

LEGISLATIVE AUDIT DIVISION

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Legislative Audit Committee Members
FROM: Angie Grove, Deputy Legislative Auditor
CC: Denise Juneau, Superintendent, Office of Public Instruction
Madalyn Quinlan, Chief of Staff
Donna O'Neill, Administrator, Measurement and Accountability Division
DATE: March 2009
RE: Performance Audit Follow-up 08SP-10: The Collection and Use of Graduate and Dropout Data (orig. 06P-11)
ATTACHMENT: Original Performance Audit Summary

INTRODUCTION

In June 2006, we presented our performance audit on the Collection and Use of Graduate and Dropout Data. The audit made three recommendations to the Office of Public Instruction (OPI). We initially began gathering data on OPI's progress in implementing the recommendations in July of 2007; however, due to the fact that OPI was still in the process of establishing data collection activities in the Achievement in Montana (AIM) student data collection system, we postponed follow-up work until December of 2008. AIM is the student data collection system OPI is developing to address the recommendations of the audit. This memo summarizes the results of our follow-up work in addition to presenting background information on OPI's data collection for secondary graduate and dropout data.

Overview

Audit recommendations focused on establishing a quality assurance system to include technical assistance to school districts and guidelines for data verification, and a plan for accessing and disseminating graduation and dropout student data in the AIM system. The Office of Public Instruction has implemented all three recommendations.

BACKGROUND

Based on both state and federal law requirements, OPI obtains data on student graduate and dropout data. State requirements indicate that schools must examine program effectiveness through graduation and dropout rates. Under the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), states are held accountable for student performance. While student achievement must be the primary indicator of performance under NCLB, at the secondary school level an additional academic indicator required is the high school graduation rate. The Legislative Audit Committee prioritized a performance audit of Montana's high school graduate and dropout data collection activities.

FOLLOW-UP AUDIT FINDINGS

As part of follow-up work, we interviewed agency officials and statewide education stakeholders, examined AIM system materials and data verification procedures, and conducted a survey of school district personnel responsible for reporting graduation and dropout data in the AIM system. The survey was sent to 361 school district personnel; 103 individuals completed the survey, for a response rate of approximately 30 percent. The survey assessed the progress OPI is making in implementing the recommendations of the audit report. The complete results of the survey have been provided to OPI. The following summarizes information relating to follow-up audit work and the implementation status of recommendations. The performance audit report contained three recommendations to OPI.

Recommendation #1

We recommend the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) establish a quality assurance system that includes:

- A. On-site technical assistance training on status code procedures and requirements.**
- B. Random verification of status coding and data submitted.**

Implementation Status – Implemented

Technical Assistance

OPI provided on-site regional trainings in 12 locations across Montana in the fall of 2007. The trainings covered the procedures and requirements for reporting graduation and dropout student data in the AIM system, including the appropriate use of “enrollment end status codes.” These codes are the means by which school district personnel responsible for student information submit graduation and dropout data into the AIM system. In the fall of 2008, OPI again provided regional trainings for school district staff; OPI also utilized conference calls devoted to specific topics in the AIM system. It is OPI’s hope to offer regional trainings on an annual basis, as resources and staff time allow. In addition, there are various online training resources for school district personnel relative to entering graduation and dropout data in the AIM system located on the OPI website. The material includes guidance on enrollment end status codes. The material also includes “student exiting scenarios” which provide various situations and the appropriate enrollment end status code to use.

Survey results indicated a high level of satisfaction on the part of school district personnel regarding the training provided by OPI. Over 70 percent of respondents indicated they have attended training offered by OPI, with over 85 percent indicating the training included the use of enrollment end status codes to appropriately capture graduation and dropout data. Nearly 85 percent of respondents found the training to be useful or very useful. Sixty-seven percent of respondents indicated they have utilized the online training resources available from OPI, with over 70 percent indicating the material was useful or very useful. One hundred percent of the respondents indicated OPI is available to answer questions if needed.

Data Verification

In the area of data verification, OPI staff report there are over 70 data elements which they review in the AIM system, including graduation and dropout data. From a global perspective, OPI staff report that data verification is done via queries in the AIM system and by cross-referencing AIM data with school district financial information. There are also a number of template reports which individual districts may run from the AIM system to verify their own district information.

Relative to graduation and dropout data, OPI staff review and verify *all* student graduation and dropout data. They utilize an annual “push-back” report where they take a data snapshot in the system, print out a

list of graduate and dropout data for a district from a single point in time, and mail it to the school district for review and verification. A representative from the school district will then review and sign off on the data and mail back to OPI. Based on a review of a random sample of “push-back” reports, it appears that OPI does utilize a “push-back” report to verify the accuracy of graduation and dropout data. Of the reports reviewed, 100 percent included the signature of the district representative. Based on our review, we can conclude that OPI does utilize a process to verify the accuracy of graduation and dropout data; however, our review does not confirm the accuracy of the information.

In terms of our survey, 100 percent of respondents indicated they received guidance from OPI relative to data verification of graduation and dropout data in the AIM system. Nearly 90 percent indicated phone calls were the primary form of guidance. About 70 percent indicated the overall guidance from OPI was understandable. However, over 50 percent of respondents described training for data verification as an area for improvement for OPI.

Recommendation #2

We recommend OPI incorporate into its guidelines that schools verify and document home school registration and GED test information.

Implementation Status – Implemented

To address this recommendation, OPI provides guidance to school districts for home school and GED students in the form of “enrollment end status codes” and “student exiting scenarios” which OPI developed for the AIM system. Relative to home school registration, parents are required by law to notify the county superintendent of home-schooled students (section 20-5-109, MCA). However, there is no enforcement process, and no way for school districts to accurately verify home school status. OPI staff believes home school verification is outside of the scope of their responsibility and enforcement. The issue of home schooling is a sensitive topic for OPI, with concerns regarding overstepping their boundaries with students who are not enrolled in formal school setting. As for GED test information, there is a specific “enrollment end status code” for when a student withdraws to enroll in a nondiploma program, such as a GED. This code identifies a student who chooses to pursue a GED as a dropout. There is no additional verification process.

Relative to our survey, over 60 percent of school district respondents indicated they have not received guidance to verify home school and GED status in the AIM system. Only 49 percent of respondents characterized the guidance as useful or very useful. This information has been provided to OPI officials.

Recommendation #3

We recommend OPI establish a plan for accessing and disseminating the data in the new student information system.

Implementation Status – Implemented

From a statewide perspective, OPI posts student data reports to its website, including an aggregate report on graduation and dropout data in Montana. Those resources are available to anyone. At the level of the school district, there are several template and ad-hoc reports which district-level staff may generate from the AIM system to examine student data, including graduation and dropout data. According to OPI officials, each district only has access to the data from its own district and also controls the level of data access at the district level. Beyond these resources, if an individual or organization requests unique data not located on the OPI website, the agency has a process for requesting the data. The OPI *Student Records Confidentiality Policy* considers the privacy of student data relative to the request. The policy outlines the

process and criteria to be considered for data requests. The privacy of individual student data is the primary concern of the policy.

Interviews of statewide education stakeholders from the Montana School Board Association and the Montana Board of Public Education indicated the current statewide aggregate data reports available on the OPI website generally satisfy their needs.

Nearly 90 percent of school district survey respondents indicated the AIM system provides reporting tools for accessing and reviewing graduation and dropout data, with nearly 70 percent citing student reports as having been the most utilized. Nearly 60 percent characterize the reporting tools as useful; however, nearly 50 percent indicated the format of data reports as an area for improvement on the part of OPI. This information has been provided to OPI officials.

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