Beyond Accurate Reporting: Why Congress Should Improve Graduation-Rate Accountability in the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

by Daniel J. Losen — May 16, 2008

The United States is facing an educational crisis. The on-time high school graduation rate in this nation is estimated at only 70 percent. This crisis is deepest for Black, Latino and Native American students, whose chances of graduating are not much more than 50% nationally, and far lower in many cities. When high numbers of youth leave school ill-prepared to contribute to our labor force and to participate meaningfully in civic life, our economy and our democracy suffer. There is an urgent need for a remedy to this crisis. The depth of the crisis and urgency of the remedy has been a subject of debate, in part, because most states and districts misleadingly report far more favorable estimates. To address this dire situation, improving the accuracy of reporting and moving away from estimates, is imperative. Solving this accuracy problem should be among the top priorities, but all the efforts to improve accuracy in reporting will leave us with the status quo if there is no accountability. The ESEA must include accountability for improving graduation rates, not just more accurate reporting. The addition of more rigorous graduation rate accountability, however, should be a central component of a comprehensive overhaul of the imbalanced, and counter-productive test-driven accountability system that currently encourages schools and districts to "push out" struggling students, if there is to be a meaningful remedy.

The United States is facing an educational crisis. The on-time high school graduation rate in this nation is estimated at only 70 percent. This crisis is deepest for Black, Latino and Native American students, whose chances of graduating are not much more than 50% nationally, and far lower in many cities. When high numbers of youth leave school ill-prepared to contribute to our labor force and to participate meaningfully in civic life, our economy and our democracy suffer. Life opportunities for these young people are dramatically curtailed. There is an urgent need for a remedy to this crisis.

The depth of the crisis and urgency of the remedy have been a subject of debate, in part, because most states and districts misleadingly report far more favorable estimates. To address this dire situation, improving the accuracy of reporting and moving away from estimates is imperative. Yet, getting to accuracy means paying close attention to the policy details surrounding how rates are calculated and reported, which entails much more than tracking individual students with sophisticated data. Solving this problem

should be a top priority, but all the efforts to improve accuracy in reporting will leave us with the status quo if there is no accountability.

Bipartisan support for improving accuracy is demonstrated by the National Governors' Association (NGA) Compact, signed by all 50 governors. And in April, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings proposed regulations that would require uniform collection and reporting of graduation rates in a manner that would be consistent with the NGA's Compact.

The federal government is uniquely positioned to provide the technical and financial support for every state to use longitudinal individual student data, and to ensure greater accuracy through federal oversight. However, as the 2006 report, "Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis in Texas," reveals, even states that use longitudinal data can artificially inflate graduation rates (Losen, Balfzanz, & Orfield, 2006). In Texas, inflationary practices included removing students from the cohort used to calculate graduation rates when they left school to enroll in GED programs, failed to pass the state's exit exam, were expelled from school, or when districts or schools otherwise lost track of students. Other states, such as Florida, routinely include GED recipients in reported graduation rates. But as James Heckman and Paul LaFontaine (2008) point out, "the GED program does not benefit most participants….GEDs perform at the level of dropouts in the U.S. labour market."

Once tracking systems are in place, transparency in how the rates are calculated and reported to the public is critical, and the obligation to disaggregate the data by subgroups must be fulfilled. Federal policies for reporting graduation rates must be particularly strict about when students who leave school can be removed from the calculus and must clearly require states to count those who enroll in GED programs, or whose whereabouts are unknown, as equivalent to dropouts. While states should receive full funding to develop and maintain such tracking systems, there should also be consequences for states that routinely fail to follow reporting requirements or feed misleading information to the public.

As emphasized above, however, improving accuracy of reporting, while vital, is no remedy. Ironically, more attention has been paid to *reporting* than to *accountability for improving rates of graduation.* This disconnect is reflected in the recently proposed regulations by Secretary Spellings who gives the impression that improving the accuracy and uniformity of reporting, with only minor changes to the system of accountability, is an adequate solution. The Department of Education does deserve credit for reversing their prior policy on sub-group accountability for graduation rates, but a meaningful remedy must add far more rigorous accountability for graduation rates as an integral part of a major overhaul of the current accountability system, changes the current administration has opposed.

The current NCLB system is broken, in part because it labels so many schools as failures without appropriately supplying or targeting the resources necessary to achieve substantial reform. NCLB, which relies on test scores to determine whether schools or

districts are making "adequate yearly progress," requires unreasonable interim test score gains towards the unrealistic mandate that every school and district demonstrate 100% proficiency in reading and in math by 2014, regardless of their starting point or available resources. Failure to meet interim goals calibrated to reaching the 100% results in swift and serious sanctions, usually directed at schools, but ignoring state level responsibility for inadequate outcomes.

Ratcheting-up accountability for graduation rates should be integral to the creation of a far more reasonable and balanced accountability system. The new system will need to reward progress, reserve sanctions for schools as a measure of last resort, and help states to remedy their anemic education funding and inequitable resource distribution mechanisms to generate higher rates of graduation for disadvantaged children.

Rates of graduation are widely recognized as valid and important measures of the efficacy of public school systems. Most who endorse some degree of test accountability also tend to embrace graduation rate accountability. However, some proponents rail against any consideration of graduation rates that would lessen the primacy of test-driven accountability.

Evidence analyzed by The Civil Rights Project at UCLA (formerly at Harvard) and other researchers suggests that test-driven accountability inadvertently creates incentives for low-scoring students to drop out, or for administrators to encourage them to leave in subtle and not so subtle ways (Orfield, 2004; Orfield & Kornhaber 2001). The combination of pressures (i.e. high rates of grade retention, high school exit exams, the disenrollment of truant youth, harsh disciplinary codes, and pressuring students to enter GED programs) are referred to as the "push-out" phenomenon. If low scoring students leave school, their school's average test score rises. As the impact of the rising NCLB standards is intensifying, the incentive to push-out low achievers will likely grow. The current NCLB system of accountability, even with the recently proposed improvements to reporting and accountability, will do little to remedy this problem.

The current system, under NCLB, is so imbalanced that what the federal government calls graduation rate accountability is merely an illusion. Unlike test accountability, there is neither a specified goal, nor timeline for graduation rates pursuant to NCLB. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education wrote regulations that explicitly tell states that they need NOT require subgroups to meet any graduation rate goal for AYP purposes, and few states have done so voluntarily. Most states require only one tenth of one percent improvement each year toward an unambitious goal generally set between 60% and 70%.

The accountability timeline illustrates the detrimental imbalance. Schools and districts are given 12 years to score 100% proficiency on reading and math tests, yet are permitted to take much longer to meet even modest goals with respect to graduation rates. Most states use interim growth goals of "any improvement" or 1/10th of one percent over the prior year. Even a graduation rate goal of just 20 percentage points of improvement could permissibly take 200 years under such state requirements.

The academic performance of students who are Black or Latino, who have low SES or disabilities, or who are English Language learners, does affect the school's or district's test accountability, but these subgroups' graduation rates do not count as part of the normal AYP determination (Johnson, Thurlow, & Stout, 2007). Therefore it is possible that even while their test scores improve and schools and districts are making AYP, the subgroups' graduation rates could actually substantially worsen.

Discussions about increasing graduation rate accountability for all students and adding accountability for subgroups when the ESEA is reauthorized often become mired in passionate arguments about how much the current test-driven accountability system would first need to change. The reluctance to consider accountability for low graduation rates is expressed in several ways. Some suggest that since there are already many districts currently labeled as failing under NCLB, we must be sure not to add more. Others argue that we cannot have graduation rate accountability until we have accurate reporting, but that putting an accurate system in place is too costly, or too many years away. A third common argument is that graduation rate accountability will hinder rather than help dropout interventions by creating a disincentive to invest in alternative programs designed to bring dropouts back into the school system, or that "on time" graduation rate accountability would work against students with disabilities or students who legitimately need more than four years to graduate.

Given the current crisis, these arguments, while raising valid (though not insurmountable) issues, are not good reasons to keep the discussion about adding accountability for graduation rates separate or secondary to resolving questions about how to revise the ESEA.

For example, the current lack of accuracy should not be an impediment to improving graduation rate accountability. Putting accuracy before accountability would only serve as a disincentive for states to develop the tracking systems necessary to produce accurate rates. In the reauthorized ESEA, states should be required to use a uniform interim estimate deemed by researchers to be the "most" accurate, while they complete the development of an individual student tracking system. Currently, according to the Data Quality Campaign, 40 states now have individual student data for calculating graduation and dropout rates. By the time the ESEA is reauthorized, only a handful of states would still lack the means to calculate these rates accurately (Ewell & Boeke, 2008).

Congress should seize the power of positive incentives in reauthorizing accountability in the next ESEA, and reward struggling schools that do meet graduation rate improvement goals. Reasonable improvement benchmarks must be based on research on what is achievable assuming that technical assistance and support funding is provided. Imagine that the federal government required states to have the ultimate goal of a 90% graduation rate: technical assistance and additional funding for dropout intervention programs could be provided to all schools and districts that were below the goal yet meeting annual progress benchmarks. The benchmarks should reflect research on what annual progress could be reasonably expected over time, rather than that which is tied to an arbitrarily set

end date. Moreover, schools and districts that make good progress with the highest percentages of Title I eligible students could be offered additional funding to sustain and replicate their successful programs.

Likewise, moving forward, efforts to strengthen accountability can be paired with carefully constructed time extensions and rewards for limited numbers of students and for programs or alternative schools that reinstate dropouts, so that effective programs could improve the district's performance profile rather than put them, or other interventions, at risk. Further, putting graduation rates on equal footing with test scores and other achievement measures entails a full reconstruction of the accountability system, not merely adding another "gotcha" point to the system in place.

While Secretary Spellings' recently proposed regulations would add sub-group accountability for improving graduation rates and suggests that states increase their rigor, her proposal leaves critical details like graduation rate goals, incremental progress requirements, funding for technical assistance, state accountability, and positive incentives, all necessary for meaningful progress in this area, up to the next administration.

As Congress and the next president revisits the ESEA, they should include remedying the graduation rate crisis among its top priorities. Doing so is critical to the academic and life outcomes of our nation's children, to our economy, and to our democracy. Earning a diploma is the ultimate achievement of our K-12 system of public education. With so much at stake and a crisis at hand, improving graduation rates should be central to a major reconstruction of the accountability system. The question should not be whether to increase graduation rate accountability when the ESEA is reauthorized, but how to do it most effectively and as soon as possible.

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