

Comments and Discussion with the National Research Council's Committee on
Improved Measurement of High School Dropout and Completion Rates: Expert
Guidance on Next Steps for Research and Policy
October 24, 2008

I realize that my role here today is to react to the information provided by the presenters on the question, *"How can states build and maintain robust longitudinal data systems for collecting the requisite data to compute these indicators and to improve these outcomes?"* I will do just that; but before I do, I would just like to share some information with you. I would like to tell you a story about the Cohort Class of 2006.

The story goes like this....2006 was a very good year. Data came in to the Department of Education on time and with reasonable accuracy from our districts. Just for the record, we are that "small cute state with rich data" that is located east of the Chesapeake Bay. You can go from the northern most part of the state to southern tip in about 2 hours. It takes about 45 minutes to go across the widest part of the state. We have 19 districts and 17 charter schools; 16 regular districts and all have at least 2 schools in the district. There are 3 county-wide vocation-technical districts (we only have 3 counties). The PK-12 enrollment is around 121,000 students with the largest district serving about 18,000 students and the smallest serving 1,000 students. We have urban, suburban and rural schools...statewide public school choice where parents can apply to have their children attend schools within or across districts (transportation is provided across districts if the parent gets the child to a pick up site in the choice district). We have reported disaggregated data at the school level for about 30 years and have had unique student IDs since 1984. In 2005-2006, we had 33 high schools – 4 of which were charter high schools.

A quick review of the enrollment for grades 9-12 in 2005-06 was 36, 297 students with:

60% white;

31% African-American;
6% Hispanic;
3% Asian;
<1% American Indian;
14% were students with disabilities;
39% were low income (grades K-12)
52% were male; and
48% were female.

There were 7,555 students enrolled in or classified by Carnegie Units earned as students in grade 12 in 2005-06. 7,298 students graduated with a diploma; 144 with a certificate of completion and are included in some (most) graduation rates in the denominator only, depending on the definition used.

1074 students dropped out of the cohort Class of 2006. They include students who were:

53% white;
33% African-American;
12% Hispanic;
2% Asian;
<1% American Indian;
22% were students with disabilities;
43% were low income;
58% male; and
42% female.

In comparison to the enrollment profile, fewer white students dropped out (53 compared to 60); twice as many Hispanics (12 compared to 6) dropped out; more students with disabilities (22 compared to 14); more low income (43 compared to 39); and more male students (58 compared to 52).

Three percent of the dropouts dropped out more than once. The last grade that the students dropped out of included:

Grade 9: 41%

Grade 10: 32%
Grade 11: 19%
Grade 12: 8%

As for discipline and behavior – the data shown is only for the last two years of the high school experience for this class of 2006 – prior to 2005, the data is not reliable. So, with that caveat...2 years of suspension data show that...73% were never suspended out-of-school; 18% were suspended 3 or less times; 8% were suspended 4-9 times and 1% were suspended more than 10 times – one student was actually suspended 73 times.

26% were never retained during their entire school history. 31% were retained once; 29% were retained twice; 11% were retained three times; and 3% were retained 4 or more times. For the retained dropouts, 23% were first retained in grades K-5; 32% were first retained in grades 6-8; and 45% were first retained in high school.

For the Class of 2006, 2% dropped out for economic reasons (economic and employment); 5% for personal reasons (childcare, marriage, transportation, military, needed at home, pregnancy, religion); 22% for school reasons (academic, behavior, dislike experience, failed test/exams); and 71% for unknown reasons.

Because we have such a robust data system, beginning August 2008, we publicly report 5 different graduation rates – NGA, NCES, NCLB Accountability, AFGR, and CPI. For clarity, the NCES rate used in Delaware refers to the students who started 9th grade and graduated 4 years later with a high school diploma. Students who are new to Delaware during the 10th, 11th or 12th grades are not added to the original cohort. This rate takes into account students who drop out during the 4 year period unless the student transfers and show up in a statewide adult education program. The NCLB Accountability rate is the NCES rate with the students who transfer to an adult education program counted as a dropout. For both rates, the dropout had to be in the cohort to be included.

And, for the record, both the AFGR and the CPI are Delaware generated...it is our attempt to replicate the EPE's CPI rate and the NCES AFGR. Both the AFGR and

the CPI rates calculated by Delaware will differ from the rates published by NCES and EPE. Why? Because the data mart for calculating the 5 rates is built off of the individual student longitudinal data system and not from general enrollment numbers. Further, the Delaware generated CPI does not take into consideration the “weighting” that is done when “district data is weighted according to the size of the 9th-12th grade enrollment in order to produce results representative of the student populations in states “ (from EPE’s Notes on CPI Methodology). It is our best attempt to replicate both of these rates and we believe that we are more accurate based on the intent of the calculations. Thus, the rates for the Class of 2006 are:

NGA:	80.3
NCES:	84.7
NCLB:	84.0
AFGR:	76.8
CPI:	68.5%

As I mentioned, these are reported publicly in our state, district and school profiles. Here is an example of what we report at the state level. This is public information and is reported for the most recent 2 years (Classes of 2006 and 2007). One can click on the “info” tab and read an explanation of the graduation rates from our “definition” database. Or, one can click on the “Details” tab and see the following. As you can see, there are 5 rates reported...for the most recent 2 years.

So, the end of the story isn’t that everyone lived happily ever after....rather, the end of the Class of 2006 story is that we have lots of information that we need to use to identify students who are at risk of dropping out. Hopefully it’s only the end of the chapter...and the saga will continue annually as we collect more data and continue to look at trends.

You may be asking, “Why is she wasting precious time telling us a story about the Class of 2006?” The answer is....that I wanted to give you a clear example of what

you can find out about students – dropouts in this case – when you have a robust, individual student data system that is longitudinal. Trend data is also very important especially when deciding how to identify students who may be at risk. I wanted to try to illustrate what the presenters are saying...

Some thoughts about data systems and the information presented today recapping what we heard...First:

Accurate and timely data are essential – the output will obviously be dependent on the accuracy of the data inputs, so some way to audit inputs is an essential part of the process;

Granular data is important – you can always aggregate up but you can't go down farther than your data permits; You can't answer "what about" questions if you don't have the right data;

Longitudinal – it is a way to track individual students over the span of their school career which I believe is important;

Clearly defined and carefully articulated codes – schools will do their own interpretations regardless, so give them little to interpret;

Transparent and clear business rules – how you doing calculations and how you operationalize policy – these need to be clear and available to all...no secrets and no surprises; and

Annually document processes, procedures and results...I'll speak for myself on this one – I can't remember the details from one year to the next and this is a great way to document and record results in the proper context. There is no guessing or trying to recreate or reliance on a human's memory!

Continuing on with what I heard today...

It's important to continually assess what you are doing, why doing it and how you are doing it – are you able to do what you intended and do you know your risks, i.e., in producing graduation rates, where are your risks –

is it with the accuracy of data; unclear definitions; district or school defined codes. And how can you minimize risks for the future?

Sophisticated and complex data systems are not always required...start small with something that is manageable and can serve as a "win-win" for all stakeholders. In other words, collect the right data to produce an important product early or answer to a key policy question.

Put the graduation rate, or whatever, you are calculating in its proper context – we did this in a password protected system that the schools use in their data-driven decision making process by stating a question and with click at the end of the question, the answer magically appears in various disaggregated forms. And, by the way, we believe that all 5 rates are important – they each tell a different story and provide answers to different questions. Graduation rate + dropout rate do not equal 100%.

If "early warning" systems to identify students at risk of dropping out are implemented, it is important to have the appropriate robust data systems in place.

And, if going to compare across years make sure that data and algorithms are the same across the years – one small change can result in inaccurate and inappropriate comparisons.

Finally, I can't stress enough that it's the quality of the data is critical...it will greatly affect anything that is done with the data. And, just because you see a change in the data from one year to the next, don't assume that something happened to cause it...it may be an artifact of the data collection process or bad data.

It is clear from Nancy Smith's presentation that there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done in many states....and that the states here today can and should be used as examples of states with some best practices, experiences or models. Further these states would probably be willing to share or "mentor" other states.