



Advancing Accountability for Graduation Rates

BACKGROUND:

The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA) has directed federal resources to schools for more than four decades to help ensure all children have equal access to a quality education. The most recent reauthorization—or congressional update to the law—occurred with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). Although ESEA was due for reauthorization in 2007, NCLB has governed education policy in states and school districts for more than a decade. While waiting for Congress to complete its next reauthorization, the U.S. Department of Education has offered states flexibility from prescriptive provisions of the law that have become barriers to state and local implementation of innovative education reforms. ESEA flexibility moves away from top-down policies, instead supporting decisions informed by data and expertise at the state and local levels. All participating states must show how their reform plans advance all students' achievement by maintaining a high bar for student success, closing achievement gaps, improving the quality of instruction, and increasing equity by better targeting support and resources to schools based on need.

DISCUSSION:

Ensuring that all students graduate with the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in college and the workforce is a core objective of ESEA flexibility. Progress toward an ambitious, achievable graduation rate goal is one critical factor in determining if a school is adequately preparing students for success after high school. The Department recognizes the importance of this measure of school and student performance, requiring every state approved for ESEA flexibility to use the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate* as a significant element in its school accountability system.

Additionally, each participating state must:

- Set a single graduation rate goal for all of its high schools, as well as annual targets that ensure continuous and substantial progress toward that goal by all students and all subgroups of students;
- Place “dropout factories”* on an accelerated track for substantial interventions that will improve student achievement and graduation rates; and
- Report graduation rates on state and local education report cards, both in the aggregate and by different subgroups of students—such as minority students, English Learners, and students with disabilities.

How states and districts support subgroups of students must be driven by their progress toward meeting assessment performance targets and graduation rates.

Through ESEA flexibility, the Department will both recognize states for demonstrating success—such as graduating more students every year—and challenge states that fall short of their goals to pursue rigorous reform efforts that focus on what is best for students.

*See the *Definition Box*.

Definition Box:

***Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate:** A uniform method of calculating secondary school graduation rates across states, districts, and schools that increases the comparability and accuracy of this measure throughout the country.

***Dropout Factories:** Schools with graduation rates persistently below 60 percent.

History in Review:

Upwards of one million, or roughly one in four, U.S. students drop out each year. Only about 12 percent of high schools produce fully half of the country's dropouts. NCLB allowed states to mask schools with low graduation rates by lacking a requirement for how graduation rate had to be calculated, prompting 2008 federal regulations aimed at ensuring common and accurate graduation rate calculations. ESEA flexibility strengthens those regulations by ensuring that schools with the lowest graduation rates will engage in meaningful and rigorous reforms.

STATES IN ACTION:

Examples of strong plans that states have proposed to advance graduation rate accountability follow.



Oregon's flexibility plan raises the bar for high school graduation higher than ever before, by specifying that:

- Half of a school's performance rating is based on its overall graduation rate and the graduation rate of subgroups of students who, based on historical data, are least likely to receive a diploma; and
- All schools that keep graduation rates lower than 60 percent will receive increased attention and the highest level of interventions.



Minnesota's flexibility plan rewards only schools where the whole school and all subgroups of students graduate at rates of 85 percent or higher. The plan also:

- Creates an early indicator system for identifying students most at-risk of dropping out; and
- Provides student-specific approaches for keeping all kids on track to graduate.



Under ESEA flexibility, **Arkansas'** plan requires school and district performance targets for student achievement, student growth, and graduation rate.

- Such targets must be met for the overall student population and a combined subgroup of English Learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities in order for the school to be labeled as "achieving."
- Even in an "achieving" school, if an individual subgroup doesn't meet its targets, the school's improvement plan must be revised.

Fast Facts:

- Nearly 7,000 students drop out of school every school day, or one every 26 seconds.
- A quarter of our nation's students never complete high school.

“[This] is an important step forward, giving schools much needed flexibility, so they can move towards substantially increasing the quality of instruction, improving academic achievement, and ensuring all high school graduates are college- and career-ready.”

- Arizona State Superintendent John Huppenthal

ESEA flexibility granted July 19, 2012

