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Ed. Dept. Chided on Graduation Oversight

Inspector general says better enforcement of NCLB provision would boost accuracy of states' data

The goal of ensuring the accuracy of states' graduation data would be closer to reality if the Department of Education had been more forceful in implementing provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act, the department's office of inspector general says in [a report](#) released this month.

The department approved the graduation-rate formulas of all states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, many of which didn't require tracking the percentage of students who graduated within four years of entering high school, the IG's office says in the report, and didn't force the states to build the data systems needed to do so.

"If the department had been more assertive in requiring states to implement a longitudinal student-tracking system shortly after the enactment of NCLB, all states now could have four years of student data," the report says. "Instead, less than a quarter of the states are using a system that complies with the requirements of the law."

In a response included with the report, the Education Department's official in charge of implementing the NCLB law said the department properly relied on "transition authority" under the statute to approve graduation-rate formulas that didn't require data that tracked students from the start of high school until they graduated, transferred, or dropped out.

Even six years after the NCLB law's enactment, "reasonable flexibility is still necessary for states who are unable to calculate a cohort graduation rate until

necessary data systems are in place," Kerri L. Briggs, the assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education, wrote to the auditor who led the investigation.

Some states will need until 2012-13 to fully meet the requirement that graduation rates be based on data that track individual students, Ms. Briggs wrote.

Uniform Approach

The inspector general's office released the report on graduation-rate data April 4. Three days earlier, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings had announced plans to propose rules requiring states "to use the same formula to calculate how many students graduate from high school on time." Ms. Spellings also said the rules would require states to disaggregate graduation data by student subgroups, such as racial and income categories. ("**States to Face Uniform Rules on Grad Data**," April 9, 2008.)

The report documents how department officials, in the view of the IG's office, could have done more to improve the quality of states' graduation data.

But the planned move to a uniform definition of graduation rates is an important step in fixing the mistakes of the early days of implementing the 6-year-old NCLB law, said Michael T.S. Wotorson, the director of the Campaign for High School Equity.

"I'm pleased with where we are," said Mr. Wotorson, whose group includes the Alliance for Excellent Education, the National Council of La Raza, and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund, all based in Washington. The campaign is lobbying to change the NCLB law to create a uniform graduation rate and to force schools to disaggregate their graduation rates by racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic subgroups to make adequate yearly progress.

"I think folks are ready to move forward recognizing some of the shortfalls of the past," Mr. Wotorson added.

For its audit, the inspector general's office reviewed states' graduation-rate formulas that department officials had approved, as well as detailed data provided by four states.

The auditors concluded that 11 states tracked students over four years to determine whether they graduated on time, as required by the law. States must use the graduation rate as one indicator of whether high schools are making adequate yearly progress under the federal law. The main indicators are scores on reading and mathematics tests, which are given once in high school, as well as annually in grades 3-8.

Incomplete Data

If the Education Department had not given full approval to the states that hadn't proposed using the so-called cohort method, it would have sent the message that states needed to take steps to improve the way they calculate graduation rates, the report says.

In a review of data from Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Washington state, auditors concluded that those states' graduation rates "were not supported by reliable data."

In her response, Ms. Briggs noted that the auditors looked at data from the 2003-04 school year. Since then, most states have improved the quality of their data, she said. South Dakota, for example, gradually built its data system so that it now complies with NCLB requirements, Ms. Briggs wrote.