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Actively Managing a Cohort to Graduation

The New York State Board of Regents has raised the bar for graduation rate performance beginning with the 2009-10 school year results. The graduation rate target has increased from 55% to 80% for all students and for all subgroups of students.

Currently, statewide graduation rates hover around 70%. For many schools, graduation rates are significantly lower, especially for subgroups such as economically disadvantaged students or students with disabilities. For example, according to the [state education department](#), just 56% of Black and 55% of Hispanic students who started 9th grade in 2005 had graduated after 4 years, by June 2009.

So the challenge to school districts is daunting, especially for those in poor rural, suburban, small urban and large urban areas. The educational issues facing districts are well known: retention and overagedness, poverty, home conditions, discipline, attendance, problems at work, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, among others.

It's three years later: do you know who is in your 2007 cohort?

In New York State, there is also a data issue facing districts: year-to-year, month-to-month and day-to-day, they do not know accurately who is in each "active" accountability cohort and what each member's status is vis-a-vis graduation. Wait a minute, you say. What about their student management systems?

Each year, a district's student management systems purge inactive students from the data set. Most students are inactive because they have transferred from the district and are no longer a part of its official accountability cohort. However, inactive students also include those who have dropped out or transferred to GED.

So with each new school year, last year's dropouts and transfers to GED disappear from the student information system, even though they are still members of the official accountability cohort. These students remain invisible to the district – its administrators, guidance counselors, teachers and staff – until they re-appear in the cohort verification reports in the spring of the cohort's fourth year of enrollment. How can district personnel expect to manage a cohort effectively if they do not know who is in it?



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Is there any way a district can query to get an accurate accounting of cohort membership? Yes, it is possible through a Regional Information Center (RIC), but there are two caveats.

- Doing so requires very strong database skills, which most districts do not possess.
- Even with strong database skills, the process is extremely onerous and time consuming.

Consider the following example provided by a very able and talented district data manager.

To establish accurate membership in the official 2007 accountability cohort (i.e., the cohort of students who enrolled September 2007) after the third year of their enrollment, I would have to run six separate queries of the database. I would query for the 2007 cohort, for each of three years and for active and inactive students. Each query would produce an extract with separate tables based on school and location (e.g., BOCES, etc.). I would then need to join more than a dozen separate tables and filter the duplicates.

The critical point is that after the first year of a cohort's enrollment, we do not know accurately who is in that cohort. Therefore, we cannot actively manage that cohort with any confidence, dexterity or effectiveness. We really need easy and timely access to an accurate listing of each official accountability cohort.

Here is how Sandra Sherwood describes the challenge from her role as Superintendent at the Dryden Central School District: "Keeping track of our student cohort sounds so simple, but it is very complex and we find ourselves surprised in the spring of each year to learn that members of a cohort are missing. While we have gained much with the use of electronic databases, the roll-over process from year to year results in students being dropped from our active database and then during their graduation year, they suddenly reappear in the state's list. We need to be able to review and update the state database for our inactive students more easily before spring of their fourth year so that we can reach our graduation targets with confidence and be assured that students are not improperly being removed from their cohort. Right now, we receive the updated cohort list too late to make a difference for our students."

An emerging cohort management tool set

Districts are under tremendous pressure to increase graduation rates and decrease dropout rates and they are working diligently to do so. Easy access to accurate and up-to-date lists of each accountability cohort would allow them confidently to track each cohort's graduation status – by total cohort, cohort subgroup and each cohort member –

in order to intervene with students who are lagging or seriously at-risk and to ensure their successful graduation.

| Cohort | Last | First | ID | REGENTS BASIC... ADVANCED...>>> | TOTAL Credits | ON TRACK Regents | ON TRACK ADL | Transfer/Date | Transfer Reason | Special Ed. | Drop Out | Regents | Credits | Absences | Discipline |
|--------|------|-------|----|--------------------------------------|---------------|------------------|--------------|---------------|--|-------------|----------|---------|---------|----------|------------|
| 2007 | | | | 83 92 98 87 81 80 88 88 23 4 | 15.0 | 3 | 5 | | | No | NO | NO | NO | NO | NO |
| 2006 | | | | 69 71 95 90 82 84 86 86 12 18 0 | 17.5 | 4 | 4 | | | No | NO | NO | NO | NO | NO |
| 2008 | | | | 84 82 87 1 12 | 7.5 | 1 | 1 | | | No | NO | NO | NO | NO | NO |
| 2008 | | | | 15 1 | | | | | | Yes | NO | YES | NO | NO | NO |
| 2006 | | | | 87 80 49 81 85 85 80 80 19 1 24 | 20.5 | 3 | 4 | | | Yes | NO | YES | NO | YES | YES |
| 2009 | | | | 92 100 8 1 0 | 3.0 | 1 | 2 | | | No | NO | NO | NO | NO | NO |
| 2004 | | | | 28 0 | | | | 10/30/2008 | Long-term Absence(20 consecutive unexcused days) | No | YES | YES | YES | YES | NO |
| 2004 | | | | 8 68 68 0 77 80 80 0 0 5 | | 3 | 4 | 09/04/2008 | Left School: Previously Counted as a Dropout | No | YES | YES | YES | NO | NO |
| 2004 | | | | 82 86 90 91 77 85 83 82 100 83 4 1 1 | | 4 | 6 | | | No | NO | YES | YES | NO | NO |
| 2009 | | | | 87 87 2 2 1 | 1.5 | | | | | Yes | NO | YES | NO | NO | NO |
| 2009 | | | | 87 87 5 0 1 | 1.0 | | | | | No | NO | YES | NO | NO | NO |
| 2004 | | | | 87 73 70 74 88 86 85 86 80 80 1 0 | | 7 | 7 | | | No | NO | NO | YES | NO | NO |
| 2005 | | | | 80 77 72 85 81 81 81 77 88 2 1 2 | | 5 | 6 | | | No | NO | NO | YES | NO | NO |

For example, the Lockport City School District has boot-strapped in File Maker Pro a very useful cohort tracker tool that that allows guidance and administrative staff to track the graduation status of each cohort based on a set of critical factors: performance on Regents “gate” exams, total credits, foreign language, absences, tardies and discipline referrals. The system is color coded to identify students lagging or off track for graduation. It has alerts based on a student’s status related to disability, dropout, Regents exams, credits, absences and discipline. It can be sorted based on cohort year, graduation status and NCLB subgroup. (See screenshot above. Yellow indicates a student is lagging against a critical factor; red indicates the student is at-risk. Alerts are at right.)

Rob LiPuma, Lockport’s Director of Assessment & Technology and Chief Information Officer (CIO), has spearheaded the project. “Our guidance and administrative staff are working diligently to track the status of each cohort. And their efforts have borne fruit. We have improved our four-year graduation rates from 71% (2003 cohort) to 81% (2005 cohort). Cohort tracker was a critical capability facilitating that improvement.” What’s his biggest frustration? “My guidance and administrative colleagues are demanding greater accuracy in cohort tracker, and frankly we are having a challenging time getting up-to-date listings of official membership in each accountability cohort. There is simply no way to do so currently.”

The New York State Center for Rural Schools’ cohort tracker demonstration project

John Sipple, Director of The New York State Center for Rural Schools (NYSCRS), sees great promise in cohort tracker. “Whenever we meet with school district leadership and demonstrate Lockport’s cohort tracker, districts tell us they have a critical need for this

capability. So we are sponsoring a demonstration project to expand access to cohort tracker capability to other districts. The plan is to introduce an easy-to-use desktop application that does not require its users to have database skills or knowledge of FileMaker Pro or any similar database program.

“We at the NYSCRS are working with Prism Decision Systems, LLC and Decision Mechanics Limited to build a cohort tracker desktop application that will be available to up to twelve school districts in phase one. In phase two, we are hoping to expand access to other districts across the state, either through broader distribution of the desktop application or through a web service.

“However, the effectiveness of the cohort tracker application will clearly depend on the availability of up-to-date listings of official membership in each accountability cohort. To exploit the cohort tracker’s capability, school districts will need easy access to that data.”

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Sample cohort tracker fields

student ID

name

cohort year

ethnicity

disability status

economic status

ELL status

maximum score on each of five gate Regents exams

maximum score on Regents exams toward advanced diploma

L-prof

LOTE

total credits

attendance

tardies

discipline referrals

graduation status (still enrolled, graduated, dropped out, transfer to GED, received IEP certificate or diploma)