

## EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: March 31, 2009

Published in Print: April 1, 2009

# Rules Allowing Extended Time on Graduation

## Advocates Debate Effects of Change in Regulations

By **Catherine Gewertz**

Federal regulations have opened a door that allows schools to get credit under the No Child Left Behind Act for students who take longer than four years to earn a high school diploma. But that option worries some education advocates, who fear it could relieve valuable pressure on high schools to graduate students on time.

Under the law's accountability provisions, students who don't graduate in four years count against schools' graduation rates. Many educators have complained that such an approach punishes schools that go the extra mile to keep students from dropping out or to lure back those who have left school.

Several states have now applied for federal permission to use extended-year rates, according to the U.S.

Department of Education. Only one state, Washington, has permission to use them, as the **result of a waiver** granted in 2005.

In a recent interview, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan declined to say whether he would change **the regulations**, issued last October by his predecessor, Margaret Spellings, that allow extended-year rates. But his comments strongly suggested that he believes schools should get some credit for students who take more than four years to get a diploma.

"In an ideal world, students graduate in four years," Mr. Duncan said. "[A]nd to be clear, you never ever want to bend in that. ... Having said that, what I worry about is if you only do the four-year rate, you, I think, create some unintended consequences, or some disincentives for schools to really work with those students that are struggling, ... and those are exactly the kids that obviously need the most help.

"You want to really reward the schools that do a great job of helping those students who are most at risk. So you need to balance there. While [graduating in] three years is magical, and four is great, five is good, too," the secretary said on March 13. "There's nothing sacred about four."

In a bid to illuminate how well high schools are serving students, the revised regulations tighten up the rules governing how states must calculate and report graduation rates, and how they will be held to account for them. The highest-profile change requires states to depict their graduation rates the same way: as the proportion of each incoming freshman class that earns standard diplomas four years later. Previously, states could decide for themselves how to calculate their graduation rates.

### Extended Year

Under the 7-year-old NCLB law, high schools are judged by their test scores and graduation rates.

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Whether they make adequate yearly progress, or AYP, has depended on their schoolwide graduation rates and test scores, and on the test scores of students in specific ethnic and socioeconomic subgroups. The new regulations require high schools to be judged on their graduation rates by subgroup, also. That means that a high school that doesn't meet state graduation-rate targets for one or more subgroups could fail to make AYP, putting it on a clock for potential intervention.

The revised regulations allow states to apply for permission to use one or more "extended year" rates alongside their respective four-year rates, which would allow the states to get some credit for students who took five or more years to complete high school. **Guidance issued**  by the Education Department in December cautioned, however, that states' proposals should show that they would assign "predominant" weight to their four-year rates.

The guidance laid out a couple of scenarios to do that. A state could assign an 80 percent weight to its four-year rate and a 20 percent weight to its extended-year rate. Or it could set a "more aggressive" annual-improvement target for the five-year rate than for the four-year.

Louisiana is already using its own version of a weighted approach for its state accountability system. Its graduation-rate index assigns points for various student outcomes, from zero for a dropout and 90 points for a General Educational Development certificate to 120 for a regular diploma and up to 180 for a diploma with additional endorsements. Under that matrix, schools earn a better score for taking more time to help students earn diplomas than they do if students drop out.

Eighteen states already use a four-year-cohort calculation that the **National Governors Association urged** in 2005, and which all 50 governors have agreed to use eventually. That approach allows selected English-language learners and students with disabilities to be reassigned into the following year's cohort, essentially letting them take five years to graduate.

Some advocates worry that because the federal regulations set no clear requirements on how the separate four-year and extended-year rates should interact, states could win the right to use formulas that place too much weight on the longer rates. That approach, they say, could essentially lower the pressure on schools to ensure that the overwhelming majority of students graduate in four years.

"We need to be careful," said Dane Linn, the director of

## Leaving High School

Regulations issued late last year by the U.S. Department of Education made key changes in the graduation-rate requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. Among the highlights:

### States May:

- Apply for permission from the U.S. secretary of education to use one or more "extended year" graduation rates in addition to the separate four-year rate. States must show that their use of the multiple rates is designed to graduate the vast majority of their students in four years.

- Include summer graduates in their graduation-rate calculation.

### States Must:

- Use the four-year adjusted-cohort method of calculating their graduation rates and report the data by the 2010-11 school year.

- Use the four-year adjusted-cohort method to determine adequate yearly progress, or AYP, under the No Child Left Behind law by 2011-12.

- Report those rates, at the school, district, and state levels, in the aggregate and by subgroup, for determinations of adequate yearly progress.

- Count as graduates only those who receive a "regular high school diploma."

- Have written confirmation of transfer, emigration, or death to remove a student from the graduation-rate cohort calculation.

- Have a single, long-term graduation-rate goal for all schools.

- Set aggressive yearly graduation-rate improvement targets. To make AYP, schools and districts must meet their states' graduation-rate goals or show "continuous and substantial improvement" in their

the education division of the NGA's Center for Best Practices. "An extended-year rate for 1 percent of the kids today can turn into 12 percent of the kids tomorrow. We can't yield to pressure that lots of kids need extra time, when all they might need is extra support to finish the requirements."

graduation rates.

Source: Federal Title I regulations and guidance

### **Benefits for Students**

Massachusetts, which calculates four-year and five-year rates for its state accountability system, has found that traditionally disadvantaged groups of students benefit the most from having a fifth year.

In 2007, the state's four-year graduation rate—for the group of students who entered as freshmen in 2003—was 81 percent. A year later, the five-year rate was 84 percent, state data show. For Hispanic students, the difference between the four- and five-year rates was 5.9 percentage points. Among those with limited English skills, it was 7.5 points; for African-American males, the difference was 7.6 points.

"Obviously, those students are benefiting from an additional year," said JC Considine, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Department of Education. "We think it's important to be able to reflect that in our reporting."

But Massachusetts has been unable to get credit for those additional diplomas under the federal accountability system; the U.S. Education Department last year rejected its proposal to factor in the five-year rate.

Washington state is the only state that is allowed to use an extended-year rate for federal accountability purposes.

"For us, it was the right thing to do," said Bob Harmon, the state education department's assistant superintendent for special programs and federal accountability. "The standard graduation-rate calculation only allowed for a four-year cohort to be calculated, and that might work for the majority of students ... but it doesn't get at what I think is the whole purpose, the heart and soul, of No Child Left Behind: those students who are successful, but not necessarily successful in a four-year time frame."

Washington's experience shows that statewide, relatively few students take the extra year to graduate. But among some subgroups, and in some districts, the proportions are larger.

In 2005-06, the most recent year for which data were available, Washington state's four-year graduation rate was 70.4 percent. The five-year rate was 75.1 percent, or 4.7 percentage points more.

The five-year rates for key subgroups were even higher: for African-American students and low-income students, 6.8 percentage points more; for Hispanics, 7.8 percentage points; for those with limited English, 10.7 percentage points; and for students in special education, 13.9 percentage points.

Most Washington state districts showed five-year rates that were 3 to 7 percentage points higher than their four-year rates, but for one, the extended rate was nearly 15 percentage points more.

Education groups eyeing the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind law by Congress are trying to figure out a "next-generation" accountability system that delivers the right pressure and credit to high schools, and the right opportunities to students. They are asking not only how to assign weights

to the four- and five-year graduation rates, but how to balance graduation-rate and test-score information in determining high schools' performance.

A **bill** sponsored by U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, proposes that every school graduate 90 percent of its students in four years in order to make AYP. Rep. Robert C. Scott, D-Va., introduced a companion measure in the U.S. House on the same day, March 17.

Bethany M. Little, who worked with the two lawmakers on the bills as the vice president for federal policy and development for the Alliance for Excellent Education, a Washington-based group that advocates high school improvement, said the proposed 90 percent requirement addresses the concern that too many students would be allowed to take extra time to graduate.

Ms. Little, who is now the top education advisor to the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, said the proposal is based on the fact that "almost nowhere" are schools finding that more than 10 percent of students need the longer timetable.

The alliance also advocates giving test scores and graduation rates equal weight under a reauthorized NCLB, so that schools have equal incentives to graduate their students and to raise their test scores.

### **'Tricky' Policy Issue**

Some of those debating the extended-year provision in the Education Department regulations worry that it could let subgroups of disadvantaged students slide into a fifth year, when they might finish in four with better supports. Research shows better life outcomes for students who graduate in four years than for those who take longer, they note.

The Education Department's December guidance appears to respond to that concern when it says that extended-year rates may not be used "to account only for students in particular subgroups (e.g., only a five-year graduation rate for students with disabilities)."

Daria L. Hall, the director of K-12 policy development for Education Trust, which promotes better education for poor schoolchildren, called the extended-year debate "one of the trickier policy conversations we've been involved in for a while."

She said she worries that it might not be possible to create sound policy without knowing what portions of students need more time and why. That question is further complicated, she said, because the need varies from school to school.

"You could have 25 percent [of students needing five years to graduate] in some places and 2 percent in others," she said. "Is it best to craft policy broadly if we assume kids who need more time are evenly distributed? Or should it be more targeted to sets of schools that serve populations that need more time?"

George H. Wood, the principal of Federal Hocking Middle and High School in Stewart, Ohio, described the frustration many educators feel when their schools are penalized for students who take longer than four years to graduate.

"We get dinged for taking a risk on a tough kid," he said at a forum in Washington last fall on dropout prevention.

"Say we have an 18-year-old, with six or seven credits, just out of the justice system," Mr. Wood said. "He takes off. Even if we find him and get him to earn a diploma, we still get dinged [under

federal accountability rules]. How is that consistent with trying to get all kids to earn diplomas?"

*Coverage of pathways to college and careers is underwritten in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.*

Vol. 28, Issue 27, Pages 1,16-17