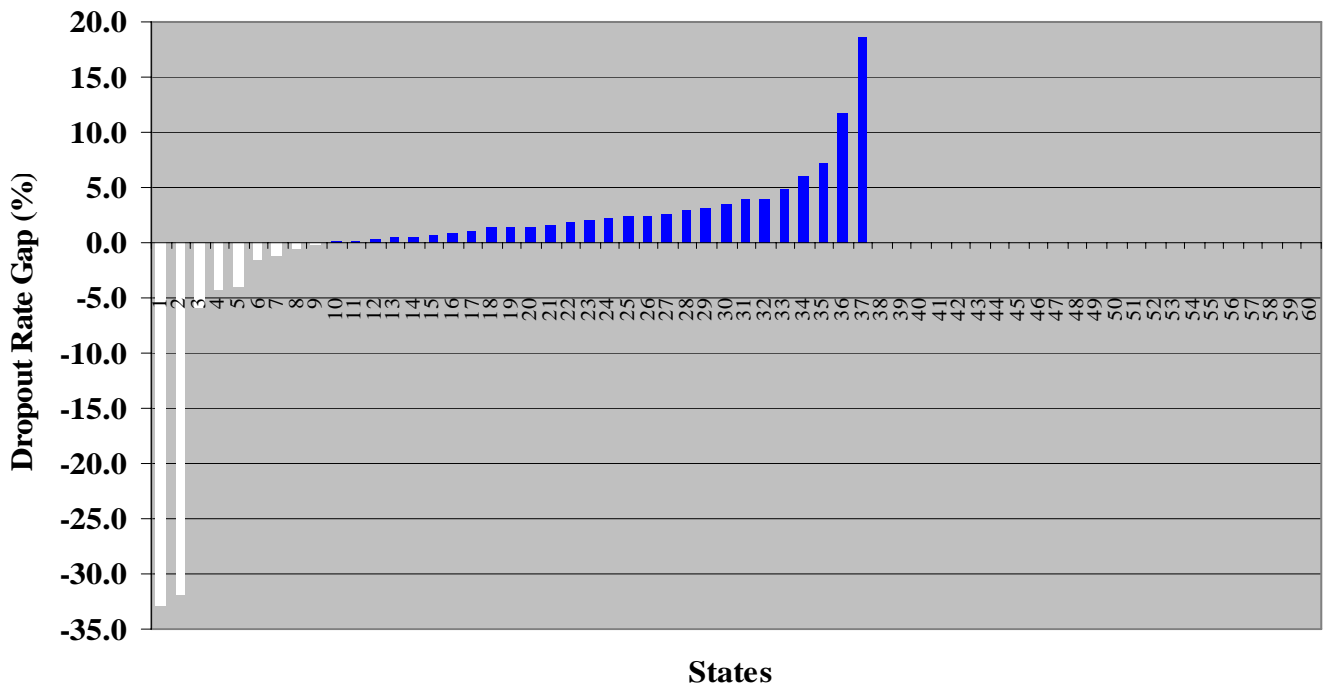## (SpEd Rate – All-student rate)

Figure 6

DROPOUT RATE TARGETS

Twenty-two states (37%) met their targeted dropout rate for students with disabilities. Twenty-seven states (45%) did not meet their target and the remaining 11 states (18%) were missing data and it was not possible to determine whether they had met their targets.

While OSEP instructed states to set measurable and rigorous targets for their special-education dropout rates, most states set extremely modest targets. This year, the proposed amounts of improvement over the life of the SPP ranged from a 1.1% increase in the dropout rate in one state to a reduction of 15% in another. In the 2005 SPPs, the range of targeted improvement by the end of the 2010-11 school year was -0.19% to 35%. In general, revisions made to the targets resulted in more conservative estimates of proposed improvements. Table 2 shows the breakdown of targeted improvement across the years of the SPPs, as reported in the 2005 SPP and in this submission of the APR.

Table 2

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

Range of improvement (percent decrease in dropout rate)	2005 SPP Number of states	2005-06 APR Number of states
Dropout rate will increase by <1%	1	2
0 – 1.0%	21	19
1.1% – 2.0%	8	9
2.1% – 3.0%	6	7
3.1% - 5.0%	6	7
5.1% - 10.0%	2	3
10.1% - 15.0%	1	1
>15%	2	0
Couldn't calculate improvement because of manner in which targets were stated	13	12

CONNECTIONS AMONG INDICATORS

Twenty-nine states (48%) identified a strong connection between Indicators 1 and 2, saying that the two indicators are so tightly intertwined that combining the efforts made sense. This is an increase from the 2005 SPP reports, which listed only 13 states using common activities for Indicators 1 and 2. Several states made a connection among Indicators 1, 2, 3, 13, and 14, citing the same reason.

NDPC-SD INTERACTIONS WITH STATES

Twenty-one states (35%) indicated that they had either used materials from NDPC-SD, received some form of technical assistance from NDPC-SD, or planned to request assistance from the Center in the future. During the year, NDPC-SD had some form of interaction with all 60 states. Table 3 shows a breakdown of these interactions using the categories specified in the OSEP template for this report.

Table 3

NDPC-SD Interactions with States during the 2005-06 school year

Nature of interaction	Number of states
A. *Information* – NDPC-SD provided information by mail, telephone, teleseminar, listserv, or Communities of Practice to State	60
B. *Conference* – State attended a conference sponsored by NDPC-SD	21
C. *Regional or State Group Assistance* – NDPC-SD provided small group assistance to the State	48
D. *Consultation* – NDPC-SD provided on-going consultation in the State	8

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. Forty-one states (68%) listed one or more evidence-based improvement activities in their APR, while the remaining 19 states (32%) did not propose any evidence-based improvement activities. This is an improvement over last year's reports in which only 32 states listed evidence-based activities.

Using the 10 categories provided by OSEP, NDPC-SD coded each state's improvement activities. Center staff then calculated the percentage of effort directed toward each of these categories. Figure 7 shows the overall distribution of activities, by category, across all states. A list of the categories and subcategories appears in Appendix 2-A with examples of activities for each.

Figure 7 shows that data and monitoring activities (A & B) as well as professional development (C) and technical assistance (D) activities were relatively abundant, each accounting for between 12 and 13% of all state activities. Policy (E) and program evaluation (H) activities were much less common (at 4% and 6%, respectively), as was states' increasing the number of FTEs at the state level (I), which accounted for only 1% of all activities. Many states described one or more improvement activities that were unique to their specific needs and programs (J). These activities constitute 18% of the total states' activities.
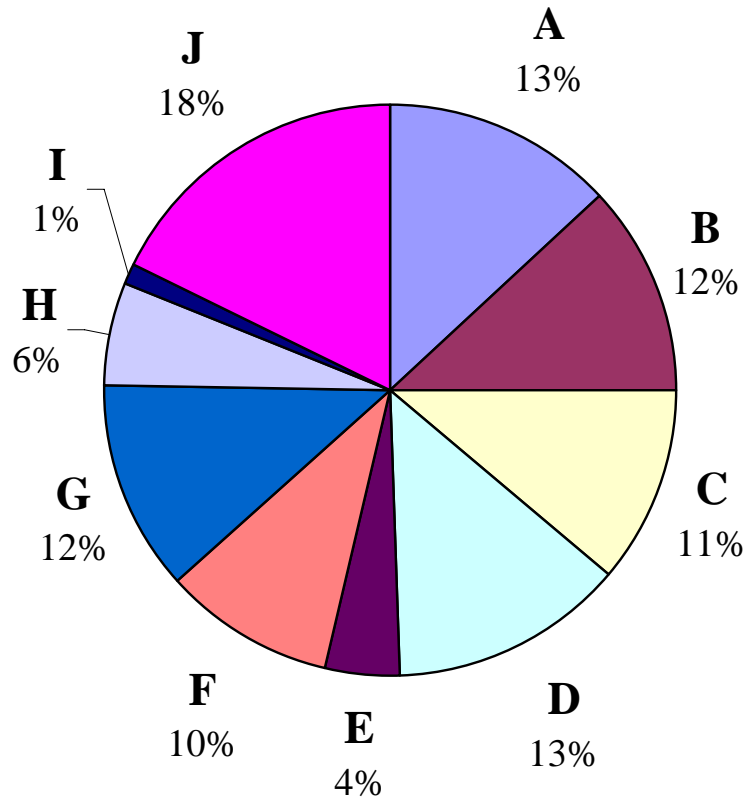
2005-06 Improvement Activities
for Indicator 2

Figure 7

Legend

A)	Improve data collection/reporting or systems
B)	Improve systems administration and monitoring
C)	Provide training/professional development
D)	Provide technical assistance
E)	Clarify/examine/develop policies and procedures
F)	Program development
G)	Collaboration/coordination
H)	Evaluation
I)	Increase/Adjust FTE
J)	Other

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the recommendations made in NDPC-SD's reports on the 2005 SPPs still hold true for the current APR submissions. Additionally, several additional recommendations have arisen while working with the current submissions. The recommendations are listed below.

- There needs to be a better correspondence between what states report in the APR and what is actually being done in terms of improvement activities as well as the calculation of actual dropout rates and the meeting of improvement targets.

- Instruct states to number their improvement activities clearly, rather than embedding numerous activities in long sections of text.

- 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.

- Comparisons of dropout rates would also be facilitated if it were possible to standardize what constitutes dropping out (i.e., whether obtaining a GED or a certificate is considered dropping out.

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

APPENDIX 2-A – OSEP IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITY CATEGORIES

A) *Improve data collection/reporting or systems – improve the accuracy of data collection and school district/service agency accountability via technical assistance, public reporting/dissemination, or collaboration across other data reporting systems. Developing or connecting data systems.*

- State color-coded maps, by district, representing 2003-04 school year dropout rates for students with disabilities were disseminated to districts as well as posted on the Department web site. Dropout rates were used as a data probe in the 2004-05 school year focused monitoring activities.

- Modification of the statewide calculation of graduation rates for students with/without disabilities using a cohort approach.

- Implement new data warehouse system that requires graduation pathway reporting at the 40th day, 80th day, 120th day, and end of year. Data will be reviewed regularly to identify patterns.

- Worked on updating and revising student data collection systems. As part of the new systems that will be operational later this year, we will have error checks similar to those used by WESTAT to assist in identifying anomalies in LEA level data.

- Worked with LEAs to not report any students with this exit category unless they have verified that the family no longer lives in the district. They do this by sending a certified letter to the last known address. This provides documentation in the file of all students reported as moved, not known to be continuing, that indicates that the student, in fact, no longer lives in the district.

B) *Improve systems administration and monitoring – refine/revise monitoring systems, including continuous improvement and focused monitoring. Improve systems administration.*

- Ensure monitoring focus on student graduation/dropout rates and other transition indicators for accountability at the building level through LEA required reporting in LEA Plans.

- Require schools with high dropout rates to engage in analysis of cause and develop specific improvement/corrective action plans to address deficiencies.

- State Transition Council will review disaggregated graduation and dropout data and make recommendations to the state DOE for focused monitoring for LEAs falling well below state average for graduation and dropout rates

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

C) *Provide training/professional development – provide training/professional development to State, LEA and/or service agency staff, families and/or other stakeholders.*

- Annual Summer Transition Institute, an interagency professional development opportunity, focuses on dropout prevention for struggling students including students in special education..

- The DoE provided data collection and reporting workshops in each region of the state to assist LEAs in the requirements of reporting dropout rates and to offer strategies for the timeliness and accuracy of data submissions. These workshops included step-by-step demonstrations of the web-based reporting system, and guided participants through each variable collected (i.e., definitions, computations, aggregations, and use of the data at the state and federal levels).

- The DoE provided training on selecting the highest, most appropriate diploma option and the requirements for each option during the Annual Transition Conference.

- A training module on high quality transition planning and ways to engage students in the transition planning process to ensure students are involved in meaningful activities related to their transition to postsecondary life was developed by the Education Department (ED) and Consultants. The draft of the module was completed in December of 2006. A final form of the module will be posted to the Effective Practices Section of the ED web site. Consultants will be trained to deliver the module to districts.

D) *Provide technical assistance – provide technical assistance to LEAs and/or service agencies, families and/or other stakeholders on effective practices and model programs.*

- In response to the 2005 focused monitoring findings, the DoE provided training and technical assistance to approximately 45 LEAs regarding parent and student participation in the educational planning process. Components from the Empowerment Training Initiative were integrated into the training conducted at the March 2005 Annual Transition Conference.

- Provide technical assistance to promote early student and family involvement by training parents and students on self-determination and self-advocacy skills.

- Utilize the Statewide Technical Assistance Center to increase consistent use and effect of research-based strategies among all school staff at school-wide, classroom and individual student levels.

- Utilize technical assistance projects such as IDEA Model Outreach (TOTAL) to: promote programs that achieve a balance between academic achievement (graduation/school completion) and the skills necessary to participate in employment

and community living; develop a broad-range of performance measures to assess student transition outcomes; increase collaboration among stakeholder agencies for long-term postsecondary success including continuing education, employment, independent living, and community participation; promote early student and family involvement in transition planning with an emphasis on self-determination; support and disseminate model programs of evidenced-based success in meeting the needs of transition-aged students and their families.

- State will sponsor a Dropout Intervention Forum, which will provide an overview of dropout issues including: predictors, prevention strategies, and dropout prevention programs.

- The DoE continued to provide technical assistance and resources to LEAs on methods of decreasing dropout rates (e.g., offering incentives to students who stay in school and have perfect attendance, developing smaller learning communities, implementing self-directed IEPs, self-determination and self-advocacy, and/or increasing involvement in extracurricular activities), secondary transition, co-teaching, team teaching, and inclusion. This included the State Transition Institute (in which 40 teams from across the state discussed secondary transition for students with disabilities, heard from experts, and developed plans for the future), several breakout sessions at the State Superintendent's Special Education Conference, the State Superintendent's Leadership Conference, the "For Counselors Only" Conference, and many other personnel development activities held statewide. The ED also provided this information to LEAs through mail, e-mail, telephone technical assistance, and continual postings on the ED web site.

E) *Clarify/examine/develop policies and procedures – clarify, examine, and or develop policies or procedures related to the indicator.*

- The Individualized Education Program (IEP) was revised to include a student's projected graduation date to inform students, their families and staff.

- Developed a Certificate of Employability for high school graduates in an effort to encourage students to remain in school and receive appropriate training in their field of interest. This will decrease the dropout rate and increase greater post-school outcomes for all students.

- A new state regulation has been put in place that allows students to come back to school (until legal school age) if they get a certificate of attendance, or complete the required coursework but have not received a diploma.

- Passage of the State Textbook Accessibility statute and development of regulatory requirements.

- Align Pathway to Diploma graduation rules to IDEA 2004 and revise alternative graduation options in state rules.

F) *Program development – develop/fund new regional/statewide initiatives.*

- Develop two pilots with school districts and a Community College to provide innovative programs to high school students receiving special education services.

- In May 2006, special education and prevention and support staff attended the annual Dropout Prevention Conference in Clemson, South Carolina.

- Information gathered from the conference will be used in the future to develop a collaborative, statewide, Dropout Prevention Plan.

- High Schools that Work piloted in 10 LEAs includes students w/IEPs.

- Six participated districts implemented activities such as: creating a formal mentoring program to improve student academic achievement and student retention; working on a school improvement plan that focuses on research-based methods for improving student achievement and successful transitioning from middle to high school, utilizing cohorts in self-contained sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade classrooms; providing a teacher and coordinator for the district credit recovery program; developing a parent resource center; and developing the Wilderness Adventure Program, which is designed to keep at-risk middle school students actively engaged in their education over the summer months and to build self-esteem and leadership skills. This program also implements adult and peer mentoring.

G) *Collaboration/coordination – Collaborate/coordinate with families/agencies/initiatives.*

- Department and SERRC personnel have been working with the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) to develop a partnership for establishing a statewide dropout prevention initiative.

- Established collaboration with other divisions within Department of Public Instruction addressing dropout prevention.

- Established collaboration with the National Dropout Prevention Center and the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (e.g., conference attendance, participation in regional conference calls, etc.).

- Collaborate with CDE Program Improvement and Interventions Office to infuse special education indicators into the Academic Performance Survey (APS) and District Assistance Survey (DAS)

- Collaboration with the National Vocational Training Institute for career education and training; and the Private Industry Council for work-study opportunities.

H) *Evaluation – conduct internal/external evaluation of improvement processes and outcomes.*

- State will continue to report on whether or not creation and implementation of programs and services will have a positive effect on dropout rates for all students. We will include questions regarding participation in these programs in the Post-School Outcome Survey for Indicator 14 in an effort to report the total number of students who participated in these programs and those who do not and if participation in these programs resulted in the students remaining in school.

I) *Increase/Adjust FTE – Add or re-assign FTE at State level. Assist with the recruitment and retention of LEA and service agency staff.*

- A consultant from the Department has been assigned the responsibility of dropout prevention and graduation for students with disabilities.

- Educational Services migrated State's Assistive Technology initiative from a contracted provider to an in-house unit during FFY 2005. The unit is scheduled for 6 full-time AT specialists located throughout the State.

- Assignment of three additional special education teachers to serve as transition teachers.

J) *Other – TA Center should indicate any additional types of improvement activities specific to their topic/area.*

- Provide five Webcasts that cover the concept of Response to Intervention (RTI) and stream this content for on-demand viewing.

- Organize an interagency task force including school personnel and parents to review literature, analyze school data, and identify factors that encourage students to stay in school, and make recommendations on how to build local school capacity for improving dropout rates.

- Public awareness and information dissemination via Web pages and listservs on variety of topics including promotion, retention guidelines, & CAPA materials.

- Develop a best practices manual on effective practices/strategies based from schools that have made progress in improving graduation rates, including decreasing dropouts.