



# research digest

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## Alliances Help Educators Access, Analyze Dropout Data

The U.S. high school graduation rate increased by 5 percent between 2006/07 and 2009/10, from 73.2 to 78.2 percent.<sup>1</sup> While that's good news, roughly a quarter of the nation's students still don't graduate in four years, if at all. And some longstanding equity issues persist. For example, the 2011 graduation rates for students with disabilities and students learning English are as low as 25 to 30 percent in some states.

Graduation rates for the four West Region states—Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah—are lower than the national average, overall and/or among student subgroups. Addressing the issue is particularly challenging because these states also have some of the lowest rates of per-pupil spending in the country.

Two of the eight alliances of education stakeholders with whom REL West currently works have set a broad outcome goal of reducing the dropout rate in their states: The Dropout Prevention Alliance for Utah Students with Disabilities and the Nevada Education Research Alliance. Although they are approaching the problem in different ways, both alliances have committed to using data-based information to make decisions as they work toward goals. REL West is providing the alliances several kinds of technical assistance and research support on this front, from inventorying districts' existing databases, to customizing and delivering training on data collection tools and methods, to conducting studies to address critical questions.

### Early warning system in Utah

To better target its dropout prevention efforts, the Utah alliance is exploring effective ways to implement an early warning system (EWS) tool that identifies students at risk for not graduating from high school. Alliance membership comprises 14 schools (10 high schools, 3 middle schools, and 1 elementary school) and the Utah State Office of Education (USOE), in partnership with the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) and REL West.

An EWS is a data system that helps educators more easily access and use their data to monitor whether a student or a subgroup of students is on track to graduate. The Utah alliance is using one such tool, developed by the National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research (AIR), and customizing it for use by individual alliance schools and districts. Schools upload student information to the tool, including data they regularly collect such as attendance, disciplinary referrals, and course performance

*REL West Research Digest* keeps educators and others abreast of the research, data analysis, and technical assistance carried out by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West), including joint efforts with eight state and regional research alliances of education stakeholders in the West Region states of Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah. In addition to providing abstracts of selected REL West research reports, the twice-yearly digest may include descriptions of upcoming REL West work, services, and events in the West Region, or publications developed by other researchers.

*continued on page 2 >>*

and completion indicators. In addition to identifying individual students or subgroups for intervention, the data can point to schoolwide policies and practices that may contribute to students dropping out.<sup>2</sup>

REL West and AIR are providing technical assistance to alliance member schools and districts that includes a workshop on research, implementation requirements, and benefits related to EWS tools; and access to AIR personnel who customize the tool and assist with getting the tool up and running at the school site. REL West and AIR also offer ongoing support on a range of procedural and technical aspects of implementing an EWS, including collecting and analyzing data and creating and disseminating user-friendly reports.

Utah alliance members have noted that, even with a high level of support, getting an EWS functioning at the school level can be challenging. Confidentiality protections must be carefully maintained; there are incompatibility problems related to uploading data from various kinds of student information databases to the EWS tool; and school-level staff have limited time and skill to work with the tool.

Informal observations suggest that one element essential to successfully implementing an EWS may be a stable school-level team that can create and sustain momentum for ongoing weekly and monthly tasks. “Ideally,” says REL West Utah alliance liaison BethAnn Berliner, “this team includes a data person; a school or district point person who knows how the tool works; an administrator; at least one counselor; and both a special education and a general education teacher.” In addition, she says, the team collectively “must be committed to using the tool, have the time and skills to input and analyze data, and meet regularly to review data and figure out how to intervene with students.” District support, the alliance has learned, particularly in providing data in usable formats, is helpful for starting and sustaining implementation of an EWS.

As the Utah alliance looks toward the start of the 2013/14 school year, one immediate goal for EWS efforts is to get student data uploaded to each school’s EWS tool over the summer so that educators can work with their own schools’ data during fall training sessions on reviewing and analyzing data. Berliner says that “early observations

indicate that doing so sparks educator engagement and motivation to use the data.” Ideally, schools beginning EWS implementation this fall will have flagged their at-risk students by the end of the 2012/13 school year, she says, so they’re ready to intervene with them when they’ve completed the fall 2013 training. A longer-term alliance goal is to be able to look at early warning data before and after dropout prevention interventions to see which approaches are working.

## Nevada taps student views on dropping out

Increasing the state’s high school graduation rate is a top priority for the Nevada State Department of Education and many of its districts. The Nevada Education Research Alliance is addressing this issue in multiple ways. Alliance members include all of Nevada’s 17 school districts organized into three collaborative work groups (southern, northern, and rural), the Nevada State Department of Education, the University of Nevada-Reno (UNR), and REL West.

In one current initiative, Washoe County School District (WCSD), a member of the alliance’s northern work group, asked REL West to assist them in developing a set of tools educators could use to elicit “student voice”—student experiences and perspectives described in their own words—to inform specific school improvement efforts. An early product of WCSD and REL West’s joint work is a draft toolkit. WCSD’s toolkit includes four tools that incorporate approaches widely regarded as effective in promoting adult-student collaborative problem solving on important issues.

One of the tools, “Students Studying Students’ Stories” (S<sup>4</sup>), was used during 2012/13 by a team of teachers and students in a leadership class at an alternative high school. The focus of the semester-long project was to create a documentary video profiling high school students who have overcome significant personal, social, and academic obstacles to stay in high school. With teacher instruction and guidance, students in the S<sup>4</sup> project developed interview questions to draw out interviewees’ ideas about factors that helped them to remain in high school. They then conducted interviews

with several students who had been identified as being at risk of dropping out, at several schools, and videotaped and edited the interviews. The district has showcased the completed video to a group of high school counselors and will kick off the new school year by showing it to secondary principals in fall 2013.

Jennifer Harris, Program Evaluator for WCSD, observed that “The S<sup>4</sup> tool provided a structured way to elicit information from students that could be readily incorporated into various stakeholder discussions. It also created a synergy of ideas between students and adults that may affect future efforts to understand and address school problems and helped to bring awareness to adults in the district of a segment of students who are often invisible. The method of students interviewing other students elicited a level of honesty and openness from the interviewees that I don’t believe I would have been able to secure as an adult.”

Challenges to implementing the S<sup>4</sup> tool included high turnover in student participants over the semester, as well as several logistical issues related to the toolkit itself and its implementation at the school site. WCSD reported a continued commitment to use the toolkit, and staff expressed growing interest in the student voice approach from across the district, including principals, evaluators, the social-emotional learning coordinator, and counseling coordinator. WCSD has requested that REL West help convene a meeting in fall 2013 to assess successes and challenges to date as a starting point for charting an intentional and integrated path forward for use of the toolkit.

## Endnotes

1. Provisional data file: SY2010/11 four-year regulatory adjusted cohort graduation rates. (2012). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
2. Osher, D., Spier, E., Kendziora, K., & Cai, C. (2009, April 14). *Improving academic achievement through improving school climate and student connectedness*. American Institutes for Research. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA.

## REL West Co-Sponsored Event on Common Core Draws 220

On June 25 and 26, 220 educators and other stakeholders attended “Moving Forward: Common Core State Standards Implementation and Assessment,” a conference co-sponsored by REL West at WestEd, the California Collaborative on District Reform at AIR, and California Education Partners. The event, held in Los Angeles, featured multiple opportunities for teams at all stages of CCSS implementation to learn from experts and each other, engage in discussion and planning activities, and set or refine next steps.

Breakout sessions highlighted district and county office of education efforts to plan and implement new instructional and assessment practices, including implications for strategic planning, professional development, special populations, non-core subjects, technology, and other topics of interest. For further detail and conference materials, go to: <http://relwest2012.herokuapp.com/events/153>

## New in our webinar archive

### Assessment of the Common Core State Standards: Lessons Learned and Promising Practices

Presented by: REL West and the California Office to Reform Education (CORE) Alliance

Drawing on the recently published brief *Learning from the Past: Exploring California’s CLAS Experience to Inform Assessment of the Common Core*, the webinar included key lessons learned, and featured work currently taking place in CORE participating districts to develop and pilot classroom-level assessment modules.

June 4, 2013; 90 minutes

Link to archived webinar and downloadable webinar materials:

<http://relwest.wested.org/events/143>

## Publications on Dropout Prevention from RELs and Others

### REL West

#### ***Reenrollment of High School Dropouts in a Large, Urban School District***

This study follows a cohort of first-time 9th graders in one large urban school district from 2001/02 to 2005/06 and documents their dropout, reenrollment, and graduation rates. (2008)

### REL Midwest

#### ***Using the Freshman On-Track Indicator to Predict Graduation in Two Urban Districts in the Midwest Region***

Among key findings: on-track status was a significant predictor of on-time graduation, even after controlling for student background characteristics and grade 8 achievement test scores. (2012)

### California Dropout Research Project

The California Dropout Research Project synthesizes existing research and undertakes new research to inform policymakers, educators, and the general public about the nature of the dropout crisis in California and to help the state develop a meaningful policy agenda to address the problem.

### National Center for Learning Disabilities

#### ***Diplomas at risk: A critical look at the graduation rate of students with learning disabilities***

This report makes key recommendations at the federal and state level to improve the graduation rate of students with specific learning disabilities, and to assure consistency and comparability in the graduation data for the subgroup of students with disabilities. (2013)

### Editorial Projects in Education Research Center

#### ***Second Chances: Turning Dropouts into Graduates***

Part of the Diplomas Count project, this June 2013 analysis of high school completion from the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center finds that the graduation rate for America's public schools stands just below 75 percent for the class of 2010. The report describes dropout recovery efforts and trends nationwide.

### National Center for Homeless Education

#### ***Supporting the Education of Unaccompanied Homeless Students (Updated brief)***

This brief provides background, guidelines, and resources for working with homeless students. (Updated 2013)

## ASK • A • REL

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