



How to Provide Accurate and Actionable Education Performance Reporting Despite Weak National Data Standards

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Educational data can be a powerful tool, not just for identifying low performing schools but for providing transparency to students and parents and enabling research on what works. At its best, it helps improve public policy and inform the creation of tools for benchmarking and improving all levels of performance among schools, districts, and states. However, the data need to be derived from clear definitions and standard measures so everyone can compare apples to apples. Regulation too often misses this target, causing otherwise effective data collections to collapse under the weight of incomparability and consumer confusion. The new reporting requirements for state grantees under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) risks creating just these sorts of flaws. Fortunately, there are three simple steps that states can take to leverage the new requirements into powerful drivers of school improvement.

Remember the chaotic state of high school graduation rates in the early 2000s? When No Child Left Behind was adopted in 2002, states were required to report high school graduation rates, but allowed to define and calculate them pretty much any way they chose. Each had different rules for counting students in the denominator (those who should have graduated) and in the numerator (those who actually graduated). There was no way to compare one state's numbers to another's. It wasn't until 2008 that the Department of Education (ED) issued regulations requiring states to move toward a standard definition, and not until at least 2012 was this method of counting fully implemented by nearly all 50 states (several still needed waivers to allow more time).

Comparability isn't the only thing that suffered under the lack of standards. Accuracy, too, fell victim to the political

pressures of reporting numbers that made schools look good. Many states saw their reported graduation rates fall by more than 10 percentage points, and some by as many as 14 points, when they converted to the new standards.

Making sure everyone uses the same definitions is just a start. ED's standard for calculating college graduation rates, to take another example, has been established for years. However, even though everyone uses the same method, that method does not count all the students it should (e.g., part-time and transfer students). As a result, some institutions suffer from misleadingly low rates and others unfairly benefit by comparison. For example, community colleges and minority-serving institutions, which serve many part-time students, don't get to count those students' successes, even while they are forced to count against their graduation



rates the large number of students who (successfully) transfer out to four-year colleges without first earning a degree.

This kind of poorly defined, although standard, measurement, when released in a well-intentioned environment of accountability and transparency, resulted in one of the least helpful attacks on a college in recent memory: a billboard outside Austin Community College denouncing its single-digit graduation rate and demanding to know how this was a good use of taxpayer funds. Once billboards go up around your campus, it's too late to start explaining why the standard measures don't count your students fairly.

The lack of standards not only obfuscates accountability, misleads the public, and encourages overly rosy measurements, it also disadvantages states that make the effort to provide honest accounting, realistic goal-setting, and measurable improvements over time. These states end up looking worse than their peers and suffering in comparison.

These scenarios are also likely to happen under the new data reporting required of states under ESSA. That's partly because each state is allowed to define its own academic content standards and assessments aligned with the standards. This makes most inter-state comparisons and benchmarks meaningless, but it is perhaps unavoidable given the failure of the Common Core standards to reach acceptance.

Less unavoidable, however, is the wide leeway given to states on the one high school outcome that is uniformly measurable: whether or not students successfully enroll in a postsecondary institution. ESSA provides a promising effort at transparency with its requirement for public annual report cards that break down all of the data for each local educational authority (LEA). However, it allows the state an easy out on reporting the data in useful ways, merely by asserting

that the necessary data are not "available" or "practicable" to collect. States should avoid this temptation. The fact is that this measure is easy to benchmark, providing states and LEAs with a valuable tool for measuring and comparing how well their high schools are preparing students for college.

The postsecondary enrollment outcome risks falling short of a standard definition because it is too easy for states to not count all the students they should. For example, if a state's Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) does not collect enrollment data for students attending private institutions (and most do not), the state can exclude these students, significantly lowering the enrollment rates for most high schools. If the state chooses not to obtain national enrollment data for its high school graduates, it can exclude students who enroll in college out-of-state, too. Even though, in both cases, these data are readily available and practicable to obtain from the National Student Clearinghouse.

States that do not will find themselves with seriously flawed measures of how they stand, and their high schools will be unable to see how their programs for preparing students for college compare to those of similar schools in other states. States with large numbers of students enrolling out-of-state, for example Connecticut and New Jersey, would suffer when compared to states like California and Texas, where most students go to college in-state. In fact, using data from the IPEDS biannual survey of state migration rates for college freshmen, Connecticut's rank would fall 37 places, from 3rd overall to 40th in the percent of high school graduates enrolling in college within 12 months, if students enrolling out-of-state were not counted. New Jersey would fall from 8th to 34th, while other states, like Ohio and Oklahoma, would jump from 37th and 39th, respectively, to 23rd and 22nd.

The National Student Clearinghouse offers state and local educational authorities (SEAs

and LEAs) the ability to keep track of their high school graduates and identify which ones attend college, no matter if they go in-state, out-of-state, or to private schools. Through the Clearinghouse's StudentTracker service, SEAs and LEAs can submit up to eight cohorts of high school graduates and receive standard, informative reports of where those graduates enrolled in college, their eventual outcomes, and their completion information. StudentTracker generates the reports using consistent measures drawn from our collection of national postsecondary enrollment records, so every state can be confident that the measures are fairly applied. With options for individual-level outcomes as well as school, district and state aggregations, educators and policymakers can examine the results at relevant levels, as well as track year-to-year trends in their graduates' postsecondary behaviors.

Here are the three steps that can put the ESSA reporting requirements to work for states:

1. Avoid hiding behind the impracticability/unavailability of postsecondary enrollment data. Make use of easily accessed Clearinghouse reports that measure enrollments for both in-state and out-of-state, as well as public and private students.
2. Provide these reports in advance to schools and districts so they can digest and compare results, and identify appropriate responses and targeted improvement strategies. Encourage them to use the [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's published national benchmarks](#) as well.
3. Publish school-level results on an easily accessible website, and publicize its availability to parents and communities, so they know where their schools stand.

If states and districts want to be able to actually use the data to identify performance gaps, target resources to where they can do the most good, and ultimately drive the kind of improvements in performance that students deserve, then they need the tools to do it right. And that means honest measures and comparative benchmarks that give fair comparisons to their peers. Comparisons that policymakers can stand up and face without needless sniping about the fairness or accuracy of the data. It also means actionable reports that clearly show how the measured outcomes differ for specific groups of students and types of schools, highlighting where policy changes can make a difference. This way, leaders have a fair chance of being ready with a clear response plan when the numbers become public. ■