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Advice from the Field: Perspectives of State Directors of Special Education Regarding Post-School Outcomes Data and Indicator 14

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Post School Outcomes Center (NPSO), in conjunction with the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), conducted a focus group with several state directors of special education to (a) discuss the collection of their post-school outcomes data and (b) share their experiences and suggestions with other state directors, especially those who are new to their positions.

NPSO felt that it would be helpful for more experienced state directors, particularly in those states that had begun collecting post-school outcomes data long before the SPP/Annual Performance Reports (APR) process began, to share their perspectives and suggestions for how they organized and collected their data. Indicator 14¹ is one of the most challenging indicators to collect data for as most states were not collecting and analyzing this data prior to the requirements of the SPP/APR. This document is an extension of NPSO's ongoing work to facilitate the sharing of experiences and knowledge among states.

METHODOLOGY

NASDSE organized and led a focus group discussion of state directors of special education that took place on October 16, 2007. The purpose of the focus group was to have the state directors share their perceptions regarding their involvement with the data collection for their APRs, particularly those data elements related to the collection of post-school outcomes data. We also sought their suggestions and recommendations to other state directors for how the work was organized in their states. The questions for the discussion were developed by NASDSE and NPSO.

Six states participated in the focus group and two states responded to the questions via email. The full document provides a complete summary of the focus group discussion and the written comments.

MAJOR THEMES

Although the discussion during the focus group was arranged around six specific questions, participants kept returning to some of the same themes. These themes provide a helpful guide for structuring the work of gathering and interpreting the data collected on post-school outcomes. They included:

¹ Indicator 14 states: Percent of youth who had IEPs, are no longer in secondary school and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in some type of postsecondary school, or both, within one year of leaving high school.

- ∞ *Engagement of the state director.* It is important for the state director to be involved and engaged. State directors can delegate the details, but must stay engaged and involved.
- ∞ *Establishment of teams to work on the indicators and even on specific components of a single indicator.* Most of the participants noted how helpful the teams had been for coordinating their work.
- ∞ *Involvement of others.* Most states sought out other stakeholders to involve in their work. These other partners included state data and school improvement personnel, vocational rehabilitation, universities, regional centers, and parents or parent groups.
- ∞ *Go slow in your data analysis.* States noted that it was important not to rush to conclusions as to what the data means, but to analyze the data set carefully and then plan improvement strategies pertinent to the most salient results.
- ∞ *Reaching hard-to-locate former students can be difficult.* Participants noted that technology in some cases can work against locating students. More sharing of successful strategies would be helpful for all states.

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the states felt that they still had a ways to progress with their post-school data collection systems and analysis to ensure that they drew correct findings from their data. These improvements must be accomplished before rushing into implementation of strategies to improve both outcomes and their data collection. This overarching philosophy might be termed, "going slow to go fast." In other words, the respondents emphasized the importance of careful analysis, involvement of stakeholders in the entire process, and targeting specific strategies to specific local education agencies in need of support and guidance.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD

BACKGROUND

This project was undertaken by National Post-School Outcomes Center (NPSO) in conjunction with the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE). The purpose of this effort was to facilitate the sharing of information among and between state directors of special education who had been more deeply involved in the collection of their post-school outcomes data with other state directors, especially state directors who are new to their positions. NASDSE reports that since states submitted their State Performance Plans (SPPs) in December 2005, the turnover in state directors has been close to 50%. Thus, at least one half of the current state directors were not involved in the development of their state's SPP and some of those only became state directors after the state was already involved in data collection for the submission of their state's first Annual Performance Report (APR), which was due in February 2007.

NPSO felt that it would be helpful for more experienced state directors, particularly in those states that had begun collecting post-school outcomes data long before the SPP/APR process began, to share their perspectives and suggestions for how they organized and collected their data. Indicator 14² is one of the most challenging indicators to collect data for as most states were not collecting and analyzing this data prior to the requirements of the SPP/ARP as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 (P.L. 108-446). NPSO's involvement with states with previous experience in obtaining information from students who have left the school system has proved invaluable for their work with all states. This document is an extension of NPSO's ongoing work to facilitate the sharing of experiences and knowledge among state directors of special education.

METHODOLOGY

NASDSE organized and led a focus group discussion of state directors of special education that took place on October 16, 2007. The purpose of the focus group was to have the state directors share their perceptions regarding their involvement with the data collection for their APRs, particularly those data elements related to the collection of post-school outcomes data (Indicator 14). We also sought their suggestions and recommendations to other state directors for how the work was organized in their states.

The focus group was designed to be a free-flowing conversation to elicit suggestions and ideas for undertaking the data collection necessary to

² Indicator 14 states: Percent of youth who had IEPs, are no longer in secondary school and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in some type of postsecondary school, or both, within one year of leaving high school.

complete the APR. To structure this discussion, questions were developed by NASDSE and NPSO.

Six states participated in the focus group and two additional states responded to the questions via email.³ This document provides a summary of the focus group discussion and the written comments.

QUESTIONS DISCUSSED BY THE FOCUS GROUP

- (1) As a state leader, what was the extent of your engagement with the APR and how did you structure your team to develop your APR (particularly the post-school outcomes data)?
- (2) Now that you have been through the first round of post-school outcomes data collection, how are you going to use the data you have collected to help drive your improvement agenda for students with disabilities and local education agencies (e.g., to reduce dropouts, improve postsecondary outcomes, etc.)?
- (3) In collecting post-school outcomes data, what are the problems that you feel are the most challenging? What steps are you planning to take to address them?
- (4) Who (what positions) were critical partners in your state education agencies and also in other agencies/contractors for the implementation of Indicator 14? What did they provide and/or what was their role in the process?
- (5) What supports do you need related to post-school outcomes?
- (6) Nearly one half of the current state directors were not in their positions when their state developed its SPP. What advice do you have to give to your newer counterparts in terms of how to provide leadership for (1) collecting the post-school outcomes data for the APR; (2) analyzing and reporting the data; and (3) using the data to develop an improvement plan (specifically related to post-school outcomes)?

MAJOR THEMES

Although the discussion during the focus group was arranged around six specific questions, the participants kept returning to some of the same themes in their remarks. These themes provide a helpful guide for structuring the work of gathering and interpreting the data collected on post-school outcomes. They included:

- ∞ *Engagement of the state director.* It is important for the state director to be involved and engaged. State directors can delegate the details, but must stay engaged and involved.

³ A list of the focus group participants can be found in Appendix 1.

- ∞ *Establishment of teams to work on the indicators and even on specific components of a single indicator.* Most of the participants noted how helpful the teams had been for coordinating their work.
- ∞ *Involvement of others.* Most states sought out other stakeholders to involve in their work. In addition to administrators, state data and school improvement personnel, other teams relied on vocational rehabilitation, universities, regional centers, parents and others to round out their teams.
- ∞ *Go slow in your data analysis.* States noted that it was important not to rush to conclusions as to what the data means, but to analyze it carefully and then plan improvement strategies.
- ∞ *Reaching hard-to-locate former students can be difficult.* Participants noted that technology in some cases can work against locating students. More sharing of successful strategies would be helpful for all states.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

This section presents a summary of the focus group discussion for each of the six questions.

1) *As a state leader, what was the extent of your engagement with the APR and how did you structure your team to develop your APR (particularly the post-school outcomes data)?*

One state used its IDEA discretionary funds to fund statewide transition groups as part of its statewide post-school outcomes initiative. The groups had responsibility for developing select portions of the APR and almost all of this state's discretionary funds are targeted to improvement activities. The work was led by the state director.

Four states specifically mentioned teams that were put together to work on different indicators. In all four of these states, work on Indicators 13⁴ and 14 were grouped together due to the nature of their close relationship, although in one of these states, 13 and 14 were also grouped with 1 and 2 and in another state, Indicators 1, 2, 8, 13 and 14 were grouped together.

One state director commented that the state director provided high-level oversight and stayed on top of the APR process through regular briefings from a steering committee that included data personnel as well as the staff with substantive knowledge of the issues.

One state described her state's process as reviewing stakeholder input by the Division Leadership Team. In this state, all teams were responsible for

⁴ Indicator 13 states: Percent of youth aged 16 and above with an IEP that includes coordinated, measurable, annual IEP goals and transition services that will reasonably enable the student to meet the postsecondary goals.

collecting and submitting APR data, but there was specific coordination across teams with respect to data collection, terminology, training and definition of federal requirements.

Several states mentioned the types of individuals who participated on their teams. These included representation from monitoring, data collection, vocational rehabilitation, parents, community colleges and discretionary transition projects in the state.

One state indicated that it relied on assistance from both the Regional Resource Center (RRC) and NPSO.

One state began its efforts with a focus group and used that group to determine what instruments and methodologies would be used. This state also took advantage of its monitoring cycle to establish cohorts to participate in the data collection.

One state noted that it now has a full-time person working on post-school outcomes data (the position had been part-time in the past) who has been involved in developing the report on Indicator 14. That team also includes the state's co-directors for the State Improvement Grant.

2) Now that you have been through the first round of post-school outcomes data collection, how are you going to use the data you have collected to help drive your improvement agenda for students with disabilities and local education agencies (LEAs) (e.g., to reduce dropouts, improve postsecondary outcomes, etc.)?

Three of the states said that they were still analyzing their data and therefore, have not yet gone forward with next steps.

One state said that once it has completed its data analysis, it will go back to the LEAs with the findings and hold a focus group to take a look at next steps. This state cautioned against making hasty correlations with the data to avoid drawing the wrong conclusions.

One state, still analyzing its data, expressed concern that they might not have the "richness" of data that could be more useful in planning improvement activities.

Another state indicated that it is working closely with its monitoring and data collection units to look at the data across all areas before making decisions about next steps.

Three states indicated that they have been collecting this data for some time, long before the SPP/APR process. One of these noted that it has seen improvements in post-secondary education and jobs, but the state is still

struggling with what to do with the great data that it has collected over the years. Another of these states agreed – it has had transition initiatives going back more than 15 years, but still finds it challenging trying to understand what the data indicates.

Another state, which collects extensive data on postsecondary status, including employment, incarceration and welfare dependency, plans to use its data to identify specific local district needs.

One of the states specifically asked dropouts why they dropped out and what could have been done differently to help them in school. Analysis of this data will also lead to local improvement initiatives.

One state has a specific focus on reducing dropouts, increasing graduation rates and improving post-school outcomes through statewide training. The state is using a regional trainer of trainers model and a Community of Practice model to address interagency responsibilities. This state is also using its RRC to provide guidance to its states' regional centers.

Two states are looking at their outcomes data on students with disabilities compared with data on general education students in order to undertake meaningful data analysis and better strategize on improvement activities.

One state mentioned that it has a statewide planning group of stakeholders that includes the department of education, developmental disabilities, vocational rehabilitation, mental health, workforce development, school personnel, parents, universities and post-school students. The planning group reviews the data as part of its work. Because this state has been collecting post-school outcomes data for several years, it can now look at its data from a longitudinal perspective and like the other states, this one plans to use its data as the cornerstone for future planning.

3) In collecting post-school outcomes data, what are the problems that you feel are the most challenging? What steps are you planning to take to address them?

Three states said one of their biggest challenges was reaching students in highly mobile communities. One state planned to meet with its LEAs to determine strategies they used that were particularly successful in reaching out to these students. One state said that it is more difficult to keep track of students from bigger schools, so it plans to target outreach activities to the largest five cities in the state in order to better coordinate with classroom teachers. They also plan to contact dropouts immediately. They commented that many of their dropouts seem to have emotional and/or health related concerns that perhaps influenced their decision to drop out.

One state commented that two of its biggest issues were increasing the return rate on its post-school outcomes survey and figuring out how to address the issue of incarceration.

Another state noted that its two major issues were increasing the response rate and obtaining a good cross-reference of students. Other barriers cited were caller I.D. and call blocking that prevented the LEA from reaching the students and/or their families.

One state is providing specific guidance to assist LEAs and its regional centers with strategies for successful data collection through the use of its train-the-trainer model, which requires participation by all stakeholders, including parents and other state agencies. Another state is coordinating with its Indicator 8 team to see if there are additional activities that this team is utilizing that could be undertaken for Indicator 14 as well.

In general, all of the states expressed an awareness of the data collection challenges before them, but were just beginning to develop strategies to address those issues.

4) Who (what positions) were critical partners in your state education agencies and also in other agencies/contractors for the implementation of Indicator 14? What did they provide and/or what was their role in the process?

All of the states said that their partners were critical to their data collection efforts. Some of the specific partners that they noted were: technology; fiscal; data; LEAs; university contractors with many contacts throughout the state; regional service centers (to help with sampling); vocational rehabilitation; juvenile justice; Social Security; mental health; developmental disabilities; employment offices; parents; and community colleges.

One state specifically made mention of a jointly funded project with vocational rehabilitation and LEAs that is focused on increasing work opportunities. More than one half of the LEAs in the state are participating in this initiative. One state said that it used its state IDEA advisory panel that includes parents, school administrators and teachers as a steering committee that will ultimately make recommendations based on its interpretation of the data collected.

Several of the states noted the importance of combining work on Indicators, 1, 2, 13 and 14 because of the close connections between these indicators.

5) What supports do you need related to post-school outcomes?

Specific supports that would be helpful mentioned by the states included:

- ∞ assistance from NPSO;
- ∞ access to other states that have more experience in collecting post-school outcomes data;
- ∞ effective strategies for increasing the response rate;
- ∞ suggestions for how to improve services for exiting students who may not qualify for other community services (e.g., vocational rehabilitation; SSI);
- ∞ firm interpretations;
- ∞ guidelines;
- ∞ best practices on sampling;
- ∞ continuing dialogue on how states are analyzing their data and how they are using their data to improve services and outcomes; and
- ∞ how to get information on best practices into the “right” hands at the LEA level so that best practices can be implemented at the local level.

6) Nearly one half of the current state directors were not in their positions when their state developed its SPP. What advice do you have to give to your newer counterparts in terms of how to provide leadership for (1) collecting the post-school outcomes data for the APR; (2) analyzing and reporting the data; and (3) using the data to develop an improvement plan (specifically related to post-school outcomes)?

This question proved difficult for the states to respond to as most of them are still analyzing their own data and beginning to look for specific strategies to undertake in their own states. Participants felt that continuing dialogue among the states would be one of the best strategies to gain information about (a) effective data collection strategies; (b) data analysis; and (c) implementation of strategies to improve post-school outcomes.

One state noted how important it is to have a leader in the state who can carry the message of this work to policymakers and decision makers higher in their departments of education as well as to the LEAs. This same state noted that its core workgroup continues to provide leadership and diversity of views.

One state did make three specific suggestions for state directors: (1) develop and participate in an effective leadership team; (2) make assignments according to team strengths and interests; and (3) ALWAYS be a participant in the leadership team.

CONCLUSIONS

All eight of the states participating in the focus group emphasized the teamwork involved in collecting post-school outcomes data and analyzing it. Most of the states felt that they still had a ways to go with their data analysis to ensure that they drew correct findings from their data before rushing into

implementation of strategies to improve both outcomes and their data collection. This overarching philosophy might be termed, "going slow to go fast." In other words, they emphasized the importance of careful analysis, involvement of stakeholders and targeting specific strategies to specific LEAs in need of support and guidance.

As this was the states' first experience with development of their APRs, it might prove insightful to repeat the focus group next year after the states have a better handle on their data and have begun implementation of specific, targeted improvement strategies for both their data collection and its usage.

APPENDIX A FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Arizona

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California

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