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

June 2008

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

NDPC-SD

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 2006–07 Annual Performance Reports (APRs) and the revised State Performance Plans (SPPs), which were submitted to OSEP in February of 2008. The text of the indicator is as follows.

> Percent of youth with IEPs 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 2006-07 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, states revised their baseline data, measurement of the indicator, targets for improvement, or improvement strategies/activities, as was deemed necessary by the state or by OSEP. A breakdown of the revisions made is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Revisions to the State Performance Plans, as submitted in February 2008

Type of revision made	Number of states
Baseline data	7
Measurement of dropout rate	9
Improvement targets	9
Improvement activities	31
None	16

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 are described in the context of the summary information for the indicator.

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 that 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

The timing of data collections is another factor that has the potential to hinder comparisons of states' dropout rates. Most states use data from the 618 data collection, which occurs on December 1, though some states use data gathered at other times during the school year.

COMPARING DROPOUT RATES – CALCULATION METHODS

Comparison of dropout rates among states is further confounded because multiple methods exist for calculating dropout rates and different states employ different ones. With one exception, the dropout rates reported in the 2006-07 APRs were calculated using one of three methods: an event rate calculation, a leaver rate or a true cohort rate calculation. The exception was a single state that calculated a synthetic cohort rate.

In general, states employing an event type of calculation reported the lowest dropout rates, although there were a few exceptions. States that used a cohort method generally reported higher dropout rates than these states. Those states employing a leaver calculation reported the highest dropout rates.

The event rate yields a very basic snapshot of a year's group of dropouts. While the cohort method generally yields a higher dropout rate than the event calculation, it provides a more accurate picture of the attrition from school over the course of four years than do the other methods. As the name suggests, the cohort method follows a group or cohort of individual students from 9^{th} through 12^{th} grades. The synthetic cohort method provides a reasonable estimate of a cohort rate in the absence of true cohort data. The leaver rates reported this year were higher than those calculated using other methods. This is attributable to circumstances specific to the states using this calculation as well as to the broadly inclusive nature of the calculation.

Event rate

As reported in the APRs, 46 states (77%) calculated special education dropout using some form of an event rate. Calculations of this type were generally stated in the following form.

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

Leaver rate

Six states (10%) calculated leaver dropout rates for their special education students. These rates are calculated using an equation that generally follows the form below.

$$\frac{\text{\# of dropouts 14-21+ in year A}}{\text{\# dropouts age 14-21+ in year A + \# grads ages 18+ in year A + \# grads age 17 in year A-1 + \# grads age 16 in year A-2 + \# grads age 15 in year A-3 + \# grads age 14 in year A-4 + \# certifs ages 18+ in year A + \# certifs age 17 in year A-1 + \# certifs age 16 in year A-2 + \# certifs age 15 in year A-3 + \# certifs age 14 in year A-4 + \# age 18+ who maxed in age in year A + \# age 17 who maxed in age in year A-1 + \# age 16 who maxed in age in year A-2 + \# age 15 who maxed in age in year A-3 + \# age 14 who maxed in age in year A-4)}}$$

Cohort rate

Only five states (8%) used a true cohort method to calculate their special education dropout rates; though only four of them had data at the time the APRs were submitted to OSEP. One of these four states, which has extremely few students with disabilities, reported a dropout rate of zero. These calculations generally follow the form of the equation shown below.

$$\frac{\text{\# dropouts from Sp Ed who entered HS as 1st time 9th graders in 2003}}{\text{\# Sp Ed students who entered HS as 1st time 9th graders in 2003 + transfers in – transfers out}}$$

A number of states reported that they are in various stages of moving from the use of an event or leaver 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, 19 states revised their targets, updated their rate calculation, changed their baseline year data, or engaged in some combination of these activities.

2006-07 DROPOUT RATES

Across the 60 states, the highest special education dropout rate reported for the 2006-07 school year was 33.6% and the lowest rate was 0%. It should be noted that the state with the dropout rate of zero has an extremely small number of students in special education.

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 rates. The state labeled “Syn” was the one that calculated a synthetic cohort rate. Additionally, the other state for which a cohort rate is not plotted had not provided OSEP with data for the 2006-07 school year by the time of this report.

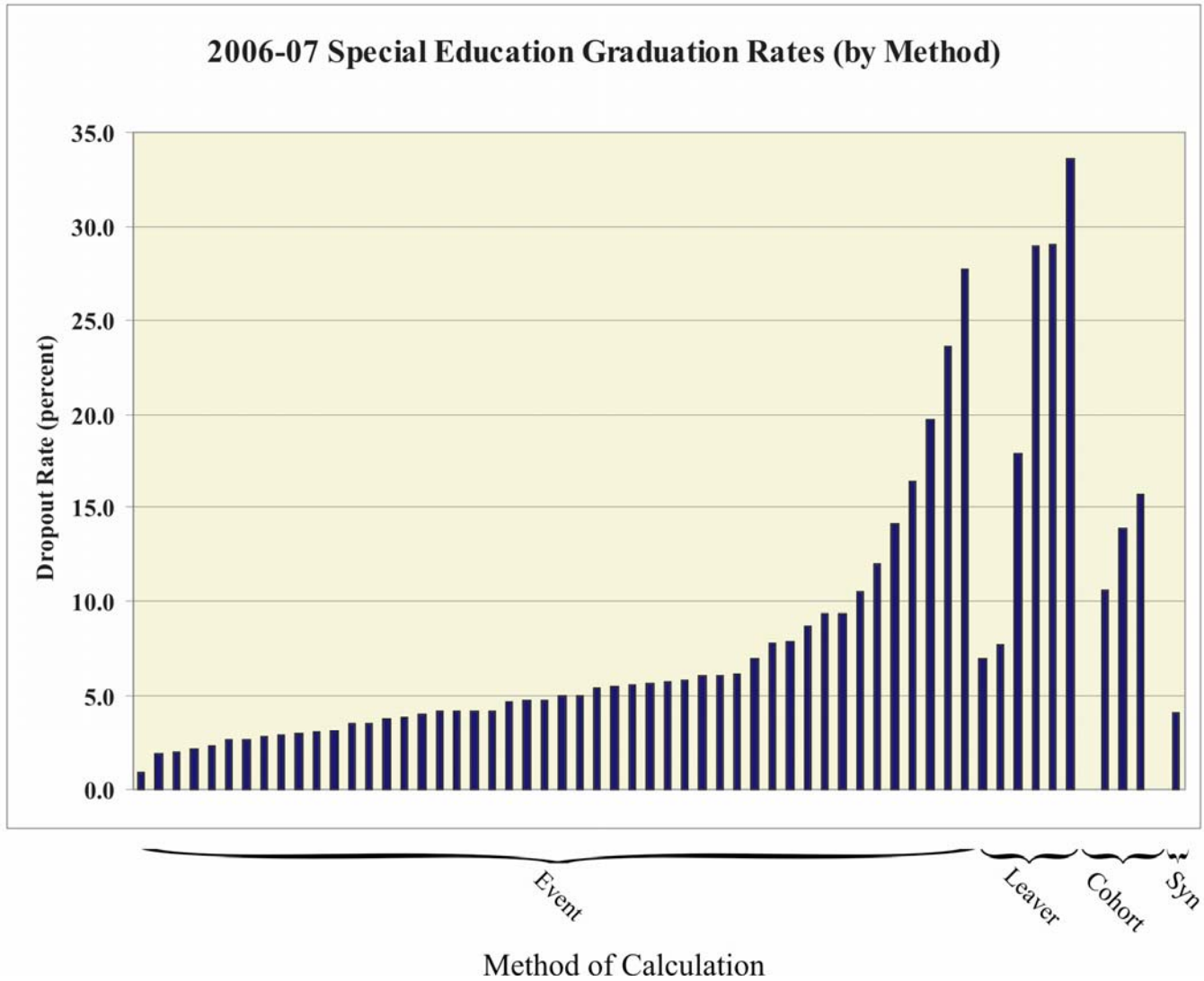

Figure 1

The states were sorted by the method employed in calculating their special education dropout rates. The sorted data were then plotted as Figures 2 – 4. Figure 2 shows the special education dropout rates for states that used an event method; Figure 3 shows the data for states that calculated a leaver rate; Figure 4 shows the data for states that used the cohort method of calculation.

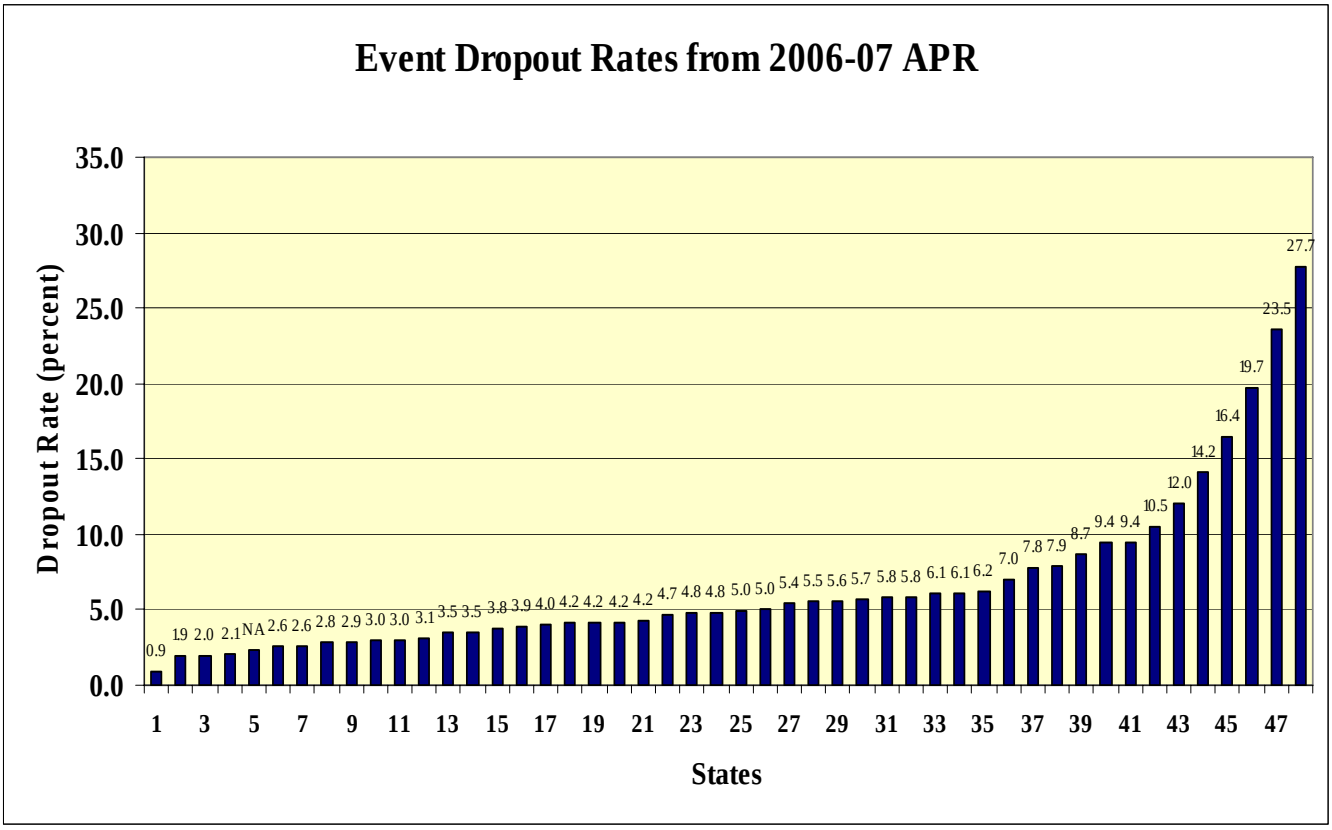

Figure 2

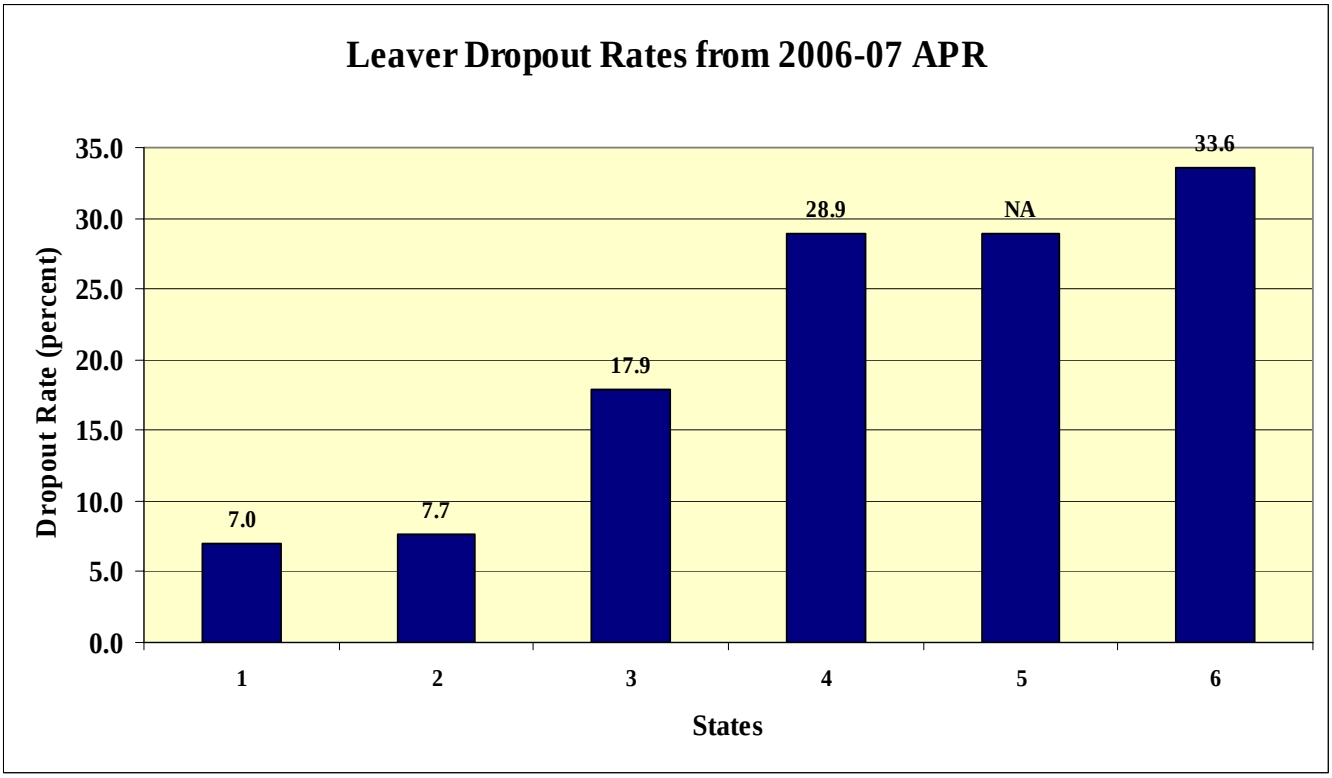

Figure 3

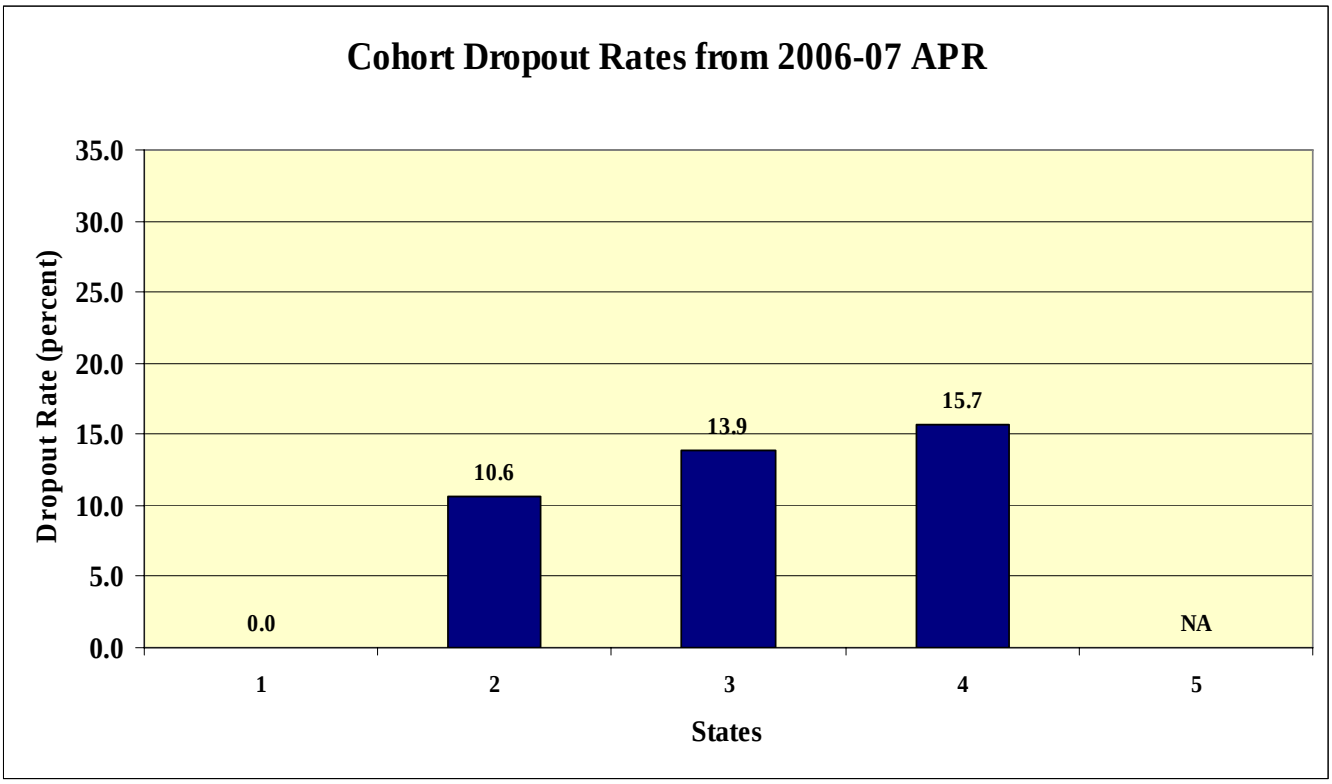

Figure 4

DROPOUT RATE TARGETS

Twenty-five states (42%) achieved their targeted dropout rate for students with disabilities and 34 states (57%) did not. The remaining one state (2%) was missing data and was not able to determine whether it had met its targets. This was an improvement of three states over the number reported in the 2005-06 APRs.

Thirty-one states (52%) made progress from their rates reported in the 2005-06 APR and lowered their dropout rates. Twenty-seven states (45%) experienced slippage during the year, showing increased dropout rates. One state's (2%) rate remained unchanged from the previous year. One other state (2%) lacked data to determine progress or slippage for 2006-07. Figure 5 shows these changes from last year's rates. Note that a ***negative*** change in the dropout rate is good.

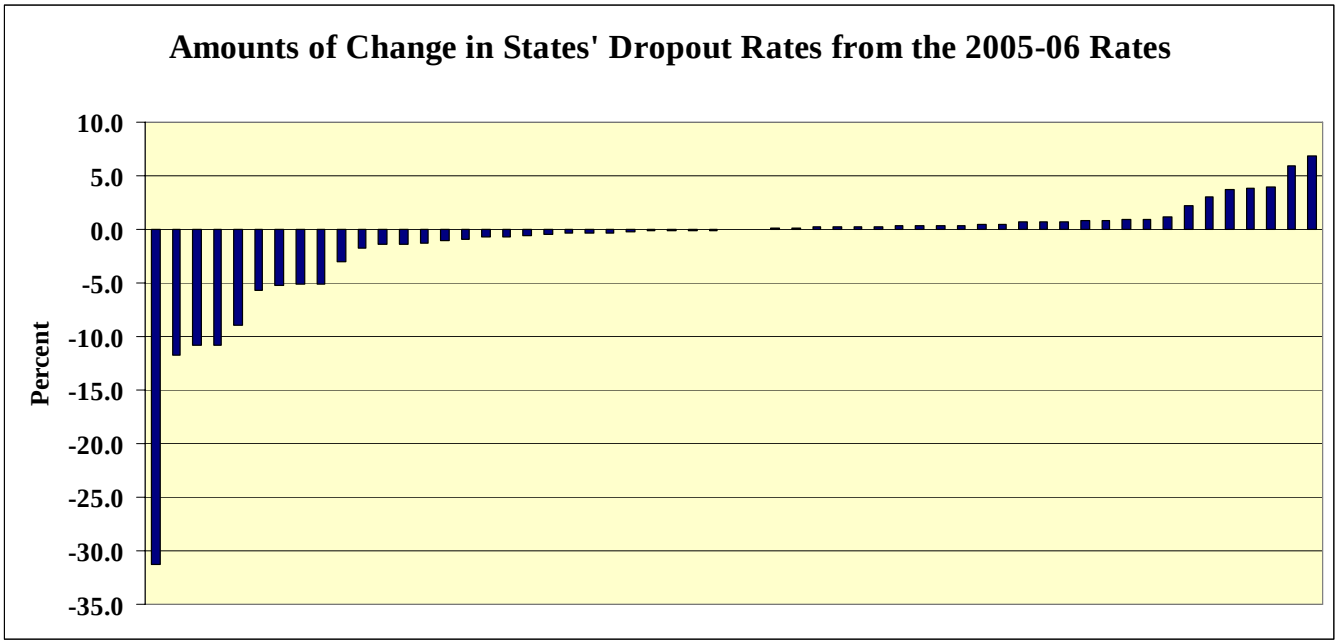

Figure 5

CONNECTIONS AMONG INDICATORS

Forty-four states (73%) identified a strong connection between Indicators 1 and 2, saying that the two indicators are so tightly intertwined that combining the efforts made sense. Many states combined their efforts to address multiple indicators, including Indicators 1, 2, 3, 4, 13, and14.

NDPC-SD INTERACTIONS WITH STATES

All 60 states received some form of technical assistance from NDPC-SD during the 2006-07 school year. Twenty-six states (43%) indicated that they had used materials from NDPC-SD or received direct technical assistance from NDPC-SD (conference presentation or direct consultation). NDPC-SD is working actively in four states (7%) to establish model dropout-prevention initiatives at the LEA level. These results represent an increase from the figures reported in the 2005-06 APR. Table 3 shows a breakdown of these interactions with states.

Table 3

NDPC-SD Interactions with States during the 2006-07 school year

Nature of interaction	Number of states
A. NDPC-SD provided information by mail, telephone, teleseminar, listserv, or Communities of Practice to State	60
B. State attended a conference sponsored by NDPC-SD or received direct on-site TA from NDPC-SD	24
C. NDPC-SD is providing ongoing, intensive, on-site TA to the State toward the end of developing model demonstration sites	4

IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

States were instructed to report the strategies, activities, timelines, and resources they employed in order to improve the special education dropout rate. The range of proposed activities was considerable. Many states are implementing evidence-based interventions to address their needs. Table 4 shows the number of states employing various evidence-based practices.

Table 4

Evidence-based practices listed in improvement activities of the 2006-07 APR

Nature of interaction	Number of states
One or more evidence-based practices	44
Positive Behavior Supports	20
Literacy initiatives	13
Response to Intervention	10
Mentoring programs	8

Forty-four states (73%) listed one or more evidence-based improvement activities in their APR, while the remaining 16 states (27%) did not propose any evidence-based improvement activities. There are a limited number of evidence-based programs that have demonstrated efficacy for students with disabilities; however, there are a number of promising practices.

Using the 9 categories listed in Table 5, NDPC-SD coded each state's improvement activities. Figure 6 shows the number of states engaging in each of the categories.

Table 5

Activity categories for the 2006-07 APRs

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

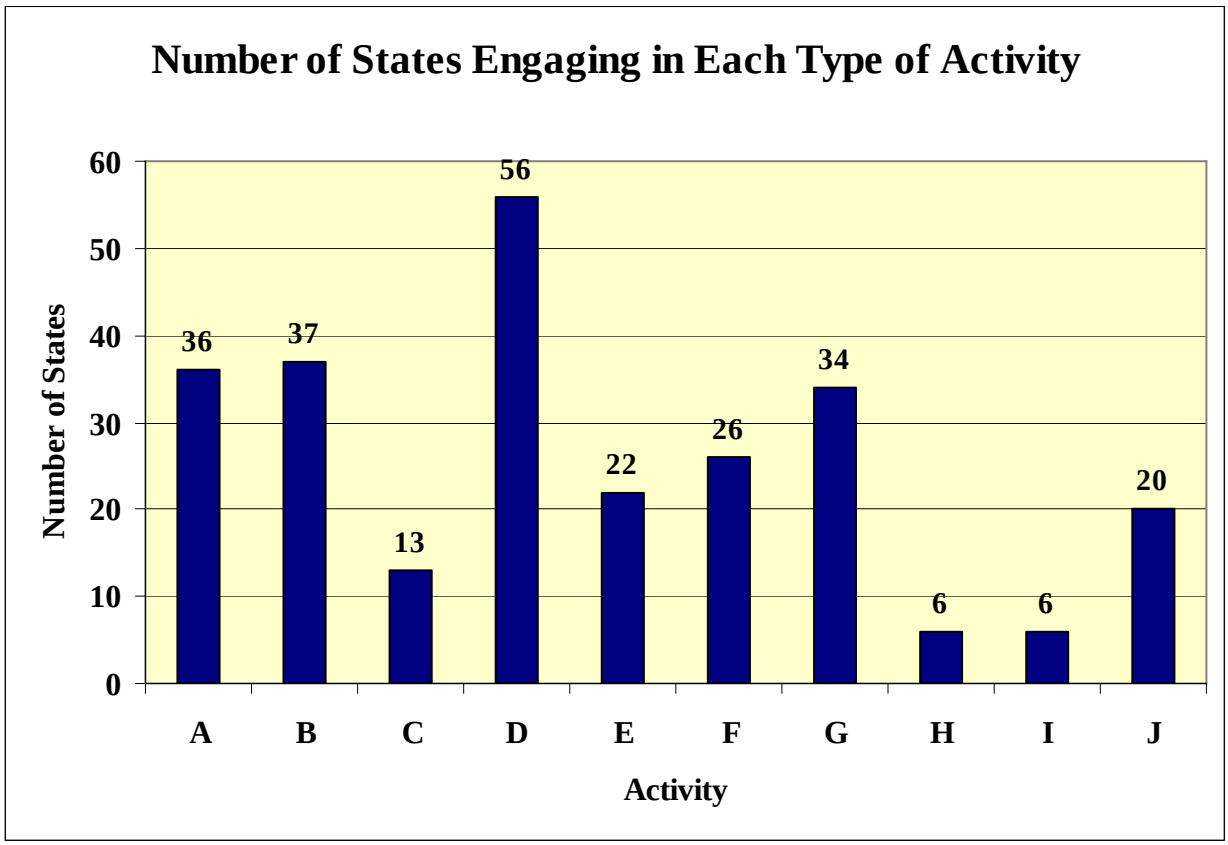

Figure 6

Figure 6 shows that the vast majority of states (56 states, or 93%) are engaging in one or more technical assistance, training or professional development activities (D). This followed by thirty-seven states (62%) working to improve their monitoring (B) and thirty-six states (60%) working to improve their data or reporting (A). Thirty-four states (57%) carried out some form of collaborative activity (G). Twenty-six states (43%) worked on the development of statewide programs or initiatives (F). Review and/or clarification of dropout-related policies and procedures (E) was undertaken by 22 states (37%).

In support of additional technical assistance, 13 states (22%) increased their TA infrastructure and support last year (C). Surprisingly, only six states (10%) engaged in some form of program evaluation to determine the efficacy of their activities (H). Six states (10%) added or reassigned staff to work on school-completion efforts (I). Additionally, many states described one or more improvement activities that were unique to their specific needs and programs (J). These activities occurred in 33% of all states.

In general, the collections of activities listed in states' APRs seem improved over last year. More states appear to be recognizing the benefit of combining activities across indicators to minimize waste and maximize effect. A substantial number of states described a group of activities that would work well to address their students' needs across the transition indicators (Inds. 1, 2, 13, and 14). Several other states included activities that also addressed Indicators 3, 4, and 5 in their mix of improvement activities to support school-completion and dropout prevention.

NOTES

- While the comparison of special education dropout rates to all-student rates has been removed from the Indicator, we would hate to see states lose sight of the importance of this relationship. In order to continue the push for progress in closing the gap in dropout rates between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers, it is imperative that we remain aware of how students with disabilities are doing in relation to all students. While there are various data-related barriers to making such comparisons easily, keeping such comparisons in mind may help us avoid complacency in this area. This said we were pleased to note that several states continue to provide data for their students with disabilities and their entire student population.

- Several states cited improvements in their procedures around data collection as having impacted their dropout rates. Some of those states credited their improvement in dropout rate to this, whereas others blamed it for their increased rates.

- Activities that raise states' awareness of the interconnectivity among the Part B Indicators and assist states in understanding and managing data related to those activities will continue to be beneficial to states.

  Over the last year and a half, six states participated in the pilot program of the *Making the Connection Among Indicators 1, 2, 13 and 14 Institutes*, sponsored jointly by the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, the National Post School Outcomes Center, and the Regional Resource Centers. Since the three pilot sessions, the centers have held one regional meeting for states in the Northeast and Mid-South regions, and have scheduled two additional meetings for fall 2008 to address states in the remaining regions. The 1½ -day-long process exposes states to strategies for collecting, reporting and using data across Part B Indicators 1, 2, 13, and 14 of the SPP/APR for program improvement. Using their own data, states work

through a series of guided questions and activities that help them understand and identify strengths and needs around these Indicators.

IN SUMMARY

In general, we have seen an improvement in the overall quality and organization of the APRs as well as a trend toward improvement in the nature of the data states submitted. States' activities are generally more concerted and focused than in previous years. While the slight majority of states missed their dropout rate targets last year, more states made progress over last year's rates than showed slippage. There is a recognized lag between the time at which implementation of an intervention begins and the point at which it shows measurable results. Despite this lag and the once-a-year nature of the measurement of this indicator, it appears that things might gradually be improving with Indicator 2.

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