National Education Statistics Agenda Committee (NESAC)
Meeting Summary
Friday, March 4, 2022

Welcome and Overview

NESAC Chair Gunes Kaplan, Nevada Department of Education, and NESAC Vice Chair Laura Hansen, Metro Nashville Public Schools (TN), welcomed members to the meeting. Laura reminded the group that the discussions would focus on graduation rates and any best practices, challenges, and lessons learned for graduation data collection that could be shared with other standing committees. Members split into two breakout rooms where they shared their agencies' experiences with graduation rates, reflecting a variety of approaches.

Breakout Room Discussions: Graduation Rate Challenges and Best Practices

Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR)

- Agencies use a selection of different year ranges, with the lowest being a 4-5-year ACGR up to 7 years.
- All states publish graduation rates for all federally required subgroups and some publish graduation rates for subgroups beyond the U.S. Department of Education (ED) reporting requirement.
- While some states publish the federal rate, others publish state rates, and some publish multiple rates.
- Uses for these data include the following:
    - State and local report cards and school scoring
    - Accountability report cards
    - School improvement metrics
    - ED*Facts* reporting
    - Awarding of community scholarships

Cohorts

- Multiple states include all graduates who start high school later in the year, or later in their academic career. Some track graduation rates for students in the system for the full K-12 experience. Others base everything on the year a student enters 9th grade. This poses challenges for students coming from other countries and for students whose education has been interrupted.
- Students who are enrolled after the cohort count date has passed may be included in a separate "summer oasis" count of students enrolled for at least one day. Other states include graduates in the prior academic year if they finish all requirements before the start of the following year.
- Another state reported collecting student data three times a year to continuously update and reassign cohorts. These are assigned at the state level, so students who move districts keep the same cohort.
- States face challenges in reconciling statewide cohorts with local graduation requirements.

Summer School Graduates

- In some states, students in summer school have until the last day of the summer term to complete graduation requirements. If they do, they are considered as having graduated the previous spring with the regular cohort.
- In others, students who graduate from summer school are counted as graduates of their new school if they enroll there after the October 1 cutoff date.

Exit Codes

- Several states responded that the same exit codes are used for all rates and purposes.

Students Outside State and Local Education Agencies (SEAs and LEAs)

- One state has a special correctional LEA containing all correctional schools.
- Expelled students are counted as part of the school against the relevant LEA; students who withdraw and then re-enroll in the adult education option count as transfers.
- Juvenile correctional schools are under each LEA's jurisdiction; expelled students are still counted as part of their LEA while receiving some services from a special program.
- Data on students in homeless shelters or correctional schools are collected at the state level; LEAs report the data and monitor them with codes.
- Because juvenile justice is usually run by local districts, data for students in correctional schools is tracked by the running district. A major process can change a student's cohort, and many requests for this are denied.
- Students in juvenile justice or corrections can be assigned a new graduation cohort upon returning to school. Students are not removed from a cohort until they appear in another school.
- The decision as to which district includes the graduate in its graduation rate can become difficult when accounting for students in the juvenile justice system.

Charter Schools

- Charter schools that are under LEA jurisdiction are counted as such.
- Some charters are under LEA jurisdiction, while some serve as their own LEAs.
- Charters are not given any special treatment.

Discipline

- Under state law, student expulsions are considered a permanent record against the LEA that expelled them, even if the student enrolls in and graduates from another school.
- Expelled students may not enroll in a new school unless or until the school board expunges the expulsion, which changes its status to a transfer out of the school. If the student does not re-enroll after the expulsion is expunged, the status shifts to a dropout.
- Several states have special exit codes for expulsions, and students who do not return are coded as dropouts.
- Some states do not have an exit code for expulsion, and in others, students may not be expelled.

Student-Centered Models

- One state noted that these have affected the use of graduation rates, but the situation is new, and the handling is not yet settled.

- Another state reports a 6-year personalized learning cohort and focuses on "on-time" graduation if it differs from the regular rate, valuing proficiency over seat time.

Alternative Measures

- Some agencies do not publish alternative measures to the graduation rate to demonstrate student success.
- One state includes flexible pathways on report cards and is beginning to display course-taking but does not publish these outcomes as they do grades.
- Another includes career pathways in their published postsecondary readiness data, as well as the number of students taking advanced courses and getting college credit.
- In another state, students get points for different graduation types below diploma level. No other alternative measures are published.
- States are interested in alternative measures. For example, some charter schools focus on encouraging pregnant mothers to return to school. These schools have poor 4-year graduation rates and would benefit from an alternative accountability system.

Other Challenges

- Graduation rates and measures are not always comparable.
- States are under pressure to increase academic rigor while also maintaining high graduation rates.

Reconvening and Next Steps

The breakout groups reconvened in the main room. Representatives from each breakout group reported summaries of their respective discussions, after which members indicated an interest in a continued discussion of ACGR at a future, longer session.

Wednesday, April 27, 2022

Gunes and Laura welcomed members to the meeting. Gunes noted that the standing committees were meeting in April because the summer meeting in July will be a streamlined, virtual event. The NESAC Committee would meet again on June 21 before the July Forum meeting. The meeting was convened to expand on the challenges of reporting and using graduation rates discussed at the March 4 meeting, as well as identify best practices. Members split into two breakout rooms where they shared their agencies' experiences with graduation rates, reflecting a variety of approaches.

Breakout Room Discussions

Agency Uses of Graduation Rates

- Accountability is a generalized use of graduation rates across the nation; graduation rates are an example of large-scale data that can make smaller, less evident data needs and challenges noticeable. Some SEAs, for example, use graduation rates as a barometer for student satisfaction and happiness with the courses and support offered at school. Others have attempted methods like expanding the number of secondary school years leading to graduation (up to 7) and broadening the data collection to include non-traditional learners to obtain an accurate graduation snapshot. Graduation rates, both actual and aspirational, are valuable tools for states to use in driving districts to develop their plans to improve.

- Some states and districts publish graduation rates in local media and make them available to the public on designated websites, to engage stakeholders and spur conversations in the community.

Alternative Measures

- Many states track alternative measures and graduation modes (such as summer graduates, school careers that go beyond four years, special education students, and students with an Individualized Education Program [IEPs]), but these are not universally published or even universally included when calculating graduation rates.
- Several SEAs track metrics like industry certifications to record the growth and success of students not on the college path.
- One LEA has created a portfolio of competencies called a "Backpack of Success Skills;" students in the district must defend their "backpack skills" in special assessments at the end of grades 5, 8, and 12, and these results are reported.
- One LEA has an alternate assessment for qualifying students, but no alternate equivalent to a diploma to accompany it. Because of this, the district's recognized graduation rate suffers.

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

- One LEA has added a state-funded year-13 program to its high schools, which gives students the option to defer graduation for a year and take further classes to satisfy any missing requirements. Some members noted that "completion year" and "deferred completion year" would be interesting data points to measure.
- Because of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, one SEA has given its students the option of repeating a grade they may have missed. The potential effects of this decision on future graduation cohorts have been noted.
- Assigning and tracking cohorts have proved to be challenging for several agencies, due in part to the difficulty of tracking the movements of students who transfer or otherwise exit the system before graduation. Some SEAs have working relationships with other state agencies or entities to remedy this; one state communicates nightly with juvenile institutions and residences to exchange data. Another LEA has based cohort assignment on "year entered ninth grade," which poses problems for students who transferred from school systems that do not follow the United States model.

Student-Centered Models

- Several states are engaged in the conversation about the need to adapt policies to real-world developments, and to update the very concept of a graduation rate. Yet these states acknowledge the inherent slowness of changing legislation and continue to wait.
- One SEA's particular circumstances give it a special problem with accountability—more than half of its schools have a graduation rate of less than two-thirds per cohort, which puts them in range of a federal mandate to give such schools comprehensive support and improvement.

Aggregating Data

- SEA websites are frequently used to display graduation-related information to the public (including business rules, the ACGR formula, and data collection explanations).

Joint Discussion

The breakout groups reconvened in the main room to discuss their findings.

Lessons Learned

- It is helpful for the Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) to learn about measures being taken and considered at SEA and LEA levels.
- It has been fascinating to look at moving from year-based to progress-based evaluation.
- It is interesting to learn about continuing efforts at personalized learning and the efforts around allowing students to pursue their interests while still collecting useful data on their learning and progression. Considerations around the value of a diploma are helpful.
- One member noted that the discussion prompted her to look closely into equity analysis.

Emerging Best Practices

- It is helpful to use a progress index that adds more context than a graduation binary.
- It would be useful to move away from repealed legislation and superseded requirements in favor of a more sensitive matrix and a better sense of how kids are growing.
- A common metric of the value of a diploma could be developed.
- Even at the state level, all credentials are not equal across districts.

Using Data and Measures for Continuous Improvement and Student Success

- The graduation rate only changes once a year; however, tracking student progress allows for more regular evaluation (such as once per marking period).
- One LEA focuses on "on track" students extending down into middle school; the district is looking at yearly check-ins for high school.
- Global findings from research that crosses states and districts on graduation rate-related topics are useful; for example, research on whether and how graduation rates are affected when agencies institute a high school graduation exam.
- The Education Commission of the States published a 50-state comparison of high school graduation requirements: https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/high-school-graduation-requirements-03.
- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) publishes information on high school completion requirements: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/3_hsc.asp.

Next Steps and Future Meeting Planning

To close the meeting, members share the following topics for NESAC's upcoming meetings:

- Staff data, because of the interest in how adult interactions make a difference with students
- Staffing shortages and workforce cultivation
- Academic return on investment (ROI) relative to ACGR
- COVID-19-related additions and changes to data fields for collection
- Preschool data (such as public and private preschools, and Head Start)
- Transitions and dropout rates
- National trends toward data standards