

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### Graduation Rates Latest NCLB Waiver Flash Point

#### Some say flexibility on NCLB could dilute accountability

By [Michele McNeil](#)


A growing chorus of education policy advocates is urging the U.S. Department of Education to strengthen graduation-rate accountability in states that have earned waivers under the [No Child Left Behind Act](#).

In separate letters last month to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, a group of 36 civil rights, business, and education policy groups, along with U.S. Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., say they are concerned that many states' approved flexibility plans violate the spirit—if not the letter—of 2008 regulations that require all states to calculate the graduation rate in the same way and make those rates an important factor in high school accountability.

What's more, those groups and Rep. Miller warn that in many states, graduation rates—especially for groups of at-risk students—are such a minor part of the new accountability systems that getting students to successfully finish high school may take a back seat to other factors, such as performance on tests.

An *Education Week* review of the 35 approved waiver applications shows approaches to graduation-rate accountability vary significantly.

- Two states use the number of students that earn General Educational Development certificates, or GEDs, as part of their accountability system. In South Dakota, 12.5 percent of a school's grade is based on high school completion, which includes those earning a GED diploma. Louisiana awards a small number of points to schools for the GED certificates their students earn.
- Several states allow schools to take credit in their grading systems for students who take longer than four or five years to graduate. Colorado, for example, allows for a seven-year graduation rate.
- The weight that states afford to graduation rates in their accountability systems varies greatly. In Michigan's system, graduation rates are worth just 10 percent in the state's top-to-bottom ranking of schools; in Kentucky, rates are worth 20 percent of a school's grade; and Nevada, 30 percent.

"An erosion of the bipartisan progress made in the area of high school graduation-rate accountability is an unacceptable byproduct of this [waiver] policy," states the Sept. 21 letter  from the business, civil rights, and education groups, which include the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Council of La Raza, and the National School Boards Association.

In his [letter](#) from the same day to Secretary Duncan, Mr. Miller, the senior Democrat on the House Education and the Workforce Committee, wrote: "Of most immediate concern are those new state

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#### Calculating Completion

A number of states that have received waivers from provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act are using graduation rates in different ways as part of their accountability systems. A sampling:

##### COLORADO

Allows schools to use a four-, five-, six-, or seven-year graduation rate—whichever is highest—in the state's new performance framework. Graduation rates for all students is one of four college- and career-readiness indicators that in total make up

accountability systems approved by [the Education Department] that I believe undermine the role of graduation rates in determining school performance, are not supported by research or best practice, and erode the recent progress states have made on improving graduation rates."

Education Department officials had no additional comment on the graduation-rate issue and pointed to a spokesman's statement from last month in response to Mr. Miller's letter. "We will vigilantly monitor states to make sure their kids are getting over the bar and graduating them," said department press secretary Justin Hamilton at that time.

#### **Four Years and Beyond**

The concern over graduation rates is the latest in a series of sharp critiques by advocacy groups raising alarms about the waivers. Already, several states are defending their new accountability systems because, as the federal rules permit, they are setting different school performance benchmarks by race and ethnicity.

The waivers under the NCLB law allow states the freedom to design their own differentiated accountability systems that do not revolve around the original goal of 100 percent proficiency for all students in math and reading by the end of the 2013-14 school year. In exchange for having significant parts of the original law waived, states have to commit to intervening in the 15 percent of the lowest-performing schools, focus on closing achievement gaps, and implement teacher- and principal-evaluation systems that are based in part on student performance.

The flexibility offered to states, which comes as Congress remains overdue in reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, of which the NCLB law is the current version, did not waive the 2008 graduation-rate regulations.

According to the regulations put in place by then-Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, who served in the George W. Bush administration, the graduation rate is defined as the number of students who finish high school with a regular diploma within four years. The regulations allow for the addition of an extended-year graduation rate so schools could receive credit for getting students over the finish line in more than four years. But generally, the department also required states to set more ambitious goals for those extended-year rates. And most states didn't exceed a five-year rate anyway, policy advocates say.

In addition, the regulations made graduation rates a crucial factor in accountability. Schools had to meet their state's graduation goal for all students and subgroups of at-risk students, or make improvement, in order to make adequate yearly progress under the NCLB law.

"What's most concerning is the number of states and the variety of ways in which graduation-rate accountability is being implemented that is different from graduation-rate accountability as envisioned under the 2008 regulations," said Phillip Lovell, the vice president of federal advocacy for the Washington-based Alliance for Excellent Education, which works on high school issues and signed on to the September letter. "The states would only have to make, in most instances, modest modifications to their accountability systems to fix these graduation-rate problems. Little changes could have a big impact."

#### **What the Plans Show**

The waiver plans show that states are, for the most part, reporting their four-year graduation rate as

35 percent of a school's grade.

#### **LOUISIANA**

Twenty-five percent of a school's grade is based on the four-year graduation rate, and 25 percent is based on a "graduation index" that awards points for students who get advanced diplomas but also who earn GEDs.

#### **MICHIGAN**

Graduation rates will account for 16.7 percent of a school's total score; 10 percent of the state's top-to-bottom ranking of schools that determine certain interventions. Schools will be able to use the highest of a four-, five-, or six-year rate once enough years are available to make those calculations.

#### **NEW YORK**

Schools that are not already "priority" or "focus" schools will have to meet the 80 percent statewide graduation goal or make progress toward those goals, based on a four- or five-year graduation rate. If at least one student subgroup in a school does not meet those targets, the school will qualify for interventions as a "local assistance-plan school."

#### **SOUTH DAKOTA**

A school's four-year graduation rate makes up 12.5 percent of a school's grade and a high school "completer" rate that includes students who earn GED certificates makes up 12.5 percent.

Source: Approved Waiver Applications

required—but that in many cases, these graduation rates may be watered down by other factors, such as when states use extended-year rates or introduce separate measures that allow schools to get credit for GED recipients.

In Colorado's case, college- and career-readiness indicators count for 35 percent of a high school's grade, and graduation rates are a part of that broader indicator. The state includes schools' and districts' four-year graduation rates, but also counts five-, six-, and seven-year graduation rates in its accountability system.

"It's not just about giving credit, but making sure we've created an accountability system that incentivizes schools and districts to ensure students are postsecondary and workforce ready, regardless of the time they need to get there," said Colorado department of education spokeswoman Megan McDermott. "We don't want an accountability system that says, 'If you can't do it in four years, then it doesn't count.'" In the more than a dozen states that have adopted letter grading or point systems for evaluating schools, graduation rates count for less than a third of a school's grade.

Michigan, in its waiver application, explained the 10 percent weight it gives to graduation rates this way: "Although graduation rate is an important indicator, [the state] feels that placing too much emphasis on graduation incentivizes schools and districts to graduate students who are not proficient, and therefore not considered career- and college-ready."

When states submitted their initial waiver applications, outside peer reviewers found significant problems with many of the states' graduation-rate accountability plans.

The Education Department, however, didn't always adhere to the reviewers' suggestions.

In South Dakota, for instance, the peer reviewers recommended that the state forgo using a "completer" rate that included those who earned a GED diploma or another certificate of completion (such as those who fulfilled the requirements of an Individual Education Plan). South Dakota made some changes, but the department allowed the state to keep its completer rate and include only GED certificates.

And in Michigan, although peer reviewers were concerned about the low weight given to graduation rates, the department allowed the state to keep the weighting at 10 percent in one part of its accountability system, but the state agreed to make the rates worth 16.7 percent in another part of its accountability system.

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