Forum Guide to
Exit Codes

National Forum on Education Statistics

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National Cooperative Education Statistics System

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) established the National Cooperative Education Statistics System (Cooperative System) to assist in producing and maintaining comparable and uniform information and data on early childhood, elementary, and secondary education. These data are intended to be useful for policymaking at the federal, state, and local levels.

The National Forum on Education Statistics (Forum) is an entity of the Cooperative System and, among its other activities, proposes principles of good practice to assist state and local education agencies in meeting this purpose. The Cooperative System and the Forum are supported in these endeavors by resources from NCES.

Publications of the Forum do not undergo the same formal review required for products of NCES. The information and opinions published here are those of the Forum and do not necessarily represent the policy or views of NCES, the Institute of Education Sciences, or the U.S. Department of Education.

Foreword

The National Forum on Education Statistics (Forum) is pleased to present the *Forum Guide to Exit Codes*. The purpose of this resource is to provide an updated taxonomy for exit codes, information on best practices related to exit coding, and case studies that highlight different education agencies' approaches to and experiences with exit coding.

Publication Objectives

In 2006, the Forum addressed the need for a voluntary, common format for tracking data about when students transferred, completed high school, dropped out, or otherwise exited an education agency with the publication of *Accounting for Every Student: A Taxonomy for Standard Student Exit Codes*. This new publication updates information originally published in the 2006 document. Changes include revisions to the taxonomy, recent case studies from state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs), and best practices for collecting and maintaining exit code data.

Intended Audience

This resource is intended for education agency leaders and staff who collect and use data on student enrollment and exit status to accurately account for all students. This audience may include data managers, school registrars, and accountability directors in SEAs and LEAs, school administrators, researchers, and policymakers.

Organization of This Resource

This resource includes the following chapters and appendices:

- **Chapter 1: Introduction to Exit Codes** defines exit codes and reviews their use in an education agency. The chapter discusses the need for a taxonomy that accounts for 100 percent of enrolled students and explains how the taxonomy was developed.

- **Chapter 2: The Exit Codes Taxonomy** presents the taxonomy of exit codes.

- **Chapter 3: Best Practices in Exit Coding** discusses best practices and methods for addressing specific challenges in exit codes data collection.

- **Chapter 4: Case Studies** provides examples from SEAs and LEAs that have successfully implemented and used exit codes, including those that have navigated exit code challenges in unique ways.

- **Appendix A: Characteristics of Sound Exit Code Taxonomies** lists features of well-designed exit code taxonomies.

National Forum on Education Statistics

The work of the National Forum on Education Statistics (Forum) is a key aspect of the National Cooperative Education Statistics System (Cooperative System). The Cooperative System was established to produce and maintain, with the cooperation of the states, comparable and uniform education information and data that are useful for policymaking at the federal, state, and local levels. To assist in meeting this goal, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) within the Institute of Education Sciences (IES)–a part of the U.S. Department of Education (ED)–established the Forum to improve the collection, reporting, and use of elementary and secondary education statistics. The Forum includes approximately 120 representatives from state and local education agencies, the federal government, and other

organizations with an interest in education data. The Forum deals with issues in education data policy, sponsors innovations in data collection and reporting, and provides technical assistance to improve state and local data systems.

Development of Forum Products

Members of the Forum establish working groups to develop guides in data-related areas of interest to federal, state, and local education agencies. They are assisted in this work by NCES, but the content comes from the collective experience of working group members who review all products iteratively throughout the development process. After the working group completes the content and reviews a document a final time, publications are subject to examination by members of the Forum standing committee that sponsors the project. Finally, Forum members review and formally vote to approve all documents before publication. NCES provides final review and approval before online publication. The information and opinions published in Forum products do not necessarily represent the policies or views of ED, IES, or NCES. Readers may modify, customize, or reproduce any or all parts of this document.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Exit Codes

State and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs) are accountable for every student who enrolls in and later exits their schools. Exit codes, which are attached to individual student records, allow agencies to track students when they transfer, graduate, drop out, or otherwise exit from a school or district. Exit codes are essential for accounting for all students, past and present, who were enrolled at any point in time. Exit codes are also used in many different ways to promote excellence in the quality of public education that students receive. Consequently, education agencies need information on which exit codes are useful to include within a data system; how to collect accurate data, manage that data appropriately, and use it for various purposes; and how to handle any challenges that may arise.

In 2006, the National Forum on Education Statistics (Forum) noted that public education agencies were being held accountable for student achievement to an unprecedented extent. At that time, the focus on student outcomes–particularly the attention given to graduation and dropout rates–highlighted the importance of collecting accurate data at the student level. The Forum responded to the need among education agencies for information on exit coding with the publication of *Accounting for Every Student: A Taxonomy for Standard Student Exit Codes* (https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006804.pdf). Since 2006, SEAs and LEAs have continued to track student exit code data for multiple purposes, including reporting, accountability, and student management. Exit codes data help education agency personnel monitor transfers, calculate graduation and dropout rates, and perform other analytical tasks for the purpose of informed decisionmaking. This new resource updates information in the 2006 guide and provides up-to-date information on exit coding in SEAs and LEAs.

> ## Scope of This Document
>
> This document examines exit codes that are assigned to every student when they leave an education agency. Exit codes data allow education agencies to account for all students, past and present, who were enrolled at any point in time.
>
> This document does not examine
>
> - program exit codes, such as codes assigned to students exiting special education, career and technical education, and English learner programs; or
>
> - more detailed codes, sometimes called reason codes, that provide further information on why a student was assigned a particular exit code upon leaving an education agency.[1]

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[1]   Agencies may find it useful to update reason codes to account for new situations, including crises such as a pandemic.

Exit Code Uses and Users

Exit codes can be attached to student records at the state, district, or school level, or more than one of these. Accurate student enrollment and exit data are needed for many reasons. Through the collecting and reporting of valid and reliable exit code data, LEAs, SEAs, policymakers, and researchers can answer critical questions about students and systems. Some examples of these critical questions are listed in figure 1.[2][3]

LEAs	SEAs
• Which students are expected to return to the school or LEA, and which are not? • What are the mobility patterns in the LEA? • What impact do student exits have on funding? • Where is a student who is missing due to a local crisis? What is the pattern of student movement due to a local crisis?	• What are the mobility patterns within and across LEAs? • Which types of students need intervention? • Which students are leaving the system, either through transfer, dropout, or graduation, and at what point in their K-12 education experience are they exiting schools? • Where are all students enrolled at any given time in order to make per-pupil funding decisions or testing allocations?
Policymakers	**Researchers**

• How can policymakers support program evaluation?
• What policy decisions should policymakers make concerning schools and students—such as decisions on dropout prevention strategies, graduation requirements, and transfer requirements?
• How can policymakers ensure the equitable distribution of funds to schools—for instance, by knowing how many students are enrolled in each of an LEA's schools (or projected enrollment on a certain date)?
	• How can researchers define and track cohorts of students, so they can make calculations to answer education questions such as:
	  o What do the data say about dropout rates and cycles?
	  o What do the data say about mobility rates and cycles?
	  o What do the data say about on-time graduation rates and cycles (and other completion rates and cycles)?

Figure 1. Four types of exit code users and critical education questions they can answer using exit codes data (along with other types of data)

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2   Further information about managing data in a crisis is available in the *Forum Guide to Planning for, Collecting, and Managing Data About Students Displaced by a Crisis*, available at https://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2019163.asp

3   Note that the questions in figure 1 are not exclusive to each type of exit code user. For example, many of the questions posed by policymakers are addressed by SEAs.

Exit Codes in Federal, State, and Local Education Agencies

Comprehensive data systems include standard exit codes that personnel can use to account for every student as they exit a school for varied reasons. Exit codes are created and used differently according to different agencies' needs, and there is considerable variation among the exit codes used in different SEAs and LEAs (see Chapter 4). The voluntary exit codes taxonomy presented in Chapter 2 was designed to be flexible enough to meet the needs of very different education agencies:

- At the federal level, the taxonomy can provide a common understanding of exit code categories, and it can serve as a tool for comparing different exit codes used in SEAs and LEAs. The six taxonomy categories and the related codes were designed to be specific enough to distinguish between the different reasons that students exit an agency without defining every particular circumstance. While SEAs and LEAs may have more categories and codes than those included in the taxonomy, SEA and LEA codes can often be aggregated or compiled to match the codes in the taxonomy. For example, an SEA may have separate state codes for students who graduate with a regular diploma, an honors diploma, or an International Baccalaureate diploma. But for cross-state comparisons, the SEA may map all of these to a single category, such as "Graduated with regular, advanced, International Baccalaureate, or other type of diploma."

> **Tracking and Reporting High School Graduation Rates**
>
> One critical use of exit codes is to track high school graduation rates for federal reporting. The U.S. Department of Education has provided non-regulatory guidance on how SEAs, LEAs, and schools can meet federal requirements. The Every Student Succeeds Act High School Graduation Rate Non-Regulatory Guidance is available at https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essagradrateguidance.pdf.

- At the SEA level, some states choose to implement the taxonomy as the standard for all state reporting, while others use it as a map for aggregating LEA codes. SEAs that maintain state codes that differ from the taxonomy can use the taxonomy to aid in federal reporting as well as for comparisons with other states.

Chapter 2:
The Exit Codes Taxonomy

In 2006, the Forum published *Accounting for Every Student: A Taxonomy for Standard Student Exit Codes* (https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006804.pdf). The taxonomy was developed through an iterative process and informed by the collection of existing exit codes used by states. After the 2006 task force drafted its first list of basic categories, exit codes were collected from all 50 states and four other jurisdictions. The model was tested by cross-walking the state exit codes to the taxonomy. In some cases, categories were renamed and subcategories added or redefined to cover the wide range of possibilities for student enrollment changes. Data managers from each state reviewed the crosswalks of current exit codes to the taxonomy, and their comments were used to further refine the categories.

Exit codes published in the Forum's 2006 taxonomy were incorporated into the Common Education Data Standards (CEDS) as the option set for the element "Exit or Withdrawal Type." CEDS is an education data management initiative that includes a common vocabulary, data models, tools, metadata, and a community of education stakeholders[4]. Over time, the exit codes that were included in CEDS were modified and updated to address the changing needs of state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs).

The education landscape has changed since 2006, and in 2019, the Forum convened a Working Group to provide an updated resource on exit codes and to align the Forum's taxonomy with the updated information in CEDS. The taxonomy presented in this chapter aligns with the Exit or Withdrawal Type options available in CEDS Version 9, although it does not include all of the options provided in CEDS. The six categories of the taxonomy are as follows:

1. Expected to Remain in the LEA

2. Transferred Out

3. Dropped Out

4. Completed

5. Expected to Return After an Extended Break

6. Unable or Unlikely to Return

There are 34 subcategories within these broad categories. Any SEA or LEA using these 34 subcategories as exit codes will be able to account successfully for all students who exit school, past and present, enrolled at any time.

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4   For more information about CEDS, see https://ceds.ed.gov/Default.aspx

Category 1: Expected to Remain in the LEA[5]

- **Student is expected to return to the same school**–The student is expected to return to the same school at the beginning of the next school year.

- **Student is in a different public school in the same LEA**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and is in a different public school in the same LEA.

- **Student is in the same LEA, receiving education services, but is not assigned to a particular school**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and the student is in the same LEA, receiving education services, but is not assigned to a particular school.

- **Student is in a charter school managed by the same LEA**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and is in a charter school managed by the same local education agency.

Category 2: Transferred Out

- **Transferred to a public school in a different LEA in the same state**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and transferred to a public school in a different LEA in the same state.

- **Transferred to a private, non-religiously-affiliated school within the geographic boundaries of the same LEA**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and transferred to a private, non-religiously-affiliated school within the geographic boundaries of the same LEA.

- **Transferred to a private, non-religiously-affiliated school within the geographical boundaries of a different LEA in the same state**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and transferred to a private, non-religiously-affiliated school within the geographic boundaries of a different LEA in the same state.

- **Transferred to a private, religiously-affiliated school within the geographic boundaries of the same LEA**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and transferred to a private, religiously-affiliated school within the geographic boundaries of the same LEA.

- **Transferred to a private, religiously-affiliated school within the geographic boundaries of a different LEA in the same state**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and transferred to a private, religiously-affiliated school within the geographic boundaries of a different LEA in the same state.

- **Transferred to home schooling**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and transferred to homeschooling.

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[5] Category 1 codes are used in many states to exit students at the end of each school year, therefore there are codes for students expected to return to the LEA.

- **Transferred to a charter school in a different LEA in the state**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and transferred to a charter school in a different LEA in the same state.

- **Transferred to a charter school in a different state**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and transferred to a charter school in a different state.

- **Transferred to a public school in a different state**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and transferred to a public school in a different state.

- **Transferred to a private, non-religiously-affiliated school in a different state**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and transferred to a private, non-religiously-affiliated school in a different state.

- **Transferred to a private, religiously-affiliated school in a different state**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and transferred to a private, religiously-affiliated school in a different state.

- **Transferred to a school outside of the country**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and transferred to a school outside of the country.

- **Transferred to an institution**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and transferred to an institution.[6]

Category 3: Dropped Out

- **Discontinued schooling**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and discontinued schooling.

- **Reached maximum age for services**–the student reached maximum age for services.

- **Officially withdrew and enrolled in ABE, adult secondary education, or adult ESL program**–the student officially withdrew and enrolled in an adult basic education, adult secondary education, or adult English as a Second Language program.

- **Officially withdrew and enrolled in a workforce training program**–the student officially withdrew and enrolled in a workforce training program.

- **Not enrolled, eligible to return**–the student exited from membership in the education institution for an extended period unrelated to any other existing exit code. It is expected the student will return to this school after the reason for the extended period has completed.

- **Not enrolled, unknown status**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and the reason is presently unknown. It is expected this temporary option will be changed when the reason for exit has been determined.

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6   This code is used differently according to the specific needs of state education agencies (SEAs) and may refer to different types of institutions or facilities in different states. Note that in some states that use this code, it is only used for transfers to institutions that provide education services, while in other states it may be used for institutions that do not provide education services.

Category 4: Completed

- **Graduated with regular, advanced, International Baccalaureate, or other type of diploma**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and graduated with regular, advanced, International Baccalaureate, or other type of diploma.

- **Completed grade 12, but did not meet all graduation requirements**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and completed grade 12, but did not meet all graduation requirements.

- **Completed school with other credentials**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and completed school with other credentials.

- **Completed with a state-recognized equivalency certificate**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and completed with a state-recognized equivalency certificate.

Category 5: Expected to Return After an Extended Break

- **Withdrawn due to illness**–the student was withdrawn due to illness.

- **Enrolled in a foreign exchange program**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and is enrolled in a foreign exchange program.

- **Enrolled in a postsecondary early admission program**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and enrolled in a postsecondary early admission program.

- **Expelled or involuntarily withdrawn**–the student was expelled or involuntarily withdrawn.

Category 6: Unable or Unlikely to Return

- **Died**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution because of death.

- **Permanently incapacitated**–the student exited from membership in the educational institution and is permanently incapacitated.

- **Other**–the circumstances under which the student exited from membership in an educational institution is in a category not yet defined in this taxonomy.

Chapter 3:
Best Practices in Exit Coding

State and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs) that wish to create or modify their exit codes can use the taxonomy in Chapter 2 as a resource to inform their data collection processes and structures. In turn, SEAs, LEAs, policymakers, and researchers can use exit codes data collected by education agencies to answer critical education questions. Taxonomies are useful for sorting information into logical categories. However, if data are not properly collected and coded in the first place, this can lead to inaccurate analyses and conclusions. This chapter discusses best practices, developed over time by SEAs and LEAs, for ensuring the quality of exit codes data.

Withdrawal Procedures That Support Exit Code Data Quality

Exit data are only as good as the processes people follow when a student withdraws and the care they take when entering information in a database or other record-keeping document. It is important for education agencies to be diligent about crafting clear withdrawal processes and helping staff understand how to assign exit codes appropriately.

Questions to Consider When Creating Withdrawal Processes

Discuss the following questions locally to determine local processes:

- Who withdraws students?

- Is the withdrawal process centralized or by building?

- Do the withdrawal processes take virtual schools into account?

- Is there a clear withdrawal procedure that everyone can follow to ensure consistency?

- Is there a withdrawal form that collects all necessary information, so administrators can make a clear decision on which exit code(s) to use?

- What is the procedure to make sure that students who withdraw end up somewhere else so their education can continue? Is there a procedure for following up with students who withdraw?

- What is the procedure for collecting proper documentation when students transfer?

- What is the procedure if there is no parent notification of withdrawal and no request for transcripts from another school?

Establishing Sound Data Collection Practices

Several National Forum on Education Statistics (Forum) publications describe in detail how an education agency can ensure that its data collection, management, and analysis processes are sound. For information on this topic that is beyond the scope of this guide, see the publications listed below.

Forum Guide to Taking Action with Education Data
https://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2013801.asp
This guide to the skillful and appropriate use of education data includes an introduction and three briefs written for educators, school and district leaders, and state program staff. Each brief is designed to provide stakeholders with practical information on the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to identify, access, interpret, and use education data for action.

Forum Curriculum for Improving Education Data
https://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2007808.asp
This curriculum supports efforts to improve the quality of education data by serving as training materials for K12 school and district staff. It provides lesson plans, instructional handouts, and related resources, and presents concepts necessary to help schools develop a culture for improving data quality.

Forum Guide to Building a Culture of Quality Data
https://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2005801.asp
This guide was developed to help schools and school districts improve the quality of data they collect and to provide processes for developing a "Culture of Quality Data" by focusing on data entry–getting things right at the source. The quality of data will improve when all staff understand how the data will be used and how data become information.

Forum Guide to Planning for, Collecting, and Managing Data About Students Displaced by a Crisis
https://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2019163.asp
This guide provides timely and useful best practice information for collecting and managing data about students who have temporarily or permanently enrolled in another education setting because of a crisis.

- Are there policies governing when data can be corrected? For example, what if a student fails to enroll in the LEA where they are expected?

- What are the procedures for data requests on student withdrawals? What kinds of exit data are being requested, and for what reasons? How can we improve the data collected and the collection methodology?

Virtual Education Data

More information about policy questions on virtual school data systems, including policy questions about enrollments and exits, is presented in the *Forum Guide to Elementary/Secondary Virtual Education Data*, available at https://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2016095.asp

Determining the Best Exit Code to Assign a Student

Decision diagrams can help staff determine the best exit code to assign each student. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction developed a decision diagram with a series of questions that can help staff identify the correct withdrawal code (see https://dpi.wi.gov/wise/data-elements/exit-types). Figure 2 shows an example of a decision diagram for assigning an exit code to a student. SEAs and LEAs can create decision diagrams specific to their exit codes. Decision diagrams can help staff assign exit codes consistently.
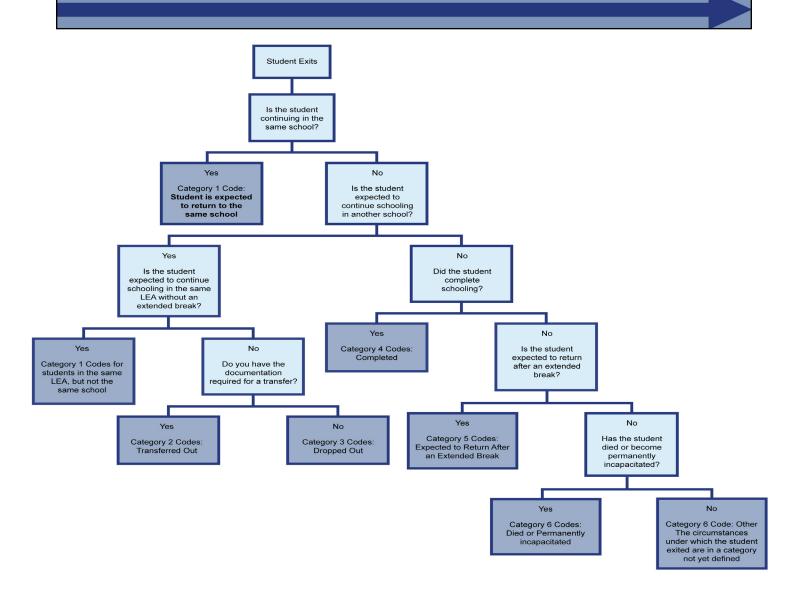
Student Exits

Is the student continuing in the same school?

Yes
Category 1 Code: **Student is expected to return to the same school**

No
Is the student expected to continue schooling in another school?

Yes
Is the student expected to continue schooling in the same LEA without an extended break?

No
Did the student complete schooling?

Yes
Category 1 Codes for students in the same LEA, but not the same school

No
Do you have the documentation required for a transfer?

Yes
Category 4 Codes: Completed

No
Is the student expected to return after an extended break?

Yes
Category 2 Codes: Transferred Out

No
Category 3 Codes: Dropped Out

Yes
Category 5 Codes: Expected to Return After an Extended Break

No
Has the student died or become permanently incapacitated?

Yes
Category 6 Codes: Died or Permanently incapacitated

No
Category 6 Code: Other The circumstances under which the student exited are in a category not yet defined

Figure 2. Example decision diagram for determining how to assign an exit code to a student

Data System and Data Governance Features That Support Exit Code Data Quality

Availability

One characteristic of high-quality data, including exit code data, is availability. In states where the exit data sync into a statewide system in real or near-real time, a student's exit status is available soon after being entered at the LEA. These data often need to be reviewed and updated because exit codes may change as new information on a student's whereabouts becomes available.

States that do not sync exit data in real or near-real time also face challenges with data availability. If collections are not timed to accommodate data demand (so that data are not available when stakeholders need them), it decreases the data's utility and, subsequently, the quality of data-driven decisionmaking. In addition, when updates are not available in real or near-real time, the data must be checked for updates before reporting them to the state.

Regardless of the method employed, data availability must factor in time to verify, validate, and present data.

Interoperability

Accessibility and quality of data increase when systems communicate effectively–that is, when they are interoperable. This is true within a single agency as well as within a collection and reporting continuum. For example, separate data systems within an organization should be able to exchange data effectively. At the same time, local exit codes must align with the SEA-determined taxonomy to ensure interoperability.

Validating Exit Codes

Validation is a process that ensures that data agree with expectations for reasonable values and accepted norms. Sometimes submitted data are clearly not valid. For example, when a school reports more four-year graduates than there are students in its 12th-grade class, an error has likely been made in the data collection or entry process. Checks can be integrated into data submission software to confirm that data entries make sense. Edit checks that are commonly used include

- cross-checking data with data in other files for consistency;

- conducting basic data analysis, such as comparisons to maximum or minimum expected values; and

- comparing data to a set of standard values.

Colorado's Use of Statewide Exit Codes Without a Statewide Student Information System (SIS)

Colorado does not have a statewide SIS. The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) collects student exit information from its LEAs utilizing a system called the Data Pipeline (https://www.cde.state.co.us/datapipeline).

The state provides the entry and exit status fields and the element options for the districts for use within at least eight different SIS products. An LEA may have more field options than the state, but the LEA must map them to the codes CDE provides for submission purposes. This has not been a challenge for Colorado, as this has been status quo since the implementation of CDE's first automated collection system in the early 2000s.

Early in the automated process, districts noticed that their vendors were not getting updated statutory or regulatory data reporting requirements in a timely manner. To improve timeliness and data accuracy, the legislature declared "that it is imperative that school districts and public schools receive adequate advance notice of changes in data submission requirements to enable them to effectively comply with the new requirements." This legislation (22-2-306 C.R.S.) requires that CDE update all changes to state or federal data reporting requirements made since the preceding April 1 on CDE's website on an annual basis by April 1.

The importance of collecting accurate exit code information cannot be overstated. Exit codes are utilized for a variety of purposes, including the calculation of graduation, dropout, and mobility rates; reporting to ED*Facts*; providing the academic progress of schools and districts on performance frameworks; and for dropout prevention purposes.

Colorado recognizes that a statewide SIS could possibly benefit the state in terms of reducing the data effort of Colorado's LEAs, relieving the financial burden of multiple SIS systems, and improving data accuracy. An independent value assessment of a statewide SIS was undertaken in December 2018, and a report of results and recommendations was released in late summer 2019.

Validation techniques are often accomplished by establishing allowable ranges for various data fields, including

- minimum values (for example, the total number of students cannot be less than zero);

- maximum values (for example, the number of graduates in a cohort cannot be greater than the number of students in the cohort); and

- comparative values (for example, the number of graduates cannot be greater than the number of completers).

Rigorous and systematic data validation procedures often identify mistakes that might otherwise go unnoticed in large data submissions.

Documenting and Verifying Student Exit Codes

Assigning an exit code to a student who was enrolled in a school and subsequently exited may seem straightforward, but the wide range of circumstances under which students leave school often makes this responsibility quite challenging. For example, when an LEA receives an official request for a student transcript from another LEA, the original LEA can be fairly confident that the student should be assigned an exit code that indicates a transfer out of the district. But the same is not true when the student's family notifies the original LEA of a transfer, but the original LEA never receives an official transcript request for the student from any other LEA. The situation is even murkier when the only evidence of a transfer is the student's friends saying, "Oh, we think he moved."

> ### Changing Transfer Documentation Requirements
>
> Establishing clear rules and procedures on how to document student transfers can help SEAs and LEAs improve data quality and reduce confusion about how to properly assign exit codes to students. However, changes to transfer documentation requirements can affect SEA and LEA reporting. In particular, more stringent requirements for documenting transfers can lead to more students being classified as dropouts.
>
> Documentation requests can cause reporting problems if they occur near the end of a school year. For example, if a student leaves a school in May but the school does not get a records request from the receiving school until the following September, the original school may be required to temporarily classify the student as a dropout. Some states allow schools to change already reported data once the documentation is secured, although there are often time limits for making corrections before the publication of data.

Verification is the process of confirming that information is correct. SEAs and LEAs without established documentation requirements for exit coding are less likely to generate accurate exit code data. Therefore, each education agency's exit code guidance should establish what evidence is necessary to make each coding assignment. The state should clearly communicate this guidance to LEAs to ensure proper data collection with fidelity at the school and LEA levels.

The case of students transferring out–coded in category 2 of the taxonomy–is particularly relevant. A common decision rule in many systems is that a student is not coded as a transfer without written parental notification, a formal transcript request from another school, or an official copy of the new school's enrollment records. Efforts to obtain such verifying information are important because without documentation transfer students could be coded incorrectly as dropouts.

SEAs have an important role in supporting LEAs in helping to identify and verify student transfers. Depending on their sophistication, some systems–such as transactional statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs)–can automatically notify the school or LEA a student leaves when they re-enroll elsewhere within the state. This will ensure a proper exit code in the

sending school. Non-transactional SLDSs can do this following each data collection, helping to improve the accuracy of exit codes.

Documenting Student Transfers

Verifying a student transfer is in most cases a straightforward process in which the receiving school sends a record request to the sending school (the student's previous school). The transcript request provides the documentation needed to confirm the transfer and allows the sending school to assign the student the appropriate exit code. However, transcript requests are not the only way that states verify student transfers. If a sending school does not receive a transcript request, staff might reach out to the receiving school for an enrollment notification to officially document the transfer.

While most transfers are promptly verified, it can sometimes be difficult for a sending school to determine whether a student has enrolled elsewhere or has ceased to attend school. Transfer verification can be especially difficult when students move out of the country, students begin homeschooling, or LEAs cannot obtain documentation on students' whereabouts.

Documenting Students Who Move out of the Country

When students move out of the country, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain documentation from the receiving school. SEAs and LEAs have established different documentation requirements and, in some cases, developed specific exit codes for these students. Often, state regulations indicate that written documentation from a parent or guardian is sufficient and need not be accompanied by official documents.

State Regulations on Transfers Out of the U.S.

The Virginia Department of Education provides exit code W310: Transfer to a school outside of the country. The code specifies, "Pursuant to 34 C.F.R. §200.19(b)(1)(ii)(B), a school must have written confirmation that a student has emigrated to another country, but need not obtain official written documentation." This code does not apply to students who transfer to U.S. overseas dependents schools.
http://www.doe.virginia.gov/info_management/data_collection/student_record_collection/code_values/exit-withdraw-codes.docx

The Colorado Department of Education allows the following types of documentation for transfers to out-of-country education entities: "a records request, a confirmation of attendance, a written confirmation by a school administrator or designee based on a conversation with a parent/guardian, or a parent/guardian signature on a written confirmation of the intent to emigrate to and attend school in another country."
https://www.sos.state.co.us/CCR/GenerateRulePdf.do?ruleVersionId=7579

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction provides code "INM: International Move" and notes that "a school or district must have written confirmation that a student has emigrated to another country (34 C.F.R. §200.19(b)(1)(ii)(B)) but need not obtain official written documentation. For example, if a parent informs a school administrator that the family is leaving the country, the school administrator may document this conversation in writing and include it in the student's file."
https://dpi.wi.gov/wise/data-elements/exit-types

Documenting Students Who Transfer to Homeschooling

Several states reported that the only documentation available when a student transfers to homeschooling is a note from the parent or guardian. Some states have detailed homeschooling policies that establish how and when parents or guardians should notify the LEA in writing of their intent to homeschool their children.

State Regulations on Transfers to Homeschooling

The Arkansas Department of Education requires parents or guardians to file a Notice of Intent if they wish to homeschool their children: "5.01 Parents or legal guardians who intend to homeschool must file a Notice of Intent with the superintendent of the resident school district and agree that the parent or guardian is responsible for the education of his or her child during the time the child is home-schooled. The Notice of Intent may be completed through the Arkansas Department of Education's online process, or by submitting the current year paper form or a written Notice of Intent to the superintendent of the student's resident school district." http://www.arkansased.gov/public/userfiles/Legal/Legal-Current%20Rules/2018/ade_262_Home_Schools_Rule_eff._06252018_.pdf

To help LEAs, schools, and parents or guardians follow the homeschooling rules, each school district has a Home School Liaison. http://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/divisions/learning-services/home-school/information-for-schools-and-districts

The Maine Department of Education requires parents or guardians to file an official notice. As a result, both the Department and the local district have a record of who is homeschooled, and not truant or dropped out: "The parent/guardian who is beginning home instruction for a student for the first time must file a Notice of Intent to Provide Home Instruction with the local school superintendent or to the Maine Department of Education (DOE) within 10 days of withdrawal from school. Each year thereafter, a Notice of Intent to Provide Home Instruction (with prior year assessment results attached) must be filed by September 1." The form is online and can be submitted online, printed and brought to the local school, or printed and mailed to the local school or the Maine Department of Education. https://www.maine.gov/doe/schools/schoolops/homeinstruction/requirements

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Documenting Students Whose Whereabouts Are Unknown

Properly assigning an exit code when students leave without informing the LEA of their intended future whereabouts, or when students report a transfer for which the LEA cannot obtain documentation. Often, there is a time gap between when a student leaves one school and enrolls in another. Sometimes a student who reports a transfer may instead drop out. Many states require LEAs to code students who purportedly transferred as dropouts unless they receive official notification that the student has enrolled elsewhere. Other states use exit codes to acknowledge that a student's whereabouts are unknown. States also use methods such as alerting authorities or sending school-parent liaisons to the students' home to help ensure that all students are accounted for.

State Regulations on Students Whose Whereabouts Are Unknown

The Colorado State Board of Education has determined that "any student whose transfer to another educational environment cannot be verified is a dropout for reporting purposes." Moreover, Colorado LEAs are required to apply a default status of dropout to any student who does not have adequate documentation on file, meaning a records request or confirmation of enrollment and attendance at another School District or at a charter school, by the end of the school year.
https://www.sos.state.co.us/CCR/GenerateRulePdf.do?ruleVersionId=7579

Washington State's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction created exit code U1 for students who quit attending for an unknown reason and cannot be contacted.
https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/cedars/pubdocs/2019-20CEDARSAppendices.pdf

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Documenting Which Students Receive High School Equivalency Diplomas

Transfers out of the LEA are not the only situations where official verification from an outside entity is helpful. Another such situation is when students receive high school equivalency diplomas. Because these diplomas are often awarded by institutions outside of the LEA, it can be difficult for an LEA to track which students received them, and which did not. Some states– including Colorado and Texas–have established agreements that allow LEAs in their state to receive lists of students who have earned a high school equivalency diploma.

Accounting for the Exit of All Students

When creating exit codes and withdrawal policies for an education agency, it is important to ensure that they can accommodate all students, including those whose exiting patterns may be different than those of the larger student body. SEAs and LEAs have found great benefit in reviewing how exit codes are assigned to

- students who concurrently attend multiple schools, charter schools, or who are homeschooled;
- truant students;
- foster and homeless students;
- military-connected students;
- students who complete high school coursework early;
- students who drop out temporarily;
- imprisoned or to-be-adjudicated students; and
- students with unique religious or cultural beliefs.

Students Concurrently Attending Multiple Schools

When students are enrolled in two schools, this can cause exit coding challenges. For example, a student might be enrolled in the local public school as well as a virtual school. Another student might be enrolled in two public schools. Some states have data systems that allow a designation of a student's primary school, plus one or more secondary (or partial) schools. In some of these cases, the exit code is assigned to the primary school. However, it is important that the secondary (or partial) schools also keep track of when and how students exit.

While most LEAs do not report to the state when a student exits a secondary (or partial) school, these data are nevertheless important for helping LEAs and schools account for students daily–for example, to determine transportation needs, the LEA should know that a student who has exited their secondary school or program no longer requires a bus to take them to their second school or program.

Another issue is whether a summer school is classified as being part of the school in which it is housed, part of a different school, a school unto itself, or a program within a school. Each of these scenarios would result in a different education agency being held accountable for any summer school dropouts.

Sometimes summer school programs are counted as part of the previous school year, and sometimes they are counted as part of the subsequent school year. It is a best practice to communicate clear deadlines for exit coding, as well as caveats about the comparability of the exit code data across time and jurisdictions.

Charter School Students

Charter schools can be within an LEA or outside of it. If a charter school is a district school, it is considered a within-district transfer, but if a charter is considered its own district, it is an out-of-district transfer. The exit codes taxonomy has three codes for these different situations, one in category 1 for a within-district transfer and two in category 2 for out-of-district transfers that are either in a different LEA in the same state or in a different state.

Homeschooled Students

The number of homeschooled students has grown substantially in recent decades and will continue to demand attention from policymakers and data collectors. To date, no nationally recognized standards exist for documenting or verifying homeschooled students. Some states have detailed policies for verifying students who transfer to homeschooling and documenting that the students continue to receive an education every year (see the section called Documenting and Verifying Student Exit Codes, above).

However, depending on the jurisdiction, public systems might not have the authority, and responsibility, to maintain information about homeschooled students' enrollment status. Data maintenance can be further complicated when homeschooled students attend a public school for part of the day (for example, for band or laboratory science

> **Homeschooled Students**
>
> The California Department of Education (CDE) states that "there are several ways that parents educate their children at home: through an existing private school, through a public charter or independent study program, and in many instances by opening their own private home based school and filling the Private School Affidavit (PSA) with the CDE." (https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ps/homeschool.asp). California LEAs are expected to use transfer codes indicating that homeschooled students have transferred either to 1) a homeschool that is affiliated with a private school, or 2) a public school with an independent study or homeschool program. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sp/cl/gradcohortguidance18att2.asp

classes). In some states and districts, homeschooled students are considered enrolled in their local public schools and, consequently, are included in the agency's student information system. Presumably, these students also receive agency-assigned exit codes.

Truant Students
In many states, students may not legally drop out of school before reaching a threshold age–usually, 16 years. In those states, underage students who do not attend school are considered truant. Policies for counting truant students past the threshold age as dropouts are therefore necessary to avoid the over-assignment of chronically truant status and under-assignment of dropout status in exit code data.

Foster and Homeless Students
Students who are in foster care or who are experiencing homelessness often move frequently; therefore, they may have frequent changes in exit status. Education agencies strive to quickly and accurately track these students' exit status to ensure that they are accounted for and that they do not experience gaps in education services. Some education agencies have found that establishing official data sharing agreements with other state agencies, such as the state department of health and human services, is beneficial in verifying the location of foster students.

Numerous laws have been enacted at the federal, state, and local levels regarding data on students who are in foster care or who are experiencing homelessness. Agencies should proactively review and understand the implications of these statutes and regulations, including the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001, the Uninterrupted Scholars Act (USA), and the Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System Final Rules.

Military-connected Students
The timing of military moves and the fact that they are frequently across state lines can cause districts to overestimate dropouts and underestimate graduation rates. If students transfer out in April or May, the original school is unlikely to receive a request for records from the school in the new state until the following year. Sometimes, students take their records with them when they leave. In these cases, the receiving school does not need to send a records request. If staff are not completely sure that students have transferred, staff must count them as dropouts. Education agencies should strive to be proactive in gaining verification for students who transfer out due to being connected to the military. Some SEAs with high military student transfer rates at the end of the school year develop processes to ensure the smooth transition of students to their new school. For example, agencies can send a certification of enrollment with the student that can be mailed back to the agency by the new LEA.

Students Who Complete High School Coursework Early
When students complete high school coursework early, they sometimes remain enrolled in high school while attending college. Education agencies must have policies in place to account for these students.

Students Who Drop Out Temporarily
Sometimes unique situations arise whereby a student is not able to continue attending school but intends to return. The taxonomy in Chapter 2 includes a code in the Dropped Out category called "Not enrolled, eligible to return." This code–and similar codes that education agencies have–can be used to flag students who should receive follow-up contact from the education agency to ensure that they return to school and not drop out permanently. (See the case study in Chapter 4 about how Guam handled a situation similar to this by creating a unique exit code.)

Imprisoned and To-be-adjudicated Students

Education agencies must be prepared to accurately track the movement of students who exit schools due to formal legal proceedings that can result in their transfer to different facilities, including, but not limited to, juvenile detention, prison, or alternative schools. Education agencies need to have policies that determine which exit codes to use for students who are waiting to be adjudicated and students who are placed in different types of institutions.

Students With Unique Religious or Cultural Beliefs

Some students have religious or cultural beliefs that require them to leave school before completing high school. For example, some religious groups expect young people to accept community responsibilities that conflict with school attendance beyond the eighth grade. Some states recognize these beliefs and exempt these students from compulsory attendance; others do not and consider these students dropouts. In districts with large populations with these beliefs, exit data will be affected by whether or not the students are considered dropouts.

> **Students Waiting to Be Adjudicated**
>
> The California Department of Education requires that education agencies not act too soon in removing a student from a cohort: "A student who is in a prison or in a juvenile facility awaiting a hearing or release and not yet adjudicated as delinquent may not be removed from the cohort of the sending school or district. Instead, the school or district must wait until the student has received such adjudication and determined that the student will transfer to a facility that has a school or educational program from which the student can expect to receive a 'regular high school diploma.' The district is required to obtain and maintain acceptable written documentation of this transfer."
> https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sp/cl/gradcohortguidance18att2.asp

Chapter 4:
Case Studies

How the Nevada Department of Education Collaborated with LEAs to Move From Local to Statewide Exit Codes

Scenario

When the Nevada Department of Education (NV DOE) started using a new statewide student information system (SIS), it also standardized its entry and exit codes. Nevada already had legislation that stated exactly what acceptable Nevada exit codes are. State personnel decided to assign state codes to each of the exit codes listed in the Nevada Revised Statutes.

State personnel began by asking all of the local education agencies (LEAs) to submit their local exit codes. Then they created a list of all of the codes currently being used and determined which codes were duplicates, completely different, different but with the same definition, the same but with different definitions, etc. State education agency (SEA) staff decided what each new exit code would be and gave the LEAs an opportunity to review the new list. As soon as SEA staff decided whether or not to make any requested changes and what the final exit codes would be, LEAs were required to implement them in the next school year.

Challenges

The biggest challenge was trying to help the LEAs to come to a consensus. In some cases, NV DOE had to make the decision, which was difficult. When in doubt, NV DOE usually used the Clark County School District codes because of their large student population; this is the fifth largest district in the nation and the only very large district in Nevada.

Another challenge was that such large districts find it difficult to change their codes. In the Clark County School District, the codes are embedded in everything they do in the SIS. Also, the change affects not just the present and future, but also the historical data: when codes are changed, it is important to have a crosswalk to old records.

Solutions and Benefits

NV DOE had to make final decisions on some of the codes. The state offered assistance to those districts that had to change. The SIS vendor helped some districts that did not have the resources to do it themselves; they made the changes for them, taught skills, and provided resources.

The biggest benefit has been in compliance monitoring and auditing. NV DOE spends a lot of time auditing LEAs to make sure their enrollment is accurate because the state pays LEAs based on their enrollment counts. Therefore, information must be accurate. This is high-stakes reporting, and making it uniform across the state greatly improves accuracy.

Another benefit is that this made the collection of data much easier. NV DOE no longer has to write ETL processes (extract, transform, load) or translations to transform data from one system to a common value for another system. This saved NV DOE a considerable amount of reporting time.

Finally, a hidden benefit is that LEAs now have a better understanding of the enrollment and withdrawal process and what the codes mean. The codes are now the same in every LEA system, and having common data elements across the state makes transferring student records much easier.

Lessons Learned

It is important to **consolidate codes into a list of reasonable size**. There were so many different scenarios–different permutations of enrollment–that to try to come up with a code for each of them would have resulted in a list of 200 codes or more. Instead, NV DOE worked to have fewer codes that encompassed more scenarios. Doing the work to compile and examine the many LEA codes allowed state staff to see where the commonalities were and to do a gap analysis, so they could consolidate the values down to a minimal list.

Another lesson learned was that **the code list has to be flexible or dynamic** in some way. Inevitably, there will be a scenario that does not fit into the consolidated list, and there is always the possibility that the federal government could change the reporting regulations or Nevada could implement a new law affecting reporting requirements. The standard exit codes list needs to be flexible enough to accommodate future changes.

State law can affect timelines and work needed. In Nevada, standard enrollment codes were easier to create than standard withdrawal codes because withdrawal codes are in the Nevada Revised Statutes. This makes it difficult to change or update them, whereas Nevada Administrative Codes say that NV DOE has the discretion to create enrollment codes.

How Hawaii Uses Exit Codes Data to Track Transient Students and Dropouts

Scenario

Student transiency in Hawaii is a concern. Schools are continuously seeking ways to monitor the whereabouts of students who enroll in and leave the Hawaii public schools. One of the largest transient student populations in Hawaii is military dependents. Students from military families remain in the Hawaii public schools for approximately three years before their parents receive a new permanent change of station notice.

Due to Hawaii's high transiency rate of military-connected students leaving at the end of the year due to a parent's permanent change of station, the Department created specific acceptable early release cut-off dates.

- A student who is released during the last four weeks of school will be given a report card with grades for the school year and an indication of promotion or non-promotion. Promotion is based upon his/her achievements and effort up to the date of release. The last week is counted as a full week, even though it may not be a full five days for students.

- A student leaving during the fifth and sixth weeks before school closes will be given a report card (such as a mid-quarter progress report) with grades up to the time of departure, with an indication of promotion or non-promotion based upon a state estimate of anticipated final grades.

- A student leaving school before the sixth week before school ends will be released through normal procedures, except that the report card and a progress report will be given at the time of departure. School records will be forwarded later upon request of the receiving school.

Upon withdrawal, each student is issued a withdrawal code and a "Certificate of Release" or a withdrawal packet that includes unofficial records of the student's latest report card, statewide test results, health and immunization card, and anything else that might aid in a smooth transition to the new school. Many schools accept these unofficial records as documentation for enrollment. However, students often fail to deliver the withdrawal packet to the new school. Without this information, the new school does not send the old school a notice of enrollment.

During the fall, the Hawaii State Department of Education (HIDOE) Accountability Branch asks schools to verify student exits for dropout statistics. All schools need proper documentation to verify that a withdrawn student has enrolled in another school (in other words, the receiving school). When a school does not receive confirmation that an exited student has enrolled at a new school, the student is considered a potential dropout.

Each fall, schools are asked to verify two types of student exits:

- **Mainland Exits**: Students who were enrolled at the school on the Official Enrollment Count (OEC) day in the previous school year and moved to the mainland

- **Unknown Exits**: Students who were enrolled at the school on the OEC day in the previous school year, were not enrolled in any Hawaii public school on the OEC day of the following school year, and were not shown as exiting from the system

HIDOE also considers these exit codes for unknown exits as dropouts:

- 022-Age 22 High School Max

- 045-Student reached his/her fifteenth birthday, is suitably employed

- 046-The student withdrew from school because of marriage

- 050-The student entered the armed services

- 051-Beyond Mandatory School age

- 052-The student is in an alternate educational program approved by the Department of Education

- 054-NO SHOW: The student enrolled but did not attend classes from the opening day of school through the official enrollment count day

- 056-The student will be receiving tutorial services as approved by the Department of Education

- 058-The student was recommended by the Family Court to remain away from school

- 060-Referred for Evaluation (SPED)

- 061-Not for School Use, assigned when an invalid/unreadable exit code is received from school.

- 062-Not for School Use-assigned when a school stops sending data for an active student

- 066-In-State Treatment Center

- 067-Out-of-State Treatment Center

- 068-The student is in an Adult Correction Facility

- 075-The student is court ordered to attend Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility or is court ordered excluded from school

- 099-Transfer to another Hawaii Public School

- 999-Not for School Use

- 3-digit school code indicating where student is expected to re-enroll but is inflight (student exited; however, did not enroll in any school)

Soon after the Mainland and Unknown Exits verification process is completed, high schools may choose to take part in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) graduation rate appeals process. This is the final opportunity for schools to verify and change students' status, if they have adequate documentation. The graduation appeals can include movements across the entire four-year period of the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate. Common appeals include the following:

- Correction to students' cohort year (first-time ninth-grade year)

- Removal from cohort due to documentation of subsequent enrollment at another private or public U.S. high school

- Addition to cohort for students transferring in during the four-year period

- Correct designation of students' subgroups

Challenges

Due to limited resources at schools, it can be difficult for staff to follow-up on student exits in a timely manner. HIDOE is currently targeting the following areas for improvement:

- Establishing current and comprehensive student withdrawal policies and procedures.

- Ensuring that procedures are performed at the HIDOE school level, and required forms and supporting documentation are completed and/or retained.

- Improving the efficiency of processes to decrease the number of forms that serve the same purpose.

Acquiring accurate data about the number of dropouts is important but challenging. Hawaii's military families provide an example of this. During long breaks, some military families take vacations to visit family on the mainland and then, without giving notice to HIDOE, enroll their child in a school there. Unless the Hawaii school receives notice of enrollment from the mainland school, the student will remain classified as a dropout.

Solutions and Benefits

HIDOE is working toward effective monitoring of exits and has created a guide called *Enrollment and Withdrawal Process and Procedures* (2017), which all schools now follow. The state is also working on establishing better communication with LEA staff, increasing staff knowledge of how the data are entered, and promoting a better understanding of how improvements in data accuracy can be maintained.

Exit codes data are used to identify the number of students who are dropouts. They also are used to identify possible interventions schools can take to prevent students who are at risk from

dropping out. More analysis of exit codes data needs to be done to better understand some of the factors that impact a student's academic success.

Lessons Learned

Continuous training opportunities need to be readily available to ensure implementation consistency and accuracy. There is a high turnover rate of school clerks and registrars, so training need to be scheduled on a regular basis.

Regularly updating student withdrawal documentation is important. Communication between HIDOE and LEA staff must be maintained, both through training and documentation, so clerks and registrars have the knowledge and skills they need to do their jobs effectively.

Hawaii's dropout rate decreased and, over the past two years, has held steady. To understand this trend, state personnel should **understand the source system input of dropout exit codes**. Increased monitoring of student exits has allowed the state to collect more high-quality data by ensuring that students who are highly mobile are not incorrectly counted as dropouts.

Utah Tiebreaker Strategies: Exiting a Student Who Attends Two Schools

Scenario

A student may attend two or more schools in Utah for a multitude of reasons. A student may take a virtual course while enrolled in a public school; another student may attend a charter school for most of the day, but also take one course at a public school; while a third student may take core courses through Utah's statewide online education program in addition to their regular homeschool schedule. These diverse scenarios can make it difficult for the SEA to determine which school is accountable for the student and to maintain accurate exit codes.

Exiting dually enrolled students can be tricky and contentious, especially in terms of accountability for dropouts. In recent years, an increased national focus on the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) has highlighted the importance of accurately tracking each student's exit status.

In Utah, LEAs send exit code data to the SEA three times per year. LEAs can also log into the state data gateway tool anytime. There, they can look at what they have already submitted, look at live data results, and update the data.

Challenges

In the past, students who took one class in a virtual school may have been coded as a transfer when they exited the virtual school, while in the meantime the student's home brick-and-mortar school never coded the student as exiting because the student had never left. These types of errors were common and were resulting in inaccurate data.

Utah's original policy was that the exit code should be associated with the school in which the student was last enrolled. However, this was problematic because some students attend a school for just one class. This resulted in low graduation rates for schools that never expected to graduate a student–for example, a virtual school in which a student took just one course.

Solutions and Benefits

Utah instituted a new policy on tiebreaker strategies around 2013. The state developed this policy when the measure of the four-year ACGR was added to state accountability metrics. Determining the tiebreaker status requires three pieces of data: a student's exit status, enrollment status, and graduation status. The policy is written into the Utah Administrative Code (see "Utah's Tiebreaker Policy" text box). The policy includes a hierarchy of factors that determine a single school that is accountable for exiting the student.

There have been rare instances in which all of the tiebreaker options have been used. The exit codes for approximately 80 percent of Utah records can be determined just by graduation status: the first item (i) in the policy. Therefore, it is not necessary to use the subsequent levels of the tiebreaker policy 80 percent of the time. The second item in the policy (ii), the school with the last exit date, clears up most of the remaining 20 percent of cases. In the entire state, only about 10 to 15 records per year go to the second-to-last level of tiebreaking (vi), school with highest attendance. Most years, some cases go to the very last level (vii), school with highest cumulative grade point average (GPA). If this last level does not resolve the case, the state makes a random assignment; this occurs in only about two or three cases per two years.

Often, state staff will place phone calls to get the information they need to follow the tiebreaker hierarchy to the end. Since so few records proceed that far down the hierarchy, staff need to call only about five schools per year–a manageable number.

Utah's ACGR is much more accurate than before as a result of the state's tiebreaker policy and emphasis on exit coding accuracy. Further, schools are no longer being penalized in their dropout rates for enrolling students in one or a few courses with no intent to graduate them from high school.

> ### Utah's Tiebreaker Policy
>
> (This language is from the Utah Administrative Code, available at https://rules.utah.gov/publicat/code/r277/r277-419.htm#T9.)
>
> (f) If a student attended two or more schools during the student's final cohort year, a tie-breaking logic to select the single school will be used in the following hierarchical order of sequence:
> (i) school with an attached graduation status for the final cohort year;
> (ii) school with the latest exit date;
> (iii) school with the earliest entry date;
> (iv) school with the highest total membership;
> (v) school of choice;
> (vi) school with highest attendance; or
> (vii) school with highest cumulative GPA.

Lessons Learned
Start with the basics, and refine the process over time. For example, determine how to handle dually enrolled students first. Once an agency implements an initial solution to the problem, the agency can conduct further work to refine the policy over subsequent years. Staff found that the only way to solve the problem fully was to continue refining the policy until it accounted for all scenarios. Today, after several years of refinement, the policy can accommodate all situations that arise. As a result, most Utah instructional leaders at the SEA and LEA levels are satisfied with the tiebreaker policy.

Utah recommends that agencies implementing a tiebreaker policy **do not operationalize it on first use**. Instead, agencies should conduct a pilot in which staff first run the numbers and send them to the LEAs for review. This initial pilot run can help to ensure that the policy is functioning as expected, and any unexpected errors can be addressed before the policy affects official reports.

The **data must be reviewed by every LEA in the state**, and the LEAs must look at student-level reports and verify that they look as expected. An audit sampling is not sufficient; every LEA must verify all of their data so that no unusual cases are missed. LEAs know whether they do or do not have each student in their schools, and they can determine whether the tiebreaker rules are working. In addition, it is easy to miss unusual situations at the SEA level, but these can be caught by LEAs.

Establishing a tiebreaker policy requires great communication. The state must make regular and continuous efforts to educate stakeholders on how the policy works. Some stakeholders understand the intricacies of graduation rates and some do not, so Utah found that

it was important to teach them about ACGR and why these data are important. Key players in creating and refining the tiebreaker rules include

- *assessment directors,* who are responsible for tracking student exit codes and who are interested in which school is assigned to each student for accountability purposes; and

- *board members*, who are concerned with making sure that ACGR numbers are correct, fair, and equitable.

Utah staff worked very hard for many years to refine the policy by working with stakeholders. Now, key players are in agreement, and there are few complaints.

A New Exit Code in Guam for High School Students Waiting to Be "Reset"

Scenario
Prior to 2016, the J.P. Torres Success Academy in Guam was known as the J.P. Torres Alternative School. The school served as a temporary placement for secondary students who had excessive discipline records. Students with behavioral issues were transferred to the alternative school but continued to be accounted for as enrolled in their homeschools. After each student's intervention ended, the student returned to the homeschool.

Challenges
This system of referring and returning problematic students only exacerbated the issues. Students ended up being neither here nor there, losing continuity of learning and exhibiting worsening discipline problems. Students would intentionally misbehave so they would be eligible for the alternative setting that was perceived as a "vacation" from the rigors of the regular classroom. In addition, school officials would resort to referring belligerent students to the alternative school as a temporary solution, instead of providing maximal support and intervention within the homeschool.

Solutions and Benefits
In 2016, Guam reconceptualized the alternative school as a success academy and renamed it the J.P. Torres Success Academy (JPTSA). Along with the reconceptualization and name change came new policies. The revolving door practice ended. Any student who transfers to the school now remains in the school until he or she achieves success–namely, until he or she earns a high school diploma.

Students who are absent 13 days and continue to miss school without putting forth effort, as well as students who are failing their classes, meet with administration to determine the best course of action. Students who are unable or unwilling to report to school or improve their scores are assigned to be "reset"–to begin anew the following block or school year. This policy opens up slots in JPTSA for other students who might be experiencing behavioral issues in their homeschools to transfer in and thus get the support they need to graduate.

An unanticipated result of this policy was an increase in interest in finishing school among "super senior" students. School staff do not remove these interested students from the roster. Instead, they assign these students a new exit code that Guam created for this purpose: "Waiting to Be Reset."

Though these students do not receive education services while waiting to be reset, they do receive other services, such as parental training, help from social workers, or job search assistance. These students are counted in the school's enrollment data because the school and district provide such support services, though technically the students are not in the school setting.

Due to the creation of the new "Waiting to Be Reset" exit code, Guam is now able to track students in the unique situation of receiving support services but not education services, who

plan to receive education services again soon. This new exit code is just one piece of the larger solution of providing better opportunities for students who might otherwise lack the resources to achieve a high school diploma.

Lessons Learned

If school and district policies are not helping students and educators move toward education goals, it is acceptable to **reconceptualize programs and entire schools and institute new policies that are more effective**.

Defining new local exit codes to account for unique populations of students is sometimes necessary.

The Maine Department of Education's Use of Common Education Data Standards (CEDS) Element "Withdrawal or Exit Type"

Scenario

When the Maine Department of Education (DOE) began to update and change its student information system, leaders were interested in ways to introduce data standards and promote interoperability. They reviewed Common Education Data Standards (CEDS) and determined that it would meet the needs of the DOE for standardized, interoperable data elements. The DOE then began the process of using CEDS elements whenever possible for data collection and reporting. As part of this overall shift, the DOE introduced the CEDS element "Exit or Withdrawal Type" for exit coding (https://ceds.ed.gov/CEDSElementDetails.aspx?TermId=13110).

Challenges

The DOE faced two related challenges when transitioning to CEDS for exit coding:

- The "Exit or Withdrawal Type" option set needed to be adapted to meet the needs of the SEA and LEAs. The option set offered more codes than were needed for exit coding in Maine.

- Old exit code data needed to be mapped to the new option set.

Solutions and Benefits

In order to modify CEDS to meet the DOE's needs, staff found it necessary to combine several groups of options. For example, because the DOE did not need multiple options to account for students who exited to attend private schools, these options were aggregated into one code. Similarly, the DOE did not need multiple options to account for students who transferred out of state; these options were also aggregated. Staff also developed a crosswalk that mapped old exit code data to the new options.

Since implementing the modified options, the DOE has further streamlined the codes. For example, the option "withdrawn due to illness" is not an acceptable exit code in Maine. LEAs in Maine are responsible to provide education to students with long-term illnesses to the extent that the students are able to receive instruction. As a result, the DOE removed that option from the acceptable list of codes. The DOE has also clarified some CEDS wording (for example, by adding a definition of the term "institution").

CEDS is a widely used standard. Since aligning with CEDS, the DOE has found that vendors find reporting easier.

Lessons Learned

When considering whether to transition to CEDS, SEAs and LEAs should keep in mind that **CEDS can be modified and adapted to meet SEA and LEA needs**. However, the Maine DOE notes that it is good practice to communicate with the U.S. Department of Education

regarding suggested changes to CEDS to ensure that the standard remains up-to-date. Too many modifications can impact the comparability of codes.

Using CEDS can be very beneficial to small SEAs and LEAs because **vendors find working with a well-known standard is easier than managing SEA- or LEA-created codes**.

Appendix A: Characteristics of Sound Taxonomies

Well-designed taxonomies include the following features. Agencies that incorporate these features in their exit codes taxonomies should find that they can map their taxonomies to the one presented in Chapter 2.

- **Exhaustive and mutually exclusive coding options.** The available options should accommodate the full range of possible exit scenarios, and no more than one coding choice can be true for a single event at any single point in time.

- **Precise and understandable coding language.** Staff responsible for assigning exit codes must be given clearly understandable coding terms if they are to apply them accurately and consistently.

- **Intuitive coding nomenclature.** "Coding nomenclature," the alphanumeric characters assigned to each coding category in the taxonomy should follow a pattern that is intuitive and predictable to a trained user.

- **Attributes that further describe coding terms.** Attributes provide additional information about codes. An attribute can be a short text description of coding options, an explanation of the rules used to apply a code, examples of frequently occurring reasons for selecting a code, or any regulations or laws related to a code.

- **Clear rules for aggregating codes into broader categories.** Aggregating (combining) data from each category into broader groups for analytical purposes should be possible.

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