
An Analysis of States' FFY 2010 Annual Performance Report Data for Indicator B1 (Graduation)

**A Report Prepared for the
U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs
by the
National Dropout Prevention Center
for Students with Disabilities**

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Indicator B1: 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 2010 Annual Performance Reports (APRs) and amended State Performance Plans (SPPs), which were submitted by states to OSEP on February 1st of 2012. 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.

MEASUREMENT

The Part B Measurement Table indicates that states are 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 2010 APR, use data from the 2009-2010 school year), and compare the results to the target for the 2009-10 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.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE GRADUATION RATE MEASUREMENT

The 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.

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 2006-07 school year and graduating by the end of the 2009-10 school year.

of cohort members receiving a regular HS diploma by end of the 2009-10 school year

of first-time 9th graders in fall 2006 (starting cohort) + transfers in – transfers out – emigrated out – deceased during school years 2006-07 through 2009-10

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, etc.). 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 necessitates the use of longitudinal data systems that employ unique student identifiers. Most states have these in place, or are well on the way to developing such systems. A few states have had difficulty meeting this need and have had to request permission from the Department of Education for permission to report using a different calculation method or data set.

CALCULATION METHODS

States will not be required to implement the new adjusted cohort rate calculation until the 2010-11 school year and many have not yet done so. In FFY 2010 only 20 states (33%) reported using the adjusted cohort calculation. Of the remaining 40 states, 30

(50%) reported a leaver rate, four states (7%) reported a cohort rate, three states (5%) reported an event rate, and three states (5%) reported using other calculations. Figures 1 – 5 show states' graduation rates, based on the type of calculation employed.

Figure 1

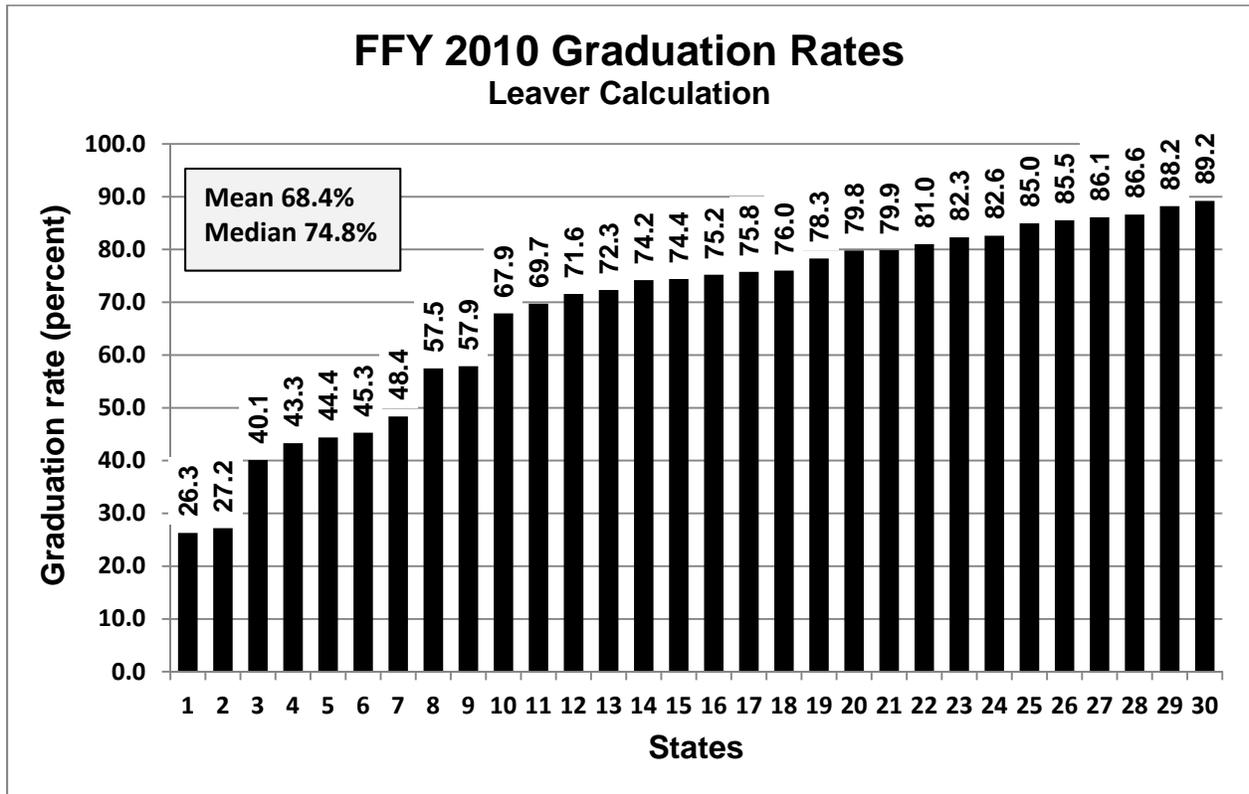


Figure 2

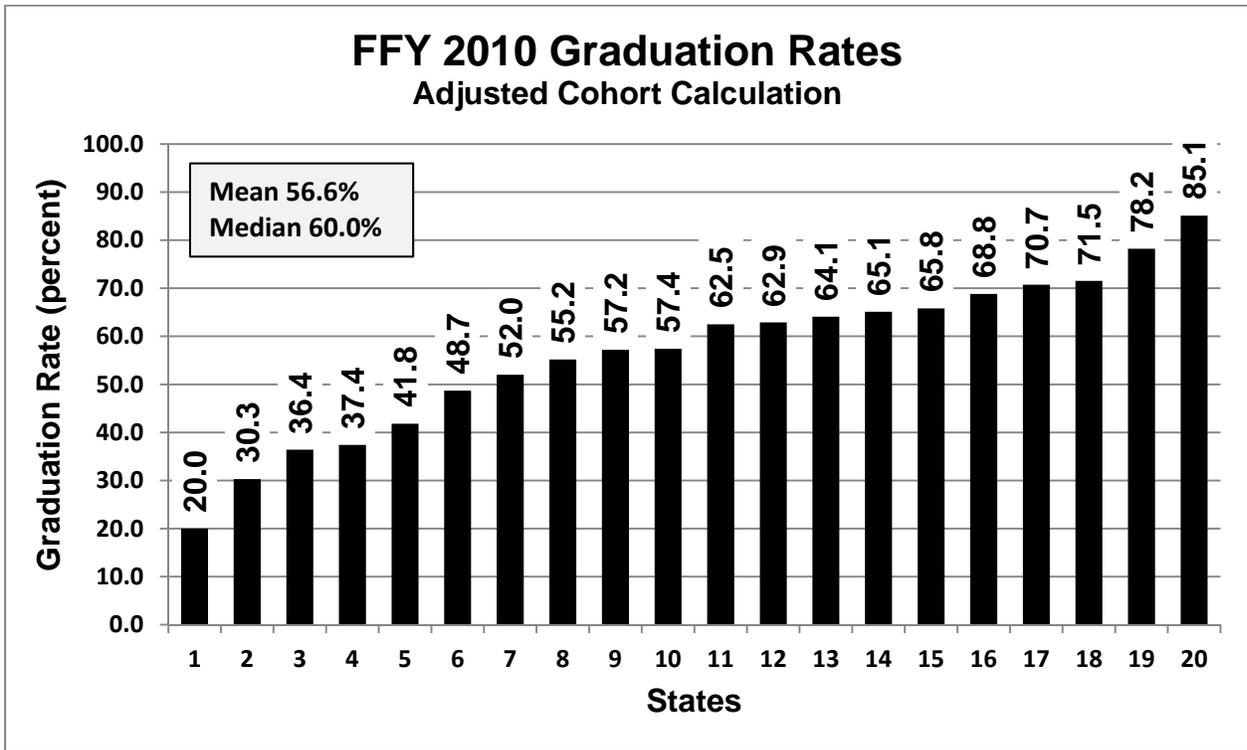


Figure 3

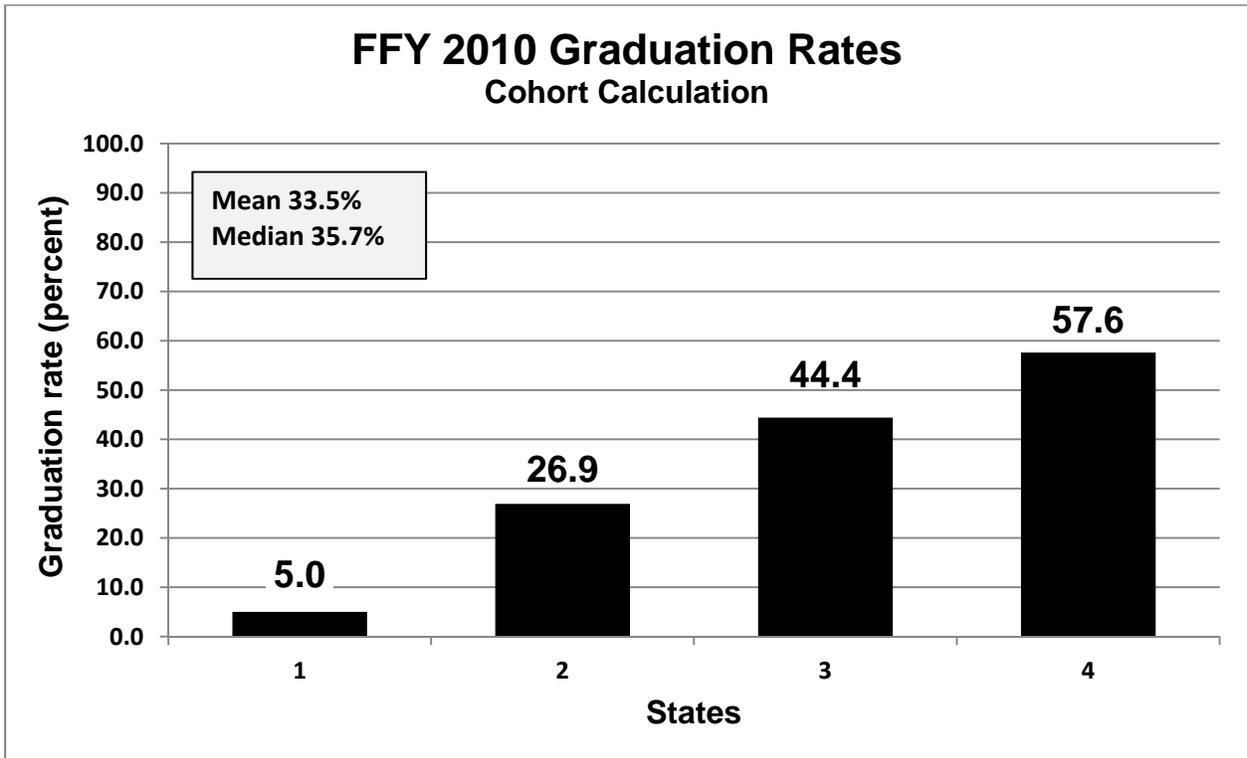


Figure 4

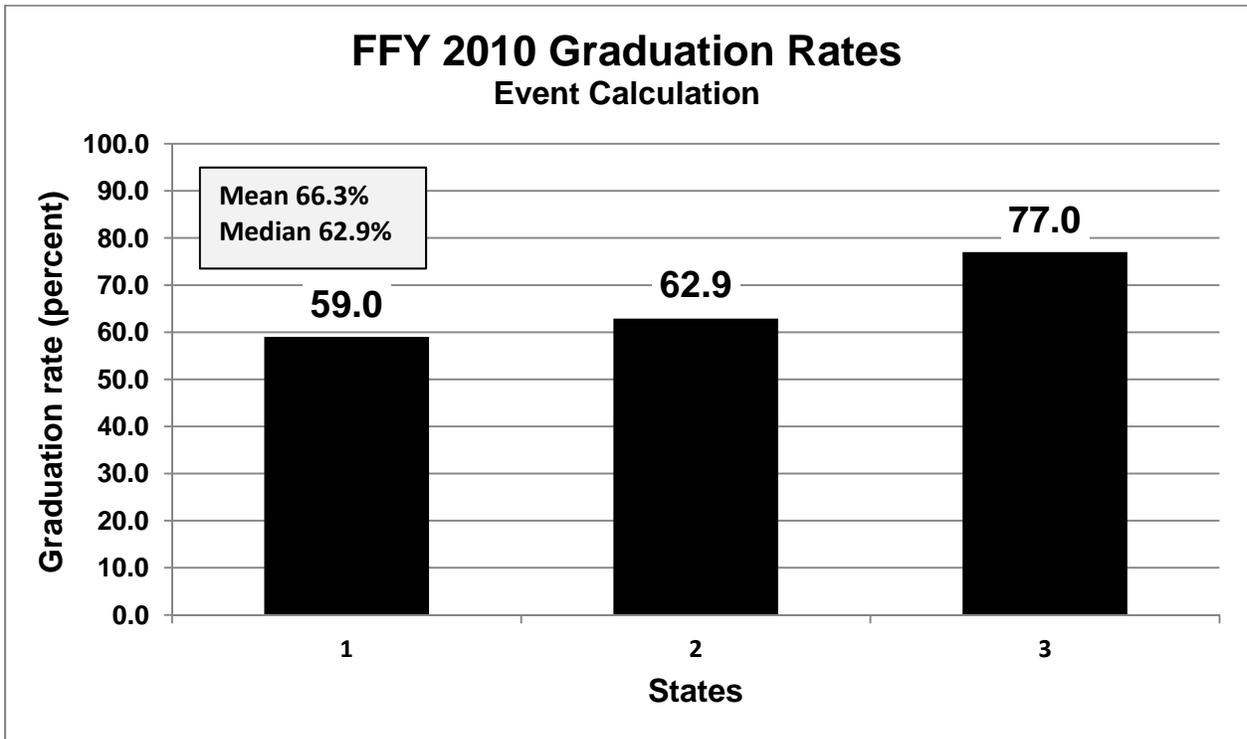
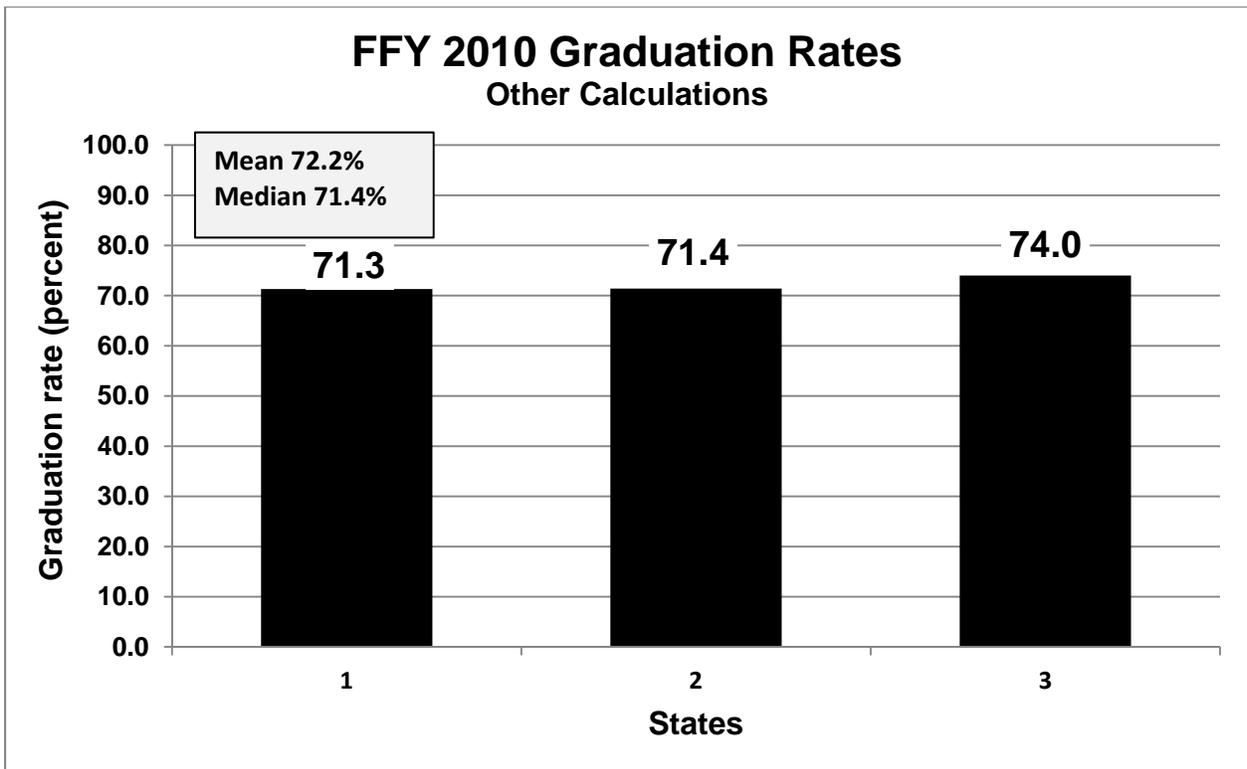


Figure 5



STATES' PERFORMANCE ON THE INDICATOR

As shown in Figure 6, 17 states (28%) met or exceeded their FFY 2010 graduation rate targets and 43 states (72%) did not. These results are down from FFY 2009, during which 25 states (42%) met their graduation rate targets. Of those that met their graduation target, 13 states (22%) also met their dropout rate target in FFY 2010.

A factor that adversely impacted states' performance against their targets was that 35 states (58%) raised their graduation rate targets from last year. As reported in the FFY 2009 APRs, targets ranged from 25.0% to 91.3% with mean of 71.2% and median of 75.3%. In the current APRs, targets ranged from 22.0% to 90.0% with mean of 72.8% and median of 80.0%.

Figure 7 shows that more than half the states (33 states or 55%) made progress and improved their rates, whereas 24 states (40%) reported a decrease (slippage) in their graduation rates from FFY 2009. One state's rate remained at the FFY 2009 level and two states were unable to make the comparison because they lacked comparable data.

Despite this progress, across each of the four common methods of calculation (leaver, adjusted cohort, cohort, and event formulas), average graduation rates for students with disabilities appeared to decline during FFY 2010. Several factors contributed to this. Some of them resulted in an actual decrease in the rate, whereas others are artifacts of changes in targets or measurement between FFY 2009 and FFY 2010.

One relatively minor factor in reducing the rates involves states that have very low numbers of students with disabilities. In these states, small fluctuations in the number of graduates from year to year can yield drastic swings in the graduation rate, thereby raising or lowering averages. Another fairly minor factor is the slight increase in the number of states that calculated an adjusted cohort rate (as opposed to an event or leaver rate). As indicated in Figures 1, 2, and 4, the adjusted cohort rates were generally lower than event or leaver rates. This year saw an increase in the number of adjusted cohort rates and a decline in the number of leaver rates, and as a likely consequence, a depression of the average graduation rates. Finally, at least one state reported that their FFY 2009 data was suspect, resulting in what appeared to be a substantial decrease in their rate from FFY 2009 to FFY 2010.

In examining Figure 7, it is apparent that the amount of slippage in those states whose graduation rate declined from FFY 2009 was generally greater than the amount of progress made by states that improved their graduation rate. The mean gain in states that made progress was 3.4% with a median of 2.3% (N=24), whereas the mean amount of slippage in states that slipped was -12.0% with a median of -5.3% (N=33).

Figure 6

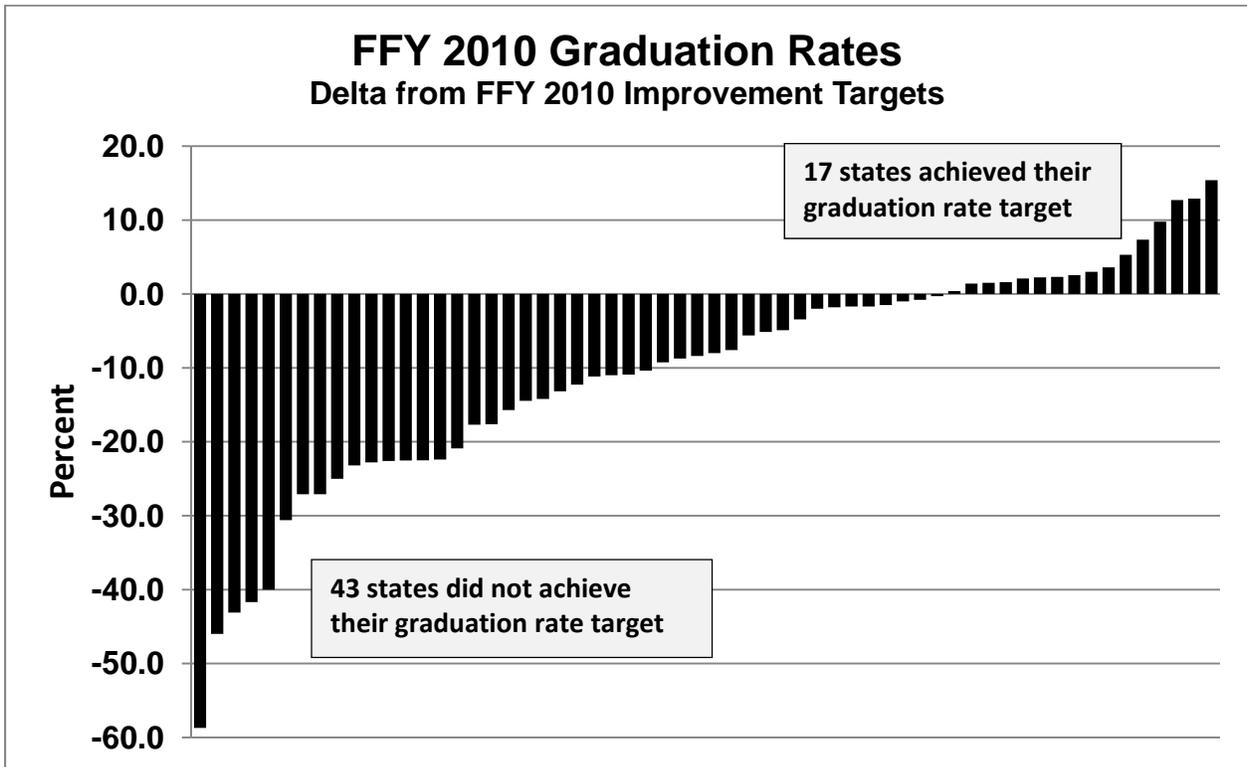
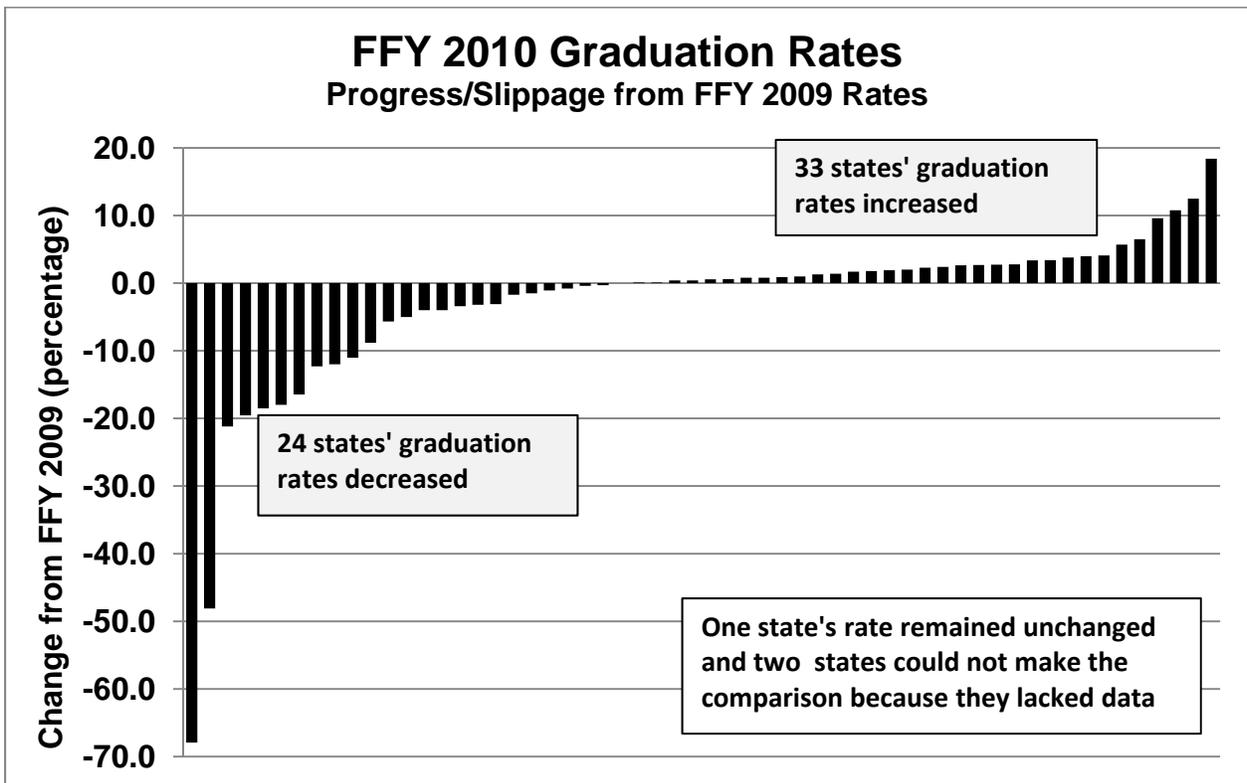


Figure 7



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.

Most states acknowledged the connections between their activities for at least Indicators 1 and 2. Thirty-eight states (63%) reported the same set of activities for both indicators. Another nine states (15%) described activities common to 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. Additionally, 28 states (47%) also reported activities aimed to engage parents and families in becoming partners in educating their children.

The utilization of research-based/evidence-based strategies and interventions as well as “promising practices” around school completion continued among states. Twelve states (20%) mentioned statewide efforts to identify (and subsequently disseminate) effective practices in their LEAs that focused on school completion. A handful of states described various efforts to develop a toolkit or suite of resources that LEAs could use to develop and support local school completion initiatives.

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. The practice guide 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 that address school completion, 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 2010 APRs

Nature of intervention	Number of states
Used research/evidence-based practices	48
Response to Intervention	44
Positive Behavior Supports	32
Parental engagement efforts	28
Academic initiatives	27
Vocational education / CTE	17
Credit recovery programs	11
Mentoring programs	9
Recovery/reentry programs	6

Statewide initiatives

Thirty-seven states (62%) reported that school completion was a state priority, though only 24 (40%) reported that they were developing or implementing any sort of statewide initiative that would impact their graduation, dropout, and/or reentry/recovery rates.

Georgia

One statewide initiative continues in the State of Georgia, which has implemented its GraduateFIRST initiative since 2007. The program currently has three cohorts of schools, for a total of 131 schools, all of which have developed and are implementing local school completion initiatives for students with disabilities. One reason for the success of this program is the ongoing support and follow-up provided to each participating school via Georgia's network of collaboration coaches. The coaches, who were trained by NDPC-SD and State personnel under Georgia's SPDG, are each assigned several schools in which they support the local work, serving as trainers, mentors, content resources, and cheerleaders for the ongoing work. Additionally, the program is briefly described in a brief developed by the Regional Resource Center Program's Student Performance and Achievement Priority Team, which may be found at http://www.ndpc-sd.org/documents/12.Spotlight_GraduateFirst.pdf.

Kentucky

Kentucky is also implementing a statewide initiative focused on school completion. The State's continuous improvement monitoring process requires every district in which one

or more students with disabilities drops out to conduct a root-cause analysis of their data at the district, school, and student level to identify the cause(s) of the dropout.

While this effort is focused only on youth with disabilities, the Kentucky Department of Education also developed the Kentucky College and Career Readiness (CCR) delivery plan to address school completion for all students. The plan focuses accountability at the school/district level to increase the rate of its students who leave high school ready for college, career or both. One of the strategies of the CCR delivery plan is the collection and use of data. This has resulted in the development of the Persistence to Graduation Tool, an early warning tool that identifies students who are at risk of dropping out. Accompanying the data tool is a suite of evidence-based practices to address any needs identified in the school.

Alabama

Alabama's First Choice Initiative is a program designed to increase the graduation rate and to improve the post-school outcomes of Alabama youth with and without disabilities. It provides multiple pathways to graduation and provides a variety of safeguards and supports to assist struggling learners. The components of the program are: credit recovery, credit advancement (earning credit in non-traditional ways), graduation coaches for at-risk students, and multiple diploma options.

NDPC-SD intensive states

In collaboration with NDPC-SD, ten states (AR, BIE, LA, MI, MO, NE, NC, UT, WA, and WV) are currently working on statewide initiatives to improve their school completion rates. SEA and LEA staff in these states are receiving training and technical assistance from NDPC-SD to help them develop model sites for dropout prevention initiatives or address other state/local data-related or other needs around school completion. Additionally, the State of Georgia and Miami-Dade County Public School District in Florida are continuing the work they initiated with NDPC-SD under its first round of OSEP funding.

OSEP Results work

Several states chose topics related to school completion for the Results portion of their OSEP continuous improvement visits in 2011. Among those states was Nebraska, which was already working intensively with the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities to develop, pilot, and disseminate a toolkit of resources and materials for schools to use in designing and developing local school completion initiatives. Nebraska wanted to leverage their work with NDPC-SD and reengage youth with disabilities who had dropped out of high school. Getting these youth back into educational programs can be an effective strategy for improving the post-secondary outcomes for these youth.

In September 2011, Nebraska held its first stakeholder meeting, at which information about dropout, graduation, reentry/recovery, and other related topics was presented to

and discussed with a broad stakeholder group. A product of that meeting was a 4-year strategic plan, which has the goal of developing, piloting, and disseminating (statewide) a reentry program for youth with disabilities in Nebraska.

Among the strategies Nebraska has chosen to support this goal are:

- 1) Increasing awareness at state and local level regarding dropout reentry strategies;
- 2) increasing capacity of current programs focused on dropout prevention to target students with disabilities who have left school but remain eligible for special education;
- 3) developing partnerships with other entities that can have statewide impact on providing reentry services to students with disabilities; and
- 4) partnering with general education initiatives to increase graduation rates.

The State has posted information about their efforts and progress on this work at the following link: <http://www.education.ne.gov/sped/reentry.html>.

Examples of other improvement activities

Data-based decision making

Data-based decision making was a nearly ubiquitous activity, reported by 54 states (90%) in this APR in one form or another. States are examining their school completion data and considering that information when targeting technical assistance to LEAs, awarding LEA improvement grants, looking for effective practices, and identifying topics for professional development.

Eleven states (18%) described work on an early warning system using their longitudinal data to identify youth who are at risk of dropping out of school. The data being employed include information about students' attendance, behavior, grade retention, and academic performance on state assessments. In general, states that reviewed this sort of information about their students have experienced success in using it to inform their work. Examples of states that examined such risk and protective factors related to school completion include Alabama, Arkansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, and West Virginia.

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 examining the factors within the school environment that contribute to dropout and 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.

As discussed above, while the use of data analysis is critical in identifying areas of need, it is not a strategy or intervention, *per se*, for keeping youth in school, but rather a tool to support the greater effort. Once the students' needs have been identified, it is necessary to provide rigorous instruction in academics, career skills, and self-advocacy in order to keep at-risk youth engaged in school and to foster their success.

Identification of effective practices

Kansas, Missouri, North Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Wisconsin were among the ten states that reported efforts to identify and examine the programs being implemented in their LEAs that had graduation rates above the state average. They are working to share these promising practices among the other districts in the state through various means, including websites, communities of practice, newsletters, and conference presentations.

Eleven states (18%) indicated in their APRs that they are actively engaging in evaluation of their improvement activities to identify those which yield measurable improvements in the desired impact area. The states incorporating evaluation into their improvement activities are Georgia, Hawaii, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, and Vermont.

Reentry programs

Including Nebraska, six states (17%) described reentry/recovery programs in their APRs. While there are many such programs around the country, most operate on a local level, rather than statewide, as Nebraska intends for their initiative. This makes it difficult to locate and identify them. Reentry programs may be operating in many states, but because of their local nature, they simply do not get reported in states' APRs.

Reentry 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. Their focus 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 reentry 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 all beneficial elements that help them address their audiences effectively.

COMMONALITIES AMONG STATES THAT MADE PROGRESS OR MET TARGETS

Table 2 shows some of the school completion activities states engaged in and indicates whether they made progress from FFY 2009 or achieved their FFY 2010 targets for Indicator 1.

Table 2
States' performance and some of their activities

Improvement activity	Number of states that made progress	Number of states that met graduation target
Transition-related activities	31	17
Data-based decision making	30	15
Indicated graduation & dropout were a priority	22	11
Using one or more evidence-based practices	28	16
Statewide initiative related to school completion	16	8

Filtering the data to select states that made progress and engaged in all of the above activities leaves ten states (17%). Only five states (8%) met their graduation target and engaged all of the activities in the table above. The same five states met their target, made progress, and engaged in the above improvement activities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall quality of states' APRs for FFY 2010 was the best since the SPP/APR came into existence. States generally provided the required information about their definitions, calculations, and data in a clear form. The descriptions of improvement activities were generally more concise than in years past as well. As more states switch over to using the adjusted cohort rate calculation, it will continue to become easier to quantify states' improvements and compare progress for the nation overall.

While Indicators B1 and B2 are performance indicators (as opposed to compliance indicators), in these lean fiscal times, there is increasing importance being placed on the identification of activities that will improve states' graduation and dropout rates for students with disabilities. The difficulty of judging what activities were most beneficial based solely on the brief amount of information contained in the APR is a difficult task at best. Without knowing the particulars about each activity or intervention, its implementation within a state, and having some impact data for the activity, there is basically no way to determine what worked well and what did not.

To advance "the work" of improving school completion rates in the nation, more states need to engage in meaningful evaluation of their SPP improvement activities and to

report on what worked in particular contexts for their students with disabilities. Information of this nature can benefit other states struggling with similar issues. The Regional Resource Center Program has posted resources to support states in their evaluation of improvement activities at the following URL:
<http://www.rrcprogram.org/content/view/191/288/>.