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

NDPC-SD

INDICATOR 2: DROPOUT

INTRODUCTION

The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) was assigned the task of summarizing Indicator 2—Dropout—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 dropping out of high school compared to the percent of all youth in the State dropping out of high school.

In the SPP, states reported and compared their dropout 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 2 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 dropout 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 dropout

Some of the difficulties associated with quantifying dropout can be attributed to the lack of a standard definition of what constitutes a dropout. Several factors confound 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 participating 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. This difference in timing reduces the comparability of the data, thereby decreasing the validity of comparisons made between special education and all youth.

Types of comparisons made

States were instructed to compare their dropout data for special education students with that for all students. Thirty-four states (56%) made this comparison. Twelve states (20%) compared special education to general education rates. Seven states (12%) made both comparisons. The remaining 7 states (12%) 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 SPPs 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 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 SPPs, 38 states (63%) reported some form of an event rate. Calculations of this type followed the form of the equation below.

$$\frac{\text{\# 2004 SpEd dropouts from Grades 9 - 12}}{\text{Total 2004 enrollment in Grades 9 - 12}}$$

Six states (10%) reported a status rate. These calculations generally followed a form like that of the equation below.

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

Twelve states (20%) used some form of a cohort method in calculating their dropout rates. These calculations generally follow some form of the equation shown below.

$$\frac{\text{(\# 2004 SpEd dropouts)}}{\text{(\# 2004 SpEd grads + \# G9 SpEd dropouts in 2000-01 + \#G10 SpEd dropouts in 2001-02 + \#G11 SpEd dropouts in 2002-03 + \# G12 SpEd dropouts in 2003-04)}}$$

Finally, 4 states did not specify the method used to calculate their dropout rates.

Several states reported that they are in the process 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.

Baseline year

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.

DROPOUT RATES

Across the 60 states, the highest special-education dropout rate reported in the SPPs was 50 and the lowest rate was 0.53%. It is interesting to note that the highest rate was arrived at using the cohort method and the lowest rate was calculated using the event method.

The states were sorted based on the method employed in calculating dropout rates. The sorted data were then plotted as Figures 1 – 4. Figure 1 shows the all-student and special-education dropout rates for states that used an event method; Figure 2 shows the data for states that calculated a status rate; Figure 3 shows the data for states that used the cohort method of calculation; and Figure 4 shows the data for states that did not specify their method of calculation. Note that the scales of the four graphs differ.

Dropout Rates in States that Used an Event Calculation

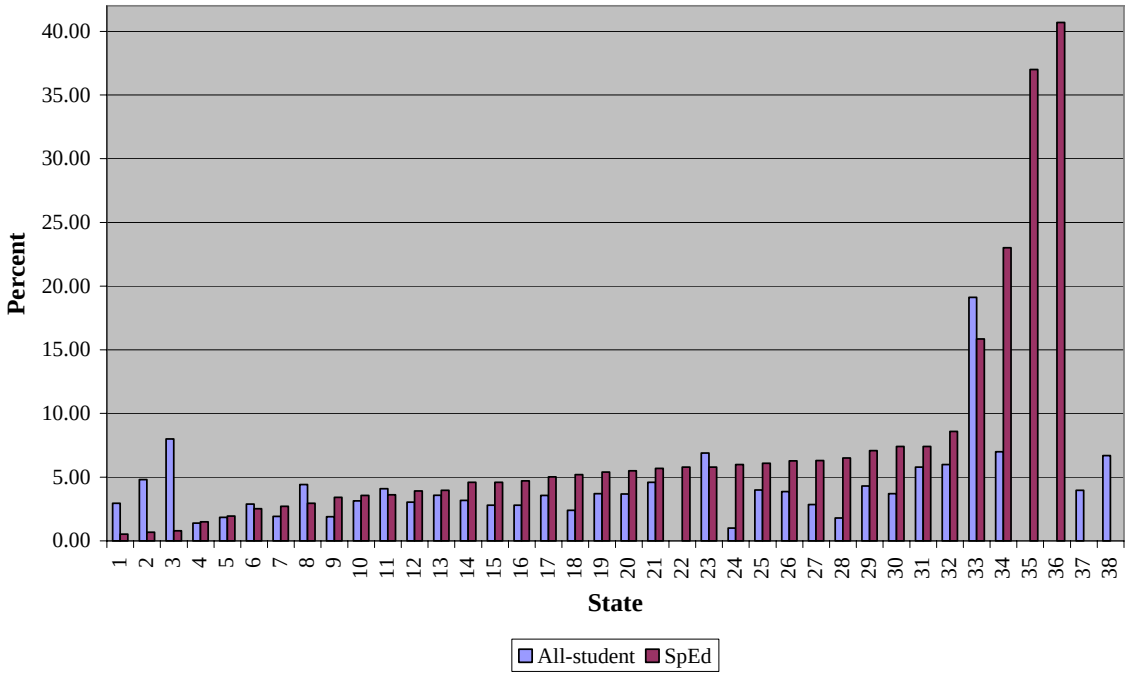

Figure 1

Dropout Rates in States that Used a Status Calculation

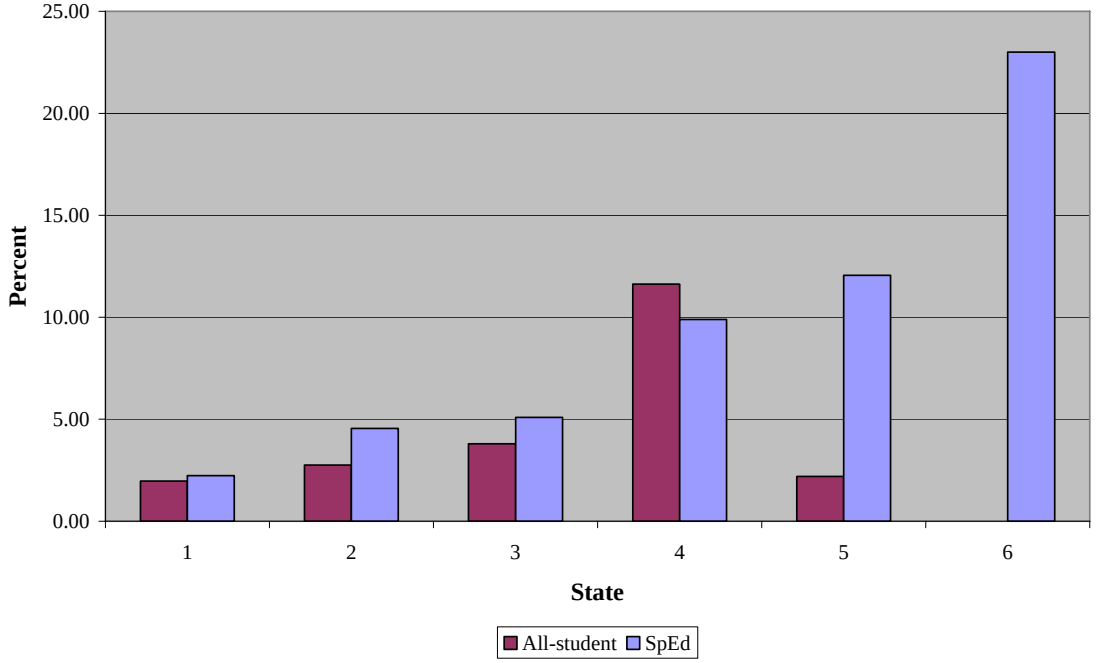

Figure 2

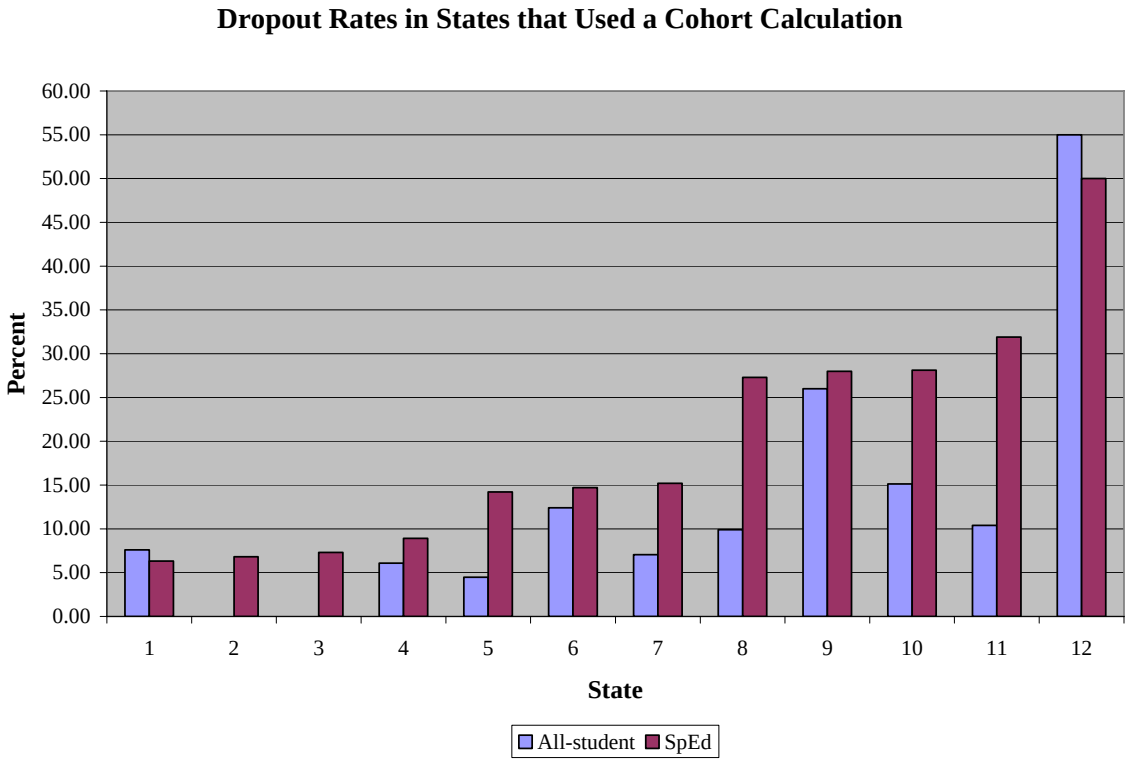

Figure 3

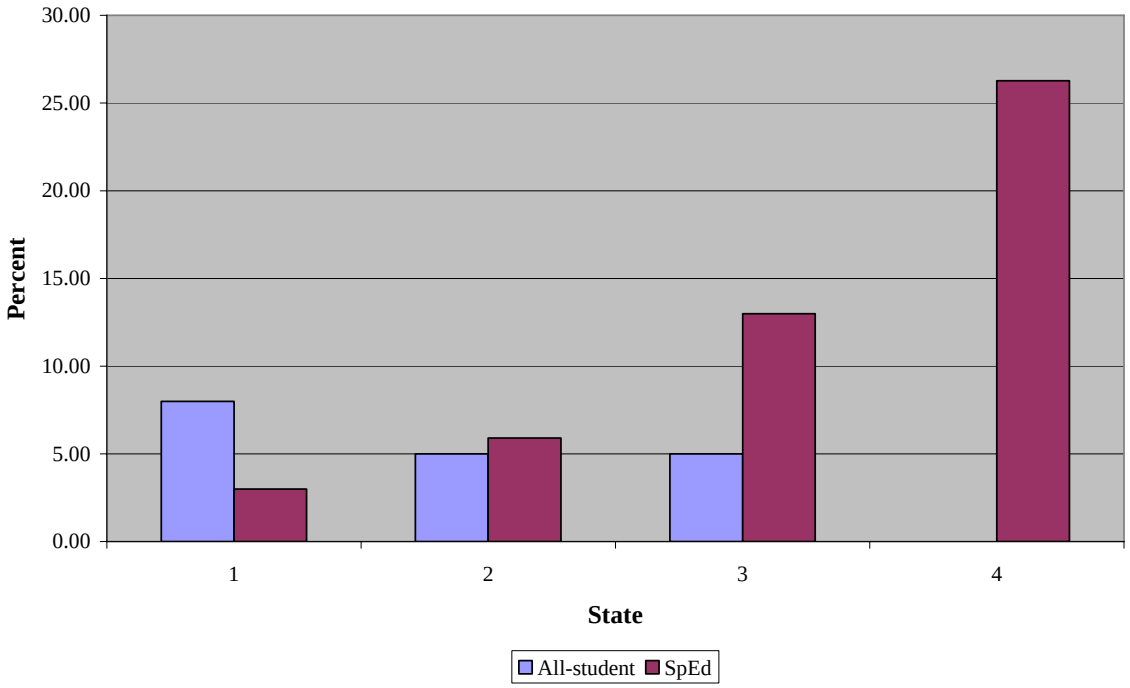

Figure 4

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 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 dropout rate is higher than the rate for special education students. Conversely, a negative value for a gap indicates that special education students drop out at a higher rate than the entire population of students in the state.

Of the 60 states, 39 (65%) showed a negative gap, 13 states (22%) showed a positive gap, and 8 states (13%) were missing data, making it impossible to calculate a gap. Figure 5 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.

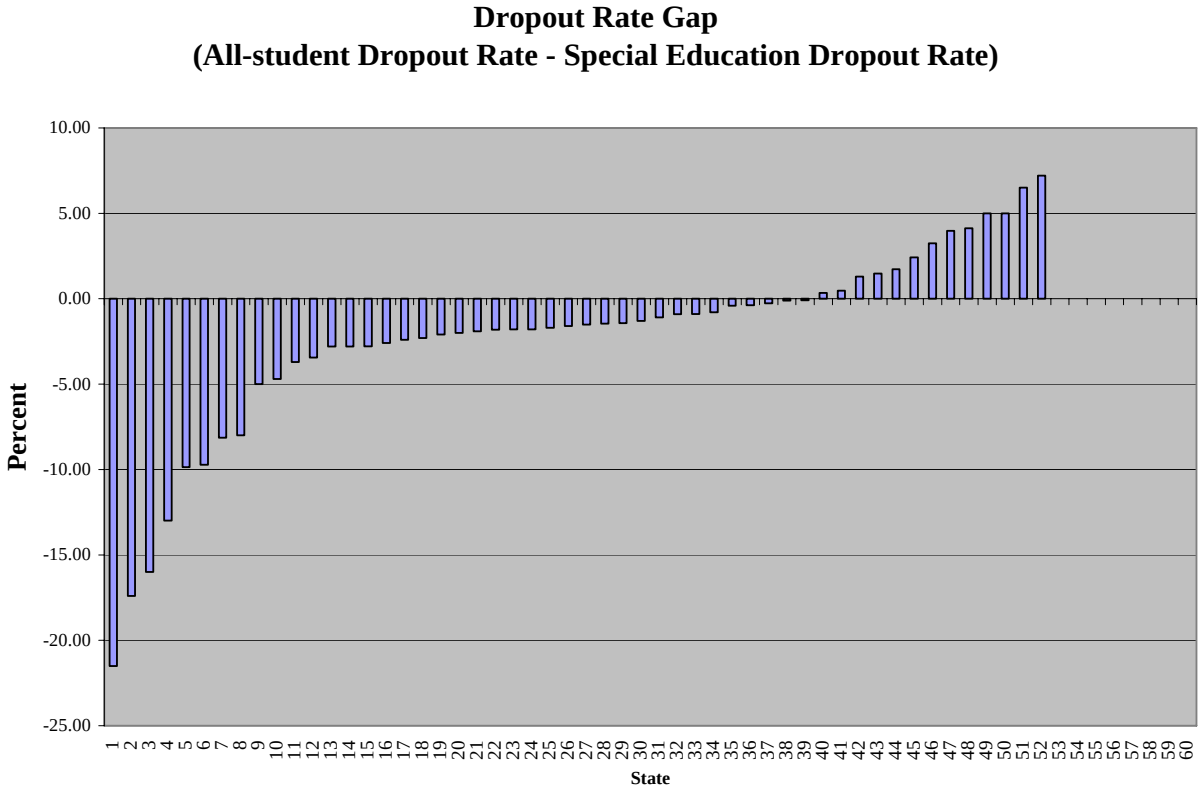

Figure 5

DROPOUT RATE TARGETS

Most states expressed their targets in terms of a particular special-education dropout rate they would like to achieve during each year of the SPP. Of the 60 states, 49 (82%) expressed their targets in this manner. Five states (8%) expressed their targets in terms of improving from a baseline value by a particular percentage for each year of the

SPP. Three states (5%) expressed their targets in terms of an increasing percentage of districts attaining particular targets. Two states (3%) stated their targets in terms of reducing the gap between the all-student and special-education dropout rates. Finally, one state set targets for only the all-student dropout rate, rather than specifying targets for both all students and special-education students.

While OSEP instructed states to set measurable and rigorous targets for their special-education graduation rates, most states set extremely modest targets. The proposed amounts of improvement over the life of the SPP ranged from a slight increase in the dropout rate (0.19%) in one state to a reduction of 35% in another. A breakdown of targeted improvement across the years of the SPPs is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

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)	Number of states
Dropout rate will increase by <1%	1
0 – 1.0%	21
1.1% – 2.0%	8
2.1% – 3.0%	6
3.1% - 5.0%	6
5.1% - 10.0%	2
10.1% - 15.0%	1
>15%	2
Couldn't calculate improvement because of manner in which targets were stated	13

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 6 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)

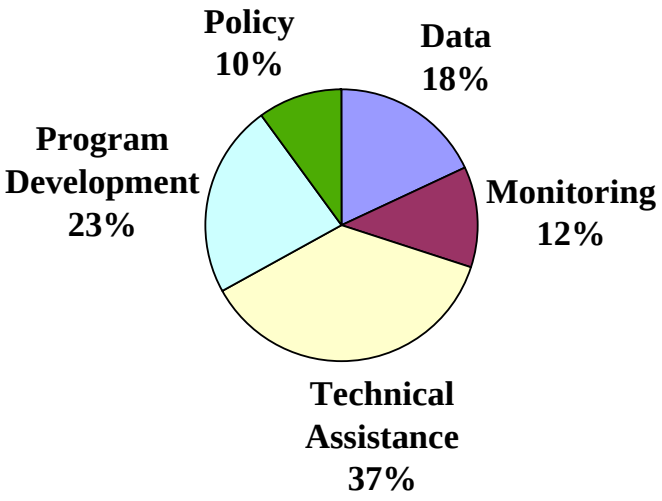

Figure 6

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.

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) Organizing 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 the dropout rate.

2) Convening 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) Adjusting/revising the monitoring system to establish triggers for causal analysis and developing 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 disseminating them to all LEAs.

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

6) Identifying a small number of districts and creating building-level models.

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

8) Considering policy and legislative recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) In order to make comparisons among states possible, the manner in which dropout is defined and dropout 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 than the others, should yield a fairly realistic picture of dropout. With a standardized calculation formula states could plug in their raw counts and the rates could be computed as part of an on-line submission of the APR.

2) 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.

3) Comparisons of dropout rates would also be facilitated if it were possible to standardize what constitutes dropping out (e.g., how long a student is absent from school before he or she is considered a dropout, whether students participating in a GED program are counted as dropouts, etc). We recommend that USDE adopt a uniform definition for dropout to be used by both OESE and OSEP.

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 dropout 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 dropout rates for students with and without disabilities using cohort approach.

B. Providing guidance to all school districts regarding the state's dropout 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 dropout-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 dropout 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 dropout (graduation, 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 high dropout rates to engage in analysis of causes

E. Ensure that transition plans for each student address the factors associated with dropout

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 dropout 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 evidence-based 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 dropout rates among students.

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

C. Require each school to complete a dropout risk/asset assessment on each sixth- and seventh-grade student. Develop a dropout-prevention plan for each student who scores in the moderate- to high-risk range.

D. Offer mini grants to LEAs seeking to replicate evidence-based models.

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 - 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. State will adopt many of the APEX strategies to assist in the reduction of the graduation gap for students with and without IEPs.

F. The 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.

For additional information, contact:
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