



Collecting Post-School Outcome Data

Strategies for Increasing Response Rates



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Introduction

As states grapple with collecting post-school outcome data, many are seeking guidance on strategies for improving response rates, especially for students who exit school early and informally by dropping out. This practice brief is intended for state and local education agency personnel charged with designing systems to collect post-school outcome data for students with disabilities. The brief contains an overview of the requirement to collect post-school outcome data and challenges experienced by states in collecting these data. Recommendations and strategies that states can use to secure sufficient response rates, especially from youth who drop out of school, are provided.



The Requirement to Collect Post-School Outcome Data

A major purpose of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) is to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services **designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living** (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Public Law 108-446 (20 U.S.C. 1416 (a)(3)(B)). To comply with IDEA 2004, states must establish performance plans across 20 identified indicators, including the collection of post-school outcomes data (Indicator #14).

Indicator #14 Requirements

Indicator #14 focuses on post-school outcomes and is: The 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.

To address this indicator states must:

- Collect data on the “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” (Indicator #14, 20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(b).
- Collect data annually between April and September, inclusive.
- Begin collecting data on students who left school during the 2005-2006 school year.
- Include students who completed school during the prior school year, who dropped out during the prior school year, or who were expected to return but did not return for the current school year.
- Provide a narrative that defines competitive employment, including whether the work is full-time (35 or more hours per week) or part-time (less than 35 hours per week). The narrative should define postsecondary school, type of school, education or training, and whether enrollment is full- or part-time and describe what constitutes full-time enrollment

Collecting Post-School Outcome Data

Prior to these requirements, more than half of the states did not routinely collect data on postsecondary employment and education status of youth with IEPs, and many are seeking guidance on how data can be collected, analyzed, and used to improve programs and outcomes for youth with disabilities at the local level. Many states are developing and distributing surveys to collect data on students' postsecondary education, employment, and independent living status, including number of postsecondary hours attempted and degree earned; length and type of employment and wages earned; and length and type of independent living arrangements. States must decide what, how, and when data must be collected and they should anticipate challenges in collecting the information. Among those challenges are low response rates—an ongoing problem reported by most states, including locating youth who drop out of school early and informally.

Challenges to Collecting Post-School Outcome Data

Clearly, Indicator #14 presents unique challenges to states because (a) the young people to be included in data collection are no longer students as they have left the public school system, and (b) designated reporting outcomes—whether those individuals are working competitively or enrolled in postsecondary education—cannot be gathered through completion of a test or other measure administered within the confines of the school building. To gather accurate data for this indicator, most states will query young people who were on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) after they exit from high school to collect data on their employment and postsecondary educational experiences. Many states report using or intend to use surveys to collect post-school outcome data. Surveys may take the form of written, online, phone, or in-person interviews. Personnel note their preferences to utilize surveys because they enable the surveyor to gather both quantitative and qualitative data that are accurate and measurable. However, response

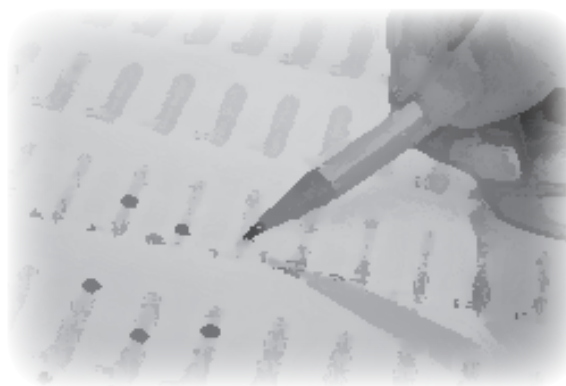
rates pose a problem when the target respondents are difficult to locate or reluctant to respond. When response rates are low, the findings can neither be used to make statements about the outcomes of youth with disabilities, including dropouts, nor provide sufficient information for program improvement. Therefore, states should make every attempt to secure response rates sufficient to ensure that data collected is representative of the target population.

Increasing Response Rates

Increasing response rates is not a small task. But low response need not be an insurmountable problem. There is no one solution to increasing response rates; however, a combination of common strategies incorporated in the design, development, and administration of surveys has proven to be effective in maximizing response rate. The remainder of this brief provides key considerations for designing and administering effective surveys that improve survey response rates, including promising techniques for locating youth who drop out of school.

Strategies for Survey Design

When designing effective surveys (whether to be administered via mail, online, phone, or in-person interview), careful attention must be given to the design and development of the instrument. The following strategies are recommended from the literature on survey research.



- **Tailor survey to the intended audience.** The survey should be tailored to meet particular needs of the target population. Personnel should bear in mind specific characteristics of the population (e.g., age, language, disability, and grade level).
- **Make survey user-friendly.** Make certain the survey is simple and easy to complete. Refrain from asking too many questions or questions that are difficult. Respondents will be turned off by a survey that is too long, difficult to complete, overwhelming, and time consuming.
- **Appearance matters!** Keep in mind the appearance of the survey, including the mailing package. Make sure the questionnaire is “user-friendly” and of reasonable length. Excessive questionnaire length can significantly affect not only response rate, but also the quality of questionnaire data. Completion of the survey should not interfere with an individual’s personal time. At the same time, allow the respondent enough time to complete the survey.
- **Focus on essential questions.** Recommended essential questions to address and a post-school data collection survey, developed by an OSEP supported center may be found at www.psocenter.org/collecting.html#post. This post-school data collection protocol is available to assist states and offers a way for states to collect the information needed to adequately address Indicator #14. States may also choose to add additional questions. An OSEP approved set of supplemental questions is also available at the same Web site.

Strategies for Survey Administration

When designing effective surveys, careful attention must also be given to how the survey will be administered. Survey researchers recommend the following strategies and are applicable whether surveys are conducted via mail, online, phone, or face-to-face interviews.



- **Ensure confidentiality.** Provide assurance that respondents’ information will be kept confidential. Let respondents know who will be viewing the survey results and how the information will be used. (For additional information see Winnick, Palmer, & Coleman, 2006).
- **Personalize communication.** If respondents feel the questionnaire is directed specifically to them, they will be more likely to respond. The following tips can be used to personalize communications sent by mail.
 - Use first class stamps (vs. meter or bulk mail) for outgoing and return postage.
 - Make certain all addresses are handwritten. All signatures within cover letters should also be handwritten and not stamped, including signatures on prenotification letters and follow-up correspondences.
 - Include handwritten thank you notes along with surveys.
 - If feasible, allow personnel who have worked directly with students to sign the survey cover letter and write thank you notes. Students are more likely to respond and return surveys to an individual they

trust and consider a mentor or friend versus someone they had a strained relationship with or simply do not know.

- Specifically, when collecting post-school outcome data, be certain the survey design takes into account student limitations and specific disabilities (i.e., Will the student have difficulty reading or understanding the survey questions?)
- **Provide prenotification.** Prenotification serves to gain subject approval—therefore increasing response rate. If prenotification is conducted by telephone, personnel will have the opportunity to stress the importance of the survey, while securing the respondent's agreement to complete and return the survey. Also, the respondent will have an opportunity to ask and have any questions answered. Prenotification by telephone or letter should include a cutoff date, stressing the importance of having the questionnaire completed and returned in a timely manner. Avoid sending surveys during traditionally busy periods (e.g., holidays).
- **Consider alternate means of distribution and collection.** Additional ways to collect data include the distribution of surveys via electronic mail or the utilization of an online survey (e.g., www.surveymonkey.com). Youth spend a great deal of time on computers; therefore, an attempt to collect information from these youth via electronic email or the Internet may prove useful. Many states also collect this data via phone or in-person interviews. For additional information on training interviewers see www.psocenter.org/Docs/Products/SUNY_NPSO_TraingIF.pdf.
- **Express commitment.** The respondent should feel as though the survey is valuable and that their responses are valuable. The appearance of the survey and the questions asked should reveal commitment on behalf of the data collector (i.e., school personnel). Therefore, if respondents feel as though the survey is important, they may feel committed to complete and return the survey.
- **Use incentives.** Check with your state regarding specific guidelines related to the use of incentives. The use of incentives is used quite often in survey/questionnaire research. The use of incentives to increase response rate is well established. However, there are a number of questions to be answered when considering the use of incentives: (a) What and how much is enough? (b) Should the incentive be enclosed or promised? (c) Should the incentive be sent in the form of a certificate, check, or cash? (d) What is the cost-benefit of sending the incentive now vs. later and what is the cost-benefit of sending certificates, cash, or checks? The answers to each of these questions can only be determined by each state in accordance to specific guidelines that may exist to promote or hinder the use or amount of incentives; the feasibility of providing cash or printing checks; or the availability of resources to send prenotification of surveys, the original survey, follow-up surveys, and an incentive.
- **Conduct follow-up.** Follow-up is important. Follow-up to the initial survey sent must be conducted. Repeat contact is the most important follow-up strategy for increasing response rate. Follow-up serves as a reminder for those who have simply forgotten to return the survey.
 - A postcard or phone call follow-up increases response rates. If following up via telephone, allow respondents the opportunity to complete the survey over the phone, if feasible.
- **An alternate strategy to following up by postcard or phone, is to simply send respondents an additional survey with an enclosed "personalized" note reminding the respondent that the questionnaire has not been returned.** The note should further indicate that an additional survey is enclosed just in case they have misplaced the original survey.

What the Research Tells Us About Follow-Up

Researchers generally agree that using multiple follow-up reminders, whether by mail or phone, will significantly increase response rates. Borg and colleagues (2006) reviewed 98 studies from the field of education and found that although average response rates for initial mailings were 48%, they could be increased to 68% with one mailed follow-up, 80% with two follow-ups, and 90% with three follow-ups. Similarly, Brennan and Hoek (1992) reported that response rate could be increased 17% - 22% by using one mailed reminder, and by an additional 18% - 26% with a second reminder. Multiple contacts have been found to be more effective than any other technique for increasing response to surveys by mail (Dillman, 2000).

required and time related to each of these strategies. These strategies were reported by State Education Agency (SEA) and Local Education Agency (LEA) personnel during focus group sessions at the National Forum on Post-School Outcomes (March, 2006) and the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative Spring Meeting (May, 2006).

These strategies fall into two categories: before students exit (proactive strategies) and after students exit (reactive strategies). A number of these strategies can be performed both before and after the student exits.

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Strategies for Locating Youth

For students who cannot be located, it is virtually impossible to collect post-school outcome data on them. One population of youth who are extremely difficult to locate once they leave school are students with disabilities who drop out. The process of dropping out is not a new phenomenon to school personnel. A large number of students exit school informally, making it difficult to track their whereabouts and even more difficult to track their post-school outcomes. These students often leave school without completing an exit survey or informing teachers or administrators of their intentions to drop out. To address these issues state education agencies and school district personnel report promising techniques during their initial attempts to successfully locate youth, particularly those who have dropped out. Presently, there is no scientific evidence to support the use of these strategies or their level of effectiveness. However, these strategies represent many common sense approaches that appear useful. States should consider costs and resources

Before Exiting

1. **Keep students' files current and accurate prior to exiting** and notify students and their families of the expectation for students to provide post-school outcome data. This will assist in the collection of these data more easily.
2. **Have students complete an exit survey prior to leaving school.** Administrators and teachers should emphasize the importance of the survey to both students and families. Verbally reinforce the relevance of completing the survey during all high school IEP meetings.
3. **Discuss the importance of transition planning and inform students and families that they may be contacted after leaving school.** Explain to students and families the necessity of collecting post-school outcome data. Make youth and families your partners in this process.
4. **Encourage LEAs to maintain current contact information and to update information biannually,** including mailing and physical address,

home telephone number, cellular number, alternate address and phone number, email address, and next of kin address and phone number.

5. **Encourage LEAs to recheck fall enrollments annually for students who may have returned.**
6. **Locate and contact LEAs with high response rates to share what they are doing** to locate and track students and collect post-school outcome data.
7. **Prior to exit, ask students: Specifically, what would keep them in touch?** Will they keep in touch with you, and how can you help facilitate contact? Will they notify you if their contact information changes? Can you contact them twice a year to make certain their contact information has not changed? Can you send them reminders to notify you if they relocate? Explain why this is so important. Remember, students want to know that you care about them and that you want to hear what they have to say.
8. **Have students develop a resume, providing personal and professional references.** Keep this information in students' permanent file. Use this information when needed to contact



students, making certain you have the most recent and correct information.

9. **At the beginning of each semester provide all students, especially those students at risk for dropping out, with a “pre-correct” message** regarding staying in school, which directs students on how to receive assistance if considering leaving school, and how to formally exit school.
10. **Establish districtwide, standardized practices** for monitoring and responding to student attendance issues.
 - Implement an electronic student tracking system that allows schools to more accurately follow their students within and between districts in the region and state.
 - If not a unique identifier, develop some method (e.g., Web site or database) for in-state sharing of kids not known to be continuing.
11. **Improve the quality of exit interviews,** especially for students who formally withdraw, and be certain to collect the following information: families' names and contact information; emergency contact information; and contact information for best friends, close relatives, and extended family.
 - Encourage students who leave school (drop out) to complete an exit survey.
 - Administer an exit survey to every senior eligible for graduation or to those students who leave school (see post-school data collection protocol www.psocenter.org/collecting.html#post)
 - Set initial exit interview data at a minimum.
12. **During transition planning and exit interviews, ask students questions regarding their future plans** (e.g., where they plan to live, where they plan to work). Let them know they may be contacted in a year to learn what they are doing.

13. **Prior to students exiting, send written correspondences** (e.g., birthday or holiday cards) biannually (i.e., request the most current and correct mailing address from the post office, if available).

After Exiting

1. **Keep local data systems current.** Make certain that school personnel enter the most recent student data. Make certain that the data are updated at the beginning and end of each academic period.
2. **Send “heads up” letter to youth and families** so they will prompt students to respond to the post-school outcomes survey.
3. **Attempt to locate students via the Department of Motor Vehicles** (i.e., search by name, DOB, and gender to locate change of address and phone number).
4. **Schools may consider hiring police officer liaisons** (i.e., student recovery specialists) as contacts and resources to locate students.
5. **“Google” students** (e.g., a high percentage of students can be found at www.myspace.com and www.classmates.com).
6. **Go where students are; locate them at their favorite places** (e.g., mall, basketball court, arcade, skating rink, and high school football, basketball, and baseball games). Ask youth to update their contact information and ask them to stay in touch. Ask students if you can contact them via the Internet.



Create an incentive for keeping
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data collection protocol.

7. **Pay students to keep in touch.** Create an incentive for keeping in touch and involvement with the data collection protocol. Possible incentives may include free tickets to school sponsored functions (e.g., games, carnivals, and talent shows); gift cards or coupons from local restaurants (e.g., Chick-Fil-A, Pizza Hut, and Subway), and gift cards from movie theatres and retail stores (e.g., Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and Target).
8. **Locate and contact LEAs with high response rates** to share what they are doing to locate and track students and collect post-school outcome data.
9. **After students leave school, send written correspondences or correspondences through email** (e.g., birthday or holiday cards) biannually (i.e., to receive the most current and correct mailing address from the post office, if available).
10. **Telephone and send written correspondences** to families, other family members, best friends, and personal references listed on their resumes. Ask families for their child's most up-to-date contact information. Ask families to have their child contact you.
11. **Send postcard with forward service or change of address request.** Conduct formal postal checks through the post office. Current information may be obtained at the post office via the use of an automated vendor file of current postal change-of-address updates, the National Change of Address (NCOA) file. These files are updated as often as every two weeks and maintain a record of previous address updates and, in some cases, telephone numbers. NCOA updates (for both address and tele-

phone number) are far faster and less costly than multiple mailings or telephone numbers contacts.

12. **Contact the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation.** Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors maintain current files on each of their clients. They may be able to provide current information on a particular student or have that student contact school personnel to provide the data needed.

13. **Consider Aristotle's Nationwide Voter File** (www.VoterListsOnline.com) to locate youth who are difficult to find. This service contains comprehensive lists of registered voters across the U.S. Data are collected at the state, county, and municipal level across the country, and integrated and enhanced by data experts.

The need to collect data . . . to improve
secondary transition service delivery
cannot be overstated.

Summary

Educators and policymakers recognize the value of better information as an essential tool for improving school and raising achievement for youth with disabilities. They understand that when states collect the most accurate and relevant data and are able to match individual student records over time, they can answer the questions that are at the core of educational effectiveness, thereby shaping the future of special education. The need to collect data to provide the necessary information to determine how well students with disabilities are performing once they leave school and the changes required to improve secondary transition service delivery cannot be overstated. As states continue to grapple with collecting post-school outcome data, securing sufficient response rates and locating youth will

remain challenging. Addressing these challenges will take time, but assistance is available. The National Post-School Outcomes Center has tools (see www.psocenter.org) and recommended strategies available to assist states as they collect post-school outcome data. This practice guide is one tool state and local education personnel can use to increase their capacity to design and implement practices for collecting post-school outcome data.

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