High School Graduation and Dropout Data

California's New Database May Enable the State to Better Serve Its High School Students Who Are at Risk of Dropping Out

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This report concludes how, through the use of a unique student identifier, the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) allows the California Department of Education (department) to track a student's progress from when he or she enters high school to when he or she exits, and thus allows the department to calculate precise graduation and dropout rates for a particular cohort of students. Data from CALPADS compares favorably to older data, which is based on schools' aggregate counts of graduates and dropouts. In August 2011 the department used CALPADS to report graduation and dropout rates for the first cohort of students tracked from the 2006–07 through the 2009–10 school year. The department reported that this cohort graduated at an overall rate of 74 percent. However, the data shows a divide in graduation rates between various demographic groups. Specifically, African-American students, Hispanic or Latino students, and students of lower socioeconomic status generally dropped out of school at rates higher than their peers. By establishing this baseline, we believe the rates generated from CALPADS will prove useful for encouraging data-driven decision making in meeting the needs of all students.

We also conclude that there is room to increase the utility of CALPADS and improve the quality of data reported into CALPADS. School personnel varied in the extent to which they verified the reasons a student exited high school, in part because they did not consistently follow the department's guidance. Additionally, several districts reported that the process of uploading data into CALPADS can be time-consuming and some districts stated that maintaining and updating CALPADS requires significantly more resources than previously required to report data to the State. Furthermore, because the funding for CALPADS is primarily focused on meeting state and federal reporting requirements, the State may risk missing opportunities to be more innovative in using its longitudinal data.

In the report, the California State Auditor (state auditor) made the following recommendations to the department. The state auditor's determination regarding the current status of recommendations is based on the department's response to the state auditor as of September 2012.

Recommendation 1—See pages 26—30 of the audit report for information on the related finding.

To increase consistency, the department should remind schools and school districts of the importance of aligning their procedures for recording pupil enrollment and exit data with the *CALPADS Data Guide*.

> *Department's Action: Fully implemented.*
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> According to the department, it distributes a letter to local educational agencies every fall with a reminder of the upcoming data collection cycle. On September 14, 2012, the department issued correspondence to all school district superintendents, county office superintendents, and charter school administrators reminding them of the importance of reporting data accurately and directing them to guidance on data submission available on the department's Web site at www.cde.ca.gov/calpads, under the *System Documentation* link.

Recommendation 2—See pages 30 and 31 of the audit report for information on the related finding.

To improve efficiency, the department should inform school districts of the value of frequently updating the data they transfer from their local student information systems to CALPADS. Also, to the extent that departments become aware of ways that schools and school districts can perform CALPADS-related activities more efficiently, it should provide written guidance to schools and school districts on these best practices.

Department's Action: Fully implemented.

In correspondence issued on September 14, 2012, the department reminded school districts that data is used for multiple purposes throughout the year and emphasized the importance of updating the data school districts' transfer from their local student information systems to CALPADS. According to the department, if it becomes aware of new efficiencies for performing CALPADS-related activities, it will update existing guidance that is available on the department's Web site accordingly.

Recommendation 3—See pages 32 and 33 of the audit report for information on the related finding.

To improve the utility of CALPADS and fulfill the legislative intent of the system, the department should work with the Legislature, the State Board of Education, and the governor to identify priorities for building upon the system when funding is available. These priorities could include tracking student participation in dropout prevention programs or strategies to measure the effectiveness of those programs or strategies over time.

Department's Action: Partially implemented.

The department stated that it has engaged stakeholders, including State Board of Education staff and legislative staff, regarding how CALPADS can be used now and in the future. However, according to the department, existing budget language specifically restricts the department from adding any additional data elements to CALPADS at this time. Therefore, the department stated that the discussions it has held with stakeholders have been related to how currently collected data might be used and how CALPADS may be further utilized if additional funding becomes available and budget language is changed to be less restrictive.

Legislative Action: Legislation vetoed.

Senate Bill 1497 (as enrolled August 30, 2012) of the 2011–12 Regular Legislative Session, if enacted, would have prohibited a pupil from being included and reported more than once in data on pupil dropout rates produced by CALPADS and reported by the Superintendent of Public Instruction. This bill was vetoed by the governor on September 26, 2012.