



ACCOUNTING FOR EVERY STUDENT

A Taxonomy for Standard Student Exit Codes

National Cooperative Education Statistics System

The National Center for Education Statistics established the National Cooperative Education Statistics System (Cooperative System) to assist in producing and maintaining comparable and uniform information and data on early childhood education and elementary and secondary education. These data are intended to be useful for policymaking at the federal, state, and local levels.

The National Forum on Education Statistics, among other activities, proposes principles of good practice to assist state and local education agencies in meeting this purpose. The Cooperative System and the National Forum on Education Statistics are supported in these endeavors by resources from the National Center for Education Statistics.

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February 2006

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The Forum World Wide Web Home Page is <http://nces.ed.gov/forum>

Suggested Citation:

National Forum on Education Statistics. (2006). *Accounting for Every Student: A Taxonomy for Standard Student Exit Codes* (NFES 2006–804). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

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Technical Contact:

Lee Hoffman

202–502–7356

Lee.Hoffman@ed.gov



Task Force Members

This document was developed through the National Cooperative Education Statistics System and funded by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education. A volunteer task force of the National Forum on Education Statistics (an entity of the National Cooperative Education Statistics System) produced this document. The Exit Codes Task Force members are:

CHAIR

Wesley Bruce

Assistant Superintendent
Indiana Department of Education
Indianapolis, Indiana

MEMBERS

Roth Aymond

Information Technology Deputy Director
Planning, Analysis and Information Resources
Louisiana Department of Education
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Robert Curtin

Supervisor of Data Analysis and Reporting
Massachusetts Department of Education
Malding, Massachusetts

Martha Haynes

Senior Educational Program Director
Florida Department of Education
Tallahassee, Florida

Judith Holt

Associate Division Director
Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services
National Center for Education Statistics
Washington, DC

Steven King

Data Unit Director
Wyoming Department of Education
Cheyenne, Wyoming

Bunny Mack

Education Associate, Office of Research
South Carolina Department of Education
Columbia, South Carolina

Craig Neuenswander

Superintendent
Unified School District 257
Iola, Kansas

Deborah Newby

Project Director, Data Quality and Standards
Council of Chief State School Officers
Washington, DC

Mary Pat Olsen

Project Manager/Team Leader
Information Technology
Minnesota Department of Education
Roseville, Minnesota

Madalyn Quinlan

Chief of Staff
Montana Office of Public Instruction
Helena, Montana



CONSULTING AUTHORS

Tara McLarnon

Senior Associate
Council of Chief State School Officers
Washington, DC

Beth Young

Education Research Consultant
Quality Information Partners
Fairfax, Virginia

Tom Szuba

Education Research Consultant
Quality Information Partners
Charlottesville, Virginia

PROJECT OFFICER

Lee Hoffman

National Center for Education Statistics
Washington, DC





Acknowledgments

The Exit Codes Task Force of the National Forum on Education Statistics wishes to thank everyone who took the time to make valuable recommendations and suggestions to ensure that this guide would meet the needs of its intended audiences. Thanks are particularly due to the following individuals who reviewed various drafts of this document:

Janet Emerick
Superintendent
Lake Central School Corporation
St. John, Indiana

Kenneth Gu
Senior Information Officer
Rhode Island Department of Education
Providence, Rhode Island

Susan VanGorden
District EMIS Coordinator
Lakota Local School District
Liberty Township, Ohio

The Task Force also acknowledges the support of **Lee Hoffman** of NCES, **Christopher Chapman** of NCES and **Celia Sims** of the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education provided early support to the task force.

Frances Erlebacher edited the document and The Creative Shop provided layout and design services.



Foreword

The National Forum on Education Statistics (Forum) is a cooperative of state, local, and federal education agencies. The goal of Forum activities is to improve the quality of education data gathered for use by policymakers and programmatic decisionmakers.

One approach to furthering this goal has been to pool the collective experiences of Forum members to produce “best practice” guides in areas of high interest to those who collect, maintain, and use data about elementary and secondary school students. Standardizing the way data systems record changes in student enrollment—that is, developing common exit codes—is one of those areas.

In reviewing the existing literature about dropout and graduation rates, Forum members determined that there was a real need for a common format for reporting when students transferred, completed high school, dropped out, or otherwise changed their enrollment status. In response to this need, in 2004 the Forum established a task force to develop such a standardized format.

This guide is the product of the task force’s efforts. Chapter 1 defines exit codes and reviews their use in an education agency. It discusses the need for a taxonomy that accounts for 100 percent of enrolled students, and explains how the taxonomy was developed. Chapter 2 presents the taxonomy, provides detailed information on each category and subcategory, and describes a general analysis on how existing state exit codes fit into the taxonomy. Chapter 3 discusses special challenges in tracking students. Testing the taxonomy against existing state exit codes revealed many variances in how states classify the enrollment status of students. Key issues identified were the classification of homeschooled students, incarcerated youth, and students enrolled in General Educational Development (GED) programs. Chapter 4 highlights effective practices in tracking students. Chapter 5 focuses on issues that distinguish between graduates and completers. This is an important task because of the wide range of completion options available to students and the interest in producing graduation rates and dropout rates that are comparable across states. Readers who want more information on the crosswalk of existing state exit codes into the taxonomy will find that information in the appendix.

The Task Force and Forum hope this guide will contribute to improving the quality and the usefulness of data collected for and about students in our nation’s schools.





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CHAPTER 1 : Introduction

Today’s public education agencies are being held accountable for student achievement to an unprecedented extent. The current focus on student outcomes—particularly the attention given to graduation and dropout rates—has highlighted the importance of collecting accurate data at the student level. Accountability and student management are both reflected in two fundamental data requirements for education agencies:

- 📍 the ability to determine the enrollment status of students receiving services in their schools; and
- 📍 the ability to verify the status of students who transfer, graduate, drop out, or otherwise exit from a school or district.

Comprehensive information systems need standard codes to place students who enroll in a specific school within a given district, and to subsequently track any changes in those students’ enrollment status. This guidebook presents “best practice” advice, from members of the National Forum on Education Statistics, for maintaining such information. The taxonomy is not required, nor has it been endorsed by any other group. Many state and local education agencies have already developed information systems to meet their own needs, and these might include an exit code system. In some states, a standard set of exit codes has been developed and is maintained by the state education agency (SEA) for optional or required use by local education agencies. Other states may provide general guidance to their districts but not specific codes. And, in some cases, the development of exit codes is completely at the discretion of the district.

Exit Codes: Uses and Users

Exit codes are attached to student records at whatever level they exist—school, district, or state. With the current movement from aggregate reports to state-level, individual student data systems, state education agencies are likely to assume more responsibility for standardizing exit codes to ensure data quality. Accurate student enrollment and exit data are needed for many reasons, including:

- 📍 equitable distribution of funds to schools;
- 📍 effective policy decisions about instructional programs, dropout prevention strategies, and graduation requirements
- 📍 fair determination of a school’s participation rate on tests administered for accountability purposes; and
- 📍 correct and comparable calculations of completion and dropout rates, regardless of the method used to calculate those rates.

This guidebook was developed to help education agencies develop effective information systems for tracking the enrollment status of students. It is primarily for data managers and





accountability directors at state and local education agencies, as well as school administrators responsible for collecting student enrollment and exit data. In addition, researchers and policymakers will find the guidebook useful in making fair comparisons among schools and agencies on issues related to student enrollment, retention, and completion.

A Taxonomy for Exit Codes

The Task Force’s goal was to construct a taxonomy that could account, at any point in time, for all students enrolled (or previously enrolled) in a particular school or district. Through careful review of coding systems currently used by states and districts, six broad categories emerged that were mutually exclusive and covered every possible situation.

These categories are:

1. still enrolled in the district;
2. transferred;
3. dropped out;
4. completed;
5. not enrolled, eligible to return; and
6. exited—neither completed nor dropped out.

Within these broad categories, 23 subcategories were identified. Any state or school district using these 23 groupings as exit code categories would be able to account successfully for 100 percent of its students.

Creating the Taxonomy

The taxonomy was developed through an iterative process, informed by the collection of existing exit codes used by states. After the Task Force drafted its first list of basic categories, exit codes were collected from all 50 states and 4 other jurisdictions. The model was tested by crosswalking the state exit codes to the taxonomy. In some cases, categories were renamed and subcategories added or redefined to cover the wide range of possibilities for student enrollment changes. By default, all students whose status has not changed are in “Category 1A: Still enrolled.” All changes to enrollment status are accounted for in the other 22 subcategories. Data managers from each state reviewed the crosswalks of current exit codes to the taxonomy, and their comments were used to further refine the system. More detail on the crosswalk assignments can be found in the appendix.

Using the Exit Codes Taxonomy

Considerable variation in coding systems will continue to exist among states, and even among some state school districts. The taxonomy is designed to be used by any state, regardless of definition variations. For this reason, the system proposed here was conceived as a standard to which other systems could be crosswalked without losing their integrity. For example, this taxonomy has a single category for “high school equivalency recipients.” Using that single category, states, policymakers, or researchers may, depending on their information needs, include or exclude equivalency recipients when calculating the numerator of a high-school completion rate. Either way, high school equivalency recipients will be clearly identified by the record system from which the data are drawn.

It must be noted that the taxonomy was designed to be used as part of an overall student information system. Alone, it does not address the following issues:

- 📍 defining or tracking student cohorts;
- 📍 defining on-time graduation; and
- 📍 computing or evaluating dropout, graduation, or completion rates.





Exit Codes Taxonomy

CATEGORY 1: Still enrolled in the district—Students are receiving education services and funding in the district; their record has an entry code, but no exit codes

- CATEGORY 1A: Students are in the same school and program
- CATEGORY 1B: Students are in a different school (or in a different program within a school) within the same district
- CATEGORY 1C: Students are in the same district and receiving education services, but not assigned to a particular school

CATEGORY 2: Transferred—Students are known to be receiving services

- CATEGORY 2A: Students are enrolled in another public school district or public agency in the same state
- CATEGORY 2B: Students are enrolled in a nonpublic K–12 school or setting in the same state
- CATEGORY 2C: Students are enrolled in a public or nonpublic school in another state or outside the United States

CATEGORY 3: Dropped out

- CATEGORY 3A: Students withdrew for personal or academic reasons
- CATEGORY 3B: Students exceeded age requirements, including any religious or cultural age limits recognized by state law or policy
- CATEGORY 3C: Students were removed from the education system for reasons other than health, and they are not expected to return
- CATEGORY 3D: Students enrolled in adult education, or some type of education program that does not lead to a diploma or other credential recognized by the state
 - SUBCATEGORY 3D.1:** Codes associated with the General Educational Development (GED)
 - SUBCATEGORY 3D.2:** Codes associated with military enlistment
- CATEGORY 3E: Students are not enrolled and their status is unknown (including students dropped from the rolls for excessive truancy)



CATEGORY 4: Completed—A previously enrolled student who has exited the system and meets certain criteria

- CATEGORY 4A: Students completed an approved program of study and met all state or district requirements for a high school diploma
- CATEGORY 4B: Students completed an approved program of study for high school completion, but did not meet all state or district requirements for a diploma
- CATEGORY 4C: Students completed a program of study that did not address state diploma requirements and received a certificate of achievement or attendance [e.g., special education students in Individualized Educational Programs (IEP)]
- CATEGORY 4D: Students completed a vocational education program and earned a certificate recognized by the state or district
- CATEGORY 4E: Students passed an equivalency examination through an approved program, such as the GED; and met other state or district requirements for a high school equivalency certificate or diploma

CATEGORY 5: Not enrolled, eligible to return

- CATEGORY 5A: Students are not attending for disciplinary or other eligibility reasons, but are eligible to enroll at a later date
- CATEGORY 5B: Students have a long-term medical condition, or are in drug treatment or a rehabilitative center, that prevents them from receiving services, but are eligible to return to school
- CATEGORY 5C: Students are enrolled in a foreign exchange program, and are eligible to return to school in the United States
- CATEGORY 5D: Students are enrolled in an early admission college program but are eligible to return to graduate (such students often re-enroll and graduate on the same day)
- CATEGORY 5E: Students are under the age for compulsory school attendance and withdrawn from school (usually for reasons of immaturity), but are eligible to return

CATEGORY 6: Exited—Neither completed nor dropped out

- CATEGORY 6A: Students have died or are permanently incapacitated
- CATEGORY 6B: Students have returned to school after receiving a completion credential or after they reached the age until which the state guarantees a free, appropriate public education; and have subsequently exited school





CHAPTER 2 : Exit Codes Taxonomy Category and Subcategory Descriptions

The exit codes taxonomy accounts for every possible student enrollment status, including both enrolled students and those who have completed school, dropped out, or are in some other status. This chapter describes each of the six umbrella exit code categories.

Category 1: Still Enrolled in the District

Category 1 includes students who are enrolled in the same district as they were last year. The subcategories distinguish among students who remain in the same program in the same school; change programs within a school or enroll in a different public school in the district; or receive district-supported education services outside a school setting. This category follows accountability and funding models by assuming that the district is still responsible for providing education services and includes the student in enrollment counts.

CATEGORY 1 Still enrolled in the district—Students are receiving education services and funding in the district; their record has an entry code, but no exit codes

CATEGORY 1A: Students are in the same school and program

Category 1A includes students who have changed classroom or grade within the same school.

CATEGORY 1B: Students are in a different school (or in a different program within a school) within the same district

States and districts with a broad scope of codes often track students who change programs or school but remain in the same district. Category 1B includes students who are enrolled in a different public school in the district, regardless of the reason for this change; and students who have made a substantial program change within the same school. This subcategory enables districts to track changes in funding allocations. One example is a student exiting from Special Education and entering the school’s regular education program. Another is a student moving from a standard academic track into a specialized vocational/technical preparation program.

Students who enroll in a charter school managed by the school district are also reported under Category 1B. However, students who enroll in a charter school that is not managed by the school district are considered transfers as described in Category 2.



CATEGORY 1C: Students are in the same district and receiving education services, but not assigned to a particular school.

Category 1C includes students who receive district-provided education services but do not attend a particular school. This includes students who receive district-supported education services provided outside the district’s physical boundaries. Examples are students who transfer into hospital/homebound instruction, attend an out-of-district residential school for which the district pays, receive individualized education outside a school setting, or enroll in virtual education programs provided by the district. Note that this category does not include homeschooled students, unless the school district provides more than half of the education services.

Category 2: Transferred

Increased attention to dropout and graduation rates has reinforced the need to accurately differentiate between students who have “dropped out” of school and students who have “transferred” from one education system to another. Category 2 thus includes what are commonly called transfers—students who have exited one school system and entered another in which education services are also provided. The original school district is no longer responsible for the students’ education.

Students in Category 2 must be known to be receiving education services. Because the distinction between a dropout and a transfer often depends on verification, it is important for states to be able to determine into which system students have transferred. Verification differs across states and may include requests for transcripts, notification or application from a parent or guardian, or a court order.

CATEGORY 2: Transferred—Students are known to be receiving services

CATEGORY 2A: Students are enrolled in another public school district or public agency in the same state

Category 2A includes students who have transferred into a public, elementary or secondary education setting in the same state. It also includes students who have transferred to a non-school, state-operated facility—a juvenile justice facility, for example—where another school district or state agency is providing education services. This category differs from category 1C in that, in this case, the original school district is no longer responsible for educating the student.

Verification is easier for states that use unique student identifiers.

CATEGORY 2B: Students are enrolled in a nonpublic K–12 school or setting in the same state

Category 2B is used for students who exit the public school system and enter a nonpublic school environment approved by state law or policy; students are still in the same state. Homeschooled students are included in this category, as long as the parents or guardians have met all state or district requirements for home instruction. Students who transfer into private rehabilitation or residential facilities for which the original district does not pay also fall into subcategory 2B if education services are provided (if the original district pays for these services, category 1C should be used).





CATEGORY 2C: Students are enrolled in a public or nonpublic school in another state, or outside the United States.

Students who have moved outside the state are assigned to subcategory 2C. This category does not distinguish between out-of-state and out-of-country transfers; or between transfers to public and nonpublic education settings.

Category 3: Dropped Out

Category 3 encompasses all dropout exit codes. Students in this category have not met graduation requirements, are no longer attending school, and do not fall into some intermediate condition such as a prolonged illness. The subcategories were developed to accommodate differences in state laws or policies while allowing data to be aggregated for reliable state-by-state comparisons. For example, some states count as dropouts special education students who “age out” and leave school while others don’t. The subcategories also distinguish between students known to have left school and those whose enrollment status is unknown.

CATEGORY 3: Dropped out

CATEGORY 3A: Students withdrew for personal or academic reasons

State exit codes may describe the different reasons students give for dropping out of school, including failing grades, employment, pregnancy, or general dissatisfaction with school. All these reasons are folded into Category 3A: cases in which students inform the school that they are dropping out.

CATEGORY 3B: Students exceeded age requirements, including any religious or cultural age limits recognized by state law or policy

Category 3B recognizes two types of school exit due to student age. Most state-reported codes in this subcategory identify students past the age until which a free, appropriate public education must be provided. This age is determined by state policy or law and may be different for special and regular education students. Students in this subcategory have reached the maximum age until which the state must provide educational services; and they have failed to meet state graduation requirements.

Category 3B also contains a smaller number of students who drop out for cultural or religious reasons recognized by state policy. An example might be students who belong to a group that does not believe in attending school after the age of 15, if the state has a policy waiving the mandatory school age for that group.

CATEGORY 3C: Students were removed from the education system for reasons other than health, and they are not expected to return

Category 3C includes students removed from the school system without choice, for reasons other than health. This includes students removed by court order or placed into facilities where education services are not provided, such as juvenile justice. Permanently expelled students are included in this category.





CATEGORY 3D: Students enrolled in adult education, or some type of education program that does not lead to a diploma or other credential recognized by the state

Category 3D describes students who exit elementary or secondary school to enroll in a training program or adult education not recognized by the state and that will not lead to a state-approved high school diploma or credential. This subcategory also includes students enrolled in Job Corps programs and other vocational education programs if those programs will not lead to a high school completion credential.

This subcategory has been further broken out to distinguish two major circumstances that may not be considered “dropping out” by state policy or law. These two groups are:

🔗 **Subcategory 3D.1:** Students enrolled in a General Education Development (GED) test preparation program

🔗 **Subcategory 3D.2:** Students enlisted in a branch of the Armed Services (although the Armed Services do not typically accept non-high school graduates)

Students in other adult vocational/technical programs that may lead to an equivalency diploma should also be reported in subcategory 3D.2.

CATEGORY 3E: Students are not enrolled and their status is unknown (including students dropped from the rolls for excessive truancy)

Category 3E is for students whose status is unknown. It includes students who are not known to be attending school, but have not informed the district that they have dropped out. An example might be students believed to have moved away but for whom the district cannot verify enrollment in school elsewhere. This subcategory also identifies students dropped from attendance rosters after excessive truancy, and students who enrolled in school but never attended.

Category 4: Completed

Category 4 captures students who have fulfilled state or district requirements for high school completion and have been granted a diploma or certificate. Considered school “completers,” students in this category are no longer receiving services and are not expected to return. The subcategories distinguish between different types of completion categories, thereby allowing state-reported data to be aggregated for reliable state-by-state comparison.

CATEGORY 4: Completed—A previously enrolled student who has exited the system and meets certain criteria

CATEGORY 4A: Students completed an approved program of study and met all state or district requirements for a high school diploma

Category 4A includes all students who have received a regular or advanced high school diploma. These students have completed all the necessary course requirements and have met any additional graduation requirements, such as an exit assessment. Students in this subcategory are typically those considered “graduates” in federally reported graduation counts.





CATEGORY 4B: Students completed an approved program of study for high school completion, but did not meet all state or district requirements for a diploma

This subcategory captures students whose program of study addressed state or district graduation requirements, and who are recognized by the state or district as graduates or completers even though they did not meet all requirements. The majority of these students completed all course requirements but were unable to pass a required graduation exam. Students in this group typically do not fit the federally accepted definition of a “graduate.”

CATEGORY 4C: Students completed a program of study that did not address state diploma requirements and received a certificate of achievement or attendance (e.g., special education student IEP)

Category 4C is for nongraduate completers whose program of study did not address state or district graduation requirements. These students have completed some type of alternate requirements, but have not followed the regular course of study for a diploma. These students are usually not considered high school graduates. Examples are students with disabilities who have satisfied an IEP but not regular education requirements, or students in alternative programs who are issued a certificate of attendance.

CATEGORY 4D: Students completed a vocational education program and earned a certificate recognized by the state or district

Category 4D contains a few state-reported codes associated with students who completed a vocational education program and earned a certificate other than a diploma. Such students typically would be considered high school completers, but not graduates.

CATEGORY 4E: Students passed an equivalency examination through an approved program, such as the GED; and met other state or district requirements for a high school equivalency certificate or diploma

Category 4E captures students who have passed an equivalency examination through an approved program of study. The majority of these students have passed the GED test and are considered high school completers, but not graduates. These students traditionally have been counted as dropouts in federally reported data; however, as these students have demonstrated competence in a manner accepted by states or districts, they are included here instead of Category 3 (dropouts).

Category 5: Not Enrolled, Eligible to Return

Category 5 contains students temporarily not in school, but not considered to be dropouts. Students in this category are not currently able to enroll in school, but are expected to return. (If students do not return when they are able, they are considered dropouts.) While the number of codes that fall in Category 5 was not significant, the diversity of circumstances they described was sufficient to require five subcategories.



CATEGORY 5: Not enrolled, eligible to return

CATEGORY 5A: Students are not attending for disciplinary or other eligibility reasons, but are eligible to enroll at a later date

Category 5A captures students who are prevented by a school district from attending for disciplinary or other eligibility reason. A disciplinary example might be students expelled or suspended for a significant period of time, but not permanently. An example of “another eligibility” reason might be students prevented from attending school because they have not presented proper evidence of required immunizations. These students may not attend school until they have met certain requirements—satisfying the disciplinary action or providing immunization evidence in these examples—but are expected to do so and return to school.

CATEGORY 5B: Students have a long-term medical condition, or are in drug treatment or a rehabilitative center, that prevents them from receiving services, but are eligible to return to school

Category 5B identifies students who cannot receive education services because of a long-term medical condition or the location of treatment. Students may be participating in drug treatment or residing in rehabilitative centers. They may also be chronically ill, or suffer from an illness of such severity that they cannot receive education services. Students reported in this category are expected to return to school after completing a treatment program or upon recovery.

CATEGORY 5C: Students are enrolled in a foreign exchange program, and are eligible to return to school in the United States

Category 5C records students who have withdrawn from a school system to participate in a foreign exchange program. Depending on state or district policy, these students may be considered dropouts or transfers.

CATEGORY 5D: Students are enrolled in an early admission college program but are eligible to return to graduate (such students often re-enroll and graduate on the same day)

Category 5D covers students enrolled in, or transferred into, a post-secondary school prior to earning a high school diploma. These students are continuing to fulfill state high school graduation requirements while earning postsecondary credit. They are expected to receive a high school diploma (often they re-enroll and graduate on the same day), at which time they are reclassified as completers.

Students enrolled in postsecondary education prior to graduating from high school who will not receive a high school diploma should be reported as dropouts (category 3D).





CATEGORY 5E: Students are under the age for compulsory school attendance and withdrawn from school (usually for reasons of immaturity), but are eligible to return to school

Category 5E is for students under the age of compulsory attendance who enrolled in school and then left. These students are usually in preschool through first grade and were withdrawn from school by their parents because of immaturity. They are typically expected to re-enroll the following year.

Category 6: Exited—Neither Completed nor Dropped Out

Category 6 captures students who exit a system and are not expected to return, but are not considered either completers or dropouts. The difference with Category 5 is that Category 6 students are not expected to return to school, either because they are physically unable or because they exited the system previously. Two general instances of this category were identified: death or permanent incapacitation, and exit by students who had previously completed high school. This category assumes that the district is no longer responsible for providing education services to the student.

CATEGORY 6: Exited—Neither completed nor dropped out

CATEGORY 6A: Students have died or are permanently incapacitated

Category 6A includes all students who have died or become permanently incapacitated physically or mentally. These students are not considered to have dropped out or completed school, and are counted as “exiters.”

CATEGORY 6B: Students have returned to school after receiving a completion credential, or after they reached the age until which the state guarantees a free, appropriate public education; and have subsequently exited school

Students who have exited school with a completion credential, then returned and exited again, are placed in subcategory 6B. This includes students who have fulfilled completion requirements (were “completers”) and returned for additional instruction. It also includes students who dropped out in the past, subsequently reached the age until which the state guarantees a free, appropriate public education, then re-enrolled and left school again. An example might be an adult who earned a GED certificate and re-enrolled to pursue a regular high school diploma, then subsequently left (“exited”) without receiving this diploma. If the GED is a recognized completion credential, the student is not considered a dropout. Again, some states allow individuals well beyond the typical school age to take high school courses. If these students cease to attend school without receiving another completion credential, they should not be counted as dropouts. Another example might be previous exiters who enroll in a vocational training program and earn some type of additional certificate that does not meet state requirements for high school completion; they are not considered graduates, but they are not drop outs either.







CHAPTER 3 : Common Challenges to Collecting Exit Code Data

The taxonomy in chapter 2 is the first step in producing comparable, high quality exit code data in state and local education agencies. However, the taxonomy alone will not resolve all the complexities of student exit code data reporting. In addition to the challenges inherent to accurately tracking students no longer in a data system, a host of other factors commonly complicate exit code data quality. Both procedural and technological in nature, these include:

- ❏ collection system deficiencies;
- ❏ verification/validation shortcomings;
- ❏ special population obstacles to comparability;
- ❏ data system and technical challenges; and
- ❏ unintended consequences of accountability.

This chapter discusses several common, longstanding challenges that make it difficult to collect high quality exit data. Chapter 4 presents good practices to minimize the effects of these obstacles and substantially improve the quality of exit code data throughout the nation.

Collection System Deficiencies

State and local education agencies need comprehensive exit code systems that incorporate logically sound taxonomies, high quality staff training programs, and reasonable collection and reporting schedules. Without these features in place, an organization is unlikely to generate the high quality exit code data needed to inform decisionmaking.

IMPRECISE EXIT CODE TAXONOMIES: Exit code taxonomies are especially vulnerable to poor coding design. Problems arise when codes are not exhaustive, are too few or too many in number (i.e., too general or too specific), are not mutually exclusive, or are confusing or ambiguous.

❏ *Nonexhaustive code sets:* An “exhaustive” code set accounts for the full range of possible exit scenarios. Code sets that are not exhaustive are vulnerable to overuse of catch-all codes, such as “other,” that provide little usable information. For example, an exit code system that accounts only for institution-based scenarios may leave a data collector without an acceptable coding assignment for students who transfer to a homeschooled setting. When this occurs, data collectors must choose among three unsatisfactory options: not assign a code to the student whose exit status does not fit a category, assign an existing code that does not match the actual scenario, or assign the student a catch-all code such as “other.” Therefore, failure to design an exhaustive list of coding options will decrease data quality.



📌 *Code sets are too few in number:* A taxonomy with a few, broad categories may not generate useful information. For example, if the taxonomy in chapter 2 were limited only to top-level detail, the option list would read: still enrolled, transferred, dropped out, completed, not enrolled (eligible to return), and exited. While the list is exhaustive, the rich detail found in the second level of coding is lost. Users could not differentiate graduates from other types of completers, or transfers to public schools from transfers to nonpublic schools. Thus, both meaning and utility are sacrificed when a code list is limited to a few, overly broad set of options.

📌 *Code sets are too many in number:* A taxonomy with many, narrow choices may become unwieldy for those responsible for assigning exit codes. The ad hoc creation of new coding options that sometimes occurs when exit reasons are blended with exit types may result in codes with confusing or even duplicated meanings. Too many choices can lead to codes without distinctive features and, more troublesome, to overwhelmed data collectors who simply default to a few codes that are more reasonable to manage.

📌 *Code sets are not mutually exclusive:* With a “mutually exclusive” code set, only one coding choice is true for a single situation at a single point in time. In the context of exit codes, this means that one and only one code is necessary and sufficient to categorize any student’s exit status. Some taxonomies are not mutually exclusive because they use ambiguous terminology; others are not mutually exclusive because of fundamental errors in design. For example, a code set that offers “transferred” and “moved” as separate options fails the mutual exclusivity test because the latter may be considered a subset of the former—in other words, a single student who moved would most likely have transferred as well and, therefore, could be correctly assigned either code.

📌 *Coding terminology is unclear:* Ambiguous terminology and definitions encourage miscoding. Unclear language blurs the distinctions between options, resulting in individual interpretation; this may lead to inconsistent coding and inferior data quality.

INADEQUATE SUPPORT FOR DATA COLLECTORS: Without adequate support materials and training, data collectors make coding assignments based on individual intuition and category interpretation—a practice that invariably decreases the quality of exit code data.

📌 *Substandard coding instructions:* When written guidance materials do not exist, are not easily accessible, or are frequently or haphazardly modified, data collectors inevitably make coding assignments based on their own understanding of the codes and exit circumstances. Such independent interpretation of decision rules leads to inconsistent code assignments and decreases data quality.

📌 *Insufficient training and support:* Untrained, or poorly trained, data collectors will make coding errors regardless of access to written instructions. Indeed, even well-trained collectors will eventually face complicated scenarios and require additional guidance. Unless ongoing support is available (e.g., a help desk via telephone, e-mail, or website), data collectors must wrestle with difficult choices in isolation.

UNDESIRABLE COLLECTION AND REPORTING SCHEDULES: One characteristic of high quality data is “timeliness.” Data that depict the exit status of last year’s student population may be unsatisfactory for planners making programming decisions for the current school population. In other words, the most useful data reflect the current state of the system and are available to decisionmakers when they need it.

📌 *Inappropriate collection schedules:* Problems with data quality arise when exit codes are assigned too early in an academic year, before the information needed to make accurate exit code determinations is available; or too late in a year, when staff no longer





recall exit reasons. Similarly, collections not timed to accommodate data demand (i.e., when users need the data) decrease the data’s utility and, subsequently, the quality of data-driven decisionmaking.

📍 Delays in data availability: Some time between collection and release is necessary to verify quality and organize raw data into an appropriate, usable format. However, unnecessary delays may arise when reporting schedules conflict with holidays, other data releases, or other times when staff and systems are unable to dedicate time to releasing the data. Unnecessary delays to data availability also hamper good decision-making.

Verification/Validation Shortcomings

Assigning an exit code to a student who was enrolled in a school and subsequently “exited” may seem straightforward, but the wide range of circumstances under which students leave school often makes this responsibility quite challenging. For example, when a school receives an official request for a student transcript from another school, the original school can be fairly confident that the student should be assigned a “transfer” exit code. But the same is not true when a requested transcript from the “new” school fails to arrive. The choice is even harder when the only evidence of transfer is the student’s friends saying, “Oh, we think he moved.”

“Verification” is the process of confirming that information is correct. “Validation” means ensuring that data agree with expectations of reasonable values and accepted norms. Verification and validation are conducted through several collection and technical methods, including response and documentation audits, cross-checks, and value edits. Data quality is achieved when sound collection methods meet appropriate verification/validation procedures. Failure to verify and validate data leads to lower quality information and decreases its usefulness.

FAILURE TO PROPERLY VERIFY EXIT CODE ASSIGNMENTS: Districts and states without established documentation requirements are less likely to generate accurate exit code data. Therefore, exit code taxonomies should establish what evidence is needed to document various coding assignments (documentation requirements). For example, a sound decision rule in many systems is that a student is not coded as a “transfer” without written parental notification, a formal transcript request from another school, or an official copy of the new school’s enrollment records.

FAILURE TO PROPERLY VALIDATE DATA SUBMISSIONS: Any data system an agency designs should incorporate checks and balances to ensure that submitted data are a fair and accurate representation of the student enrollment picture. For example, edit analyses and cross-checks may find more vocational education certificate recipients than students enrolled in vocational education programs, or a graduation rate of 104 percent. Validation ensures that data submissions are mathematically correct, reasonable, consistent, and complete. Although it can be a highly technical and labor-intensive task, validating data submissions will result in more accurate data.

Special Population Obstacles to Comparability

In exit coding, “special populations” are groups of individuals, who have been identified as unique in their school enrollment and exiting patterns. Criteria for identifying special student populations vary by school type, school level, community characteristics, and geography. Variations in the way these special populations are counted threaten comparability across states and districts. Although generalities about individuals in special populations are



not always applicable to the entire group, membership in a special population may suggest school enrollment and exiting patterns that are not characteristic of the larger student body.

SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS: Federal law guarantees special education students a free and appropriate education until the age of 21. Consequently, special education students may choose to continue attending school after completing their Individualized Education Program (IEP), making them both “completers” and “still enrolled in school.” Completion and exit code policies often accommodate these circumstances, but variation in enrollment and reporting policies raises concerns about data comparability across states.

Special education exiting can be further complicated by the practice of “aging out” students who reach the age of 21 without completing their IEP. Although many school systems assign an “age out” status under these circumstances, this scenario more accurately matches the accepted criteria for “dropout” status, and is so coded by some states and in the taxonomy in chapter 2.

Finally, state and local policies for awarding credentials to special education students vary considerably. For example, some states grant regular diplomas to special education students who complete their IEPs, whereas others issue certificates of completion. Clearly, this decreases the comparability of exit code data for this population.

MIGRANT STUDENTS: “Migrants” are students who are itinerant agricultural workers or fishers; or whose parent, spouse, or guardian is a migrant agricultural worker or fisher; or who have other occupations with seasonal movement. Because of high mobility in the migrant population, these students may change schools and move among districts, states, and even countries several times in an academic year (mostly on a seasonal basis). Federal law requires states to track migrant students so that their educational records follow them from school to school.

Effectively counting migrant students in exit coding is usually a question of timing. Migrant students whose exits are not updated in a timely manner may influence dropout and graduation rates, especially in states with large migrant populations with predictable enrollment cycles.

CHRONICALLY TRUANT STUDENTS: In many states students may not legally drop out of school before reaching a threshold age (usually, 16 years). In those states, underage students who do not attend school are considered “truant.” Policies for counting truants past the threshold age as “dropouts” are therefore necessary to avoid the over-assignment of “chronically truant” status and under-assignment of “dropout” status in exit code data.

EXPELLED OR IMPRISONED STUDENTS: Some students must leave school because of formal expulsion proceedings initiated by an education agency, or formal legal proceedings prosecuted by a governmental body that result in a prison sentence. Determining whether incarcerated students are receiving educational services may be difficult without good communication between the public school and justice systems.

HOMESCHOOLED STUDENTS: The number of homeschooled students has grown substantially in recent decades and will continue to demand attention from policymakers and data collectors. To date, no nationally recognized standards exist for documenting or verifying homeschooled students. Depending on jurisdiction, public systems may or may not have the authority, and responsibility, to maintain information about homeschooled students’ enrollment status. Moreover, data maintenance may be further complicated when homeschooled students attend a public school part of the day (for example, for band or for laboratory science classes). In some states and districts, homeschooled students are considered “enrolled” in their local public schools and, consequently, are included in the agency’s student record system. Presumably these students will eventually receive an agency assigned exit code.





STUDENTS WHOSE RELIGIOUS OR CULTURAL BELIEFS INFLUENCE SCHOOL ENROLLMENT DECISIONS IN AN ATYPICAL MANNER: Some students have religious or cultural beliefs that require them to leave school prior to completion. For example, some religious groups expect young people to accept community responsibilities that conflict with school attendance beyond 8th grade. Some states recognize these beliefs and exempt these students from compulsory attendance; others do not and consider these students “dropouts.” In districts with large populations with these beliefs, exit data will be affected by whether or not the students are considered dropouts.

Data System and Technical Challenges

Implicit in any sound data management system is the ability to exchange information between system components and administrative levels without losing or altering meaning. In other words, records should be identifiable and accessible across the spectrum of databases, spreadsheets, and systems maintained by education agencies and other entities that exchange data. Unfortunately, stovepipe programs in many education systems maintain data in formats that limit or prevent data sharing. This is also true when data are reported from one level to another (for example, from a school district to a state department of education), or when an upgrade or new component is introduced to an existing system. Such technical obstacles are inevitable in any data system that does not use “unique identifiers” or other identification methods that positively and uniquely identify individual students across all system components.

INCOMPATIBLE DATA SYSTEMS: Accessibility and quality problems arise whenever systems are unable to communicate effectively. This may be true within a single agency, such as when separate special education and assessment data systems within an organization cannot exchange data; or within a collection/reporting continuum, for example when a local education agency (LEA) cannot submit data in a recognizable format to its state education agency (SEA).

COMPLICATED SYSTEM MANAGEMENT RULES: Some organizations have very complicated rules about entering or revising data in a system. For example, in many states, data submitted from local education agencies cannot be modified once they have been entered into the state system. Instead, the data must be updated at the local level and resubmitted. While valid reasons exist for such rules, they add a layer of complexity and delay to data management and maintenance activities. Similarly, some systems are designed to invalidate an entire record if any error is found in a key field (e.g., a number in an alphanumeric name field). While there are good reasons for such quality checks, they can also disturb the integrity of record submissions.

NEW OR UPGRADED DATA SYSTEMS: Changing systems—including hardware, software, submission requirements, and file structures—may have unexpected effects on longitudinal data. For example, some agencies have seen indicator values change solely because of hardware or software upgrades. General operating procedures in a data environment therefore demand that, when overhauling a system, the old and the upgraded (or new) systems should be run in parallel until the new system is working properly for at least one collection and reporting cycle. However, this good practice adds a substantial burden to data reporters and collectors because it requires submitting and maintaining two sets of data until the testing period is complete.

INABILITY TO IDENTIFY INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS: Record systems that do not permit individual student tracking over time, across program areas, or upon transfer to another public school system hinder the generation of unduplicated exit code counts. Matching records



to individual students is a major challenge in even the best databases; in aggregate reporting systems, verifying student data accuracy is virtually impossible because individual records are not identifiable after aggregation. When education agencies cannot readily access individual student records, for example, students who show up at a new school without transcripts will likely be assigned a new, duplicate record and are unlikely to have their academic placement informed by their past education experiences. Moreover, they may be counted as “dropouts” at their old school even though they have, in fact, transferred to another school. This simple example illustrates how data quality is constrained by the type of record system in use.

Unintended Consequences of Accountability

Accountability requirements can have a positive impact on education data quality because most data providers care about the ramifications of their accountability data. In some states, for example, data collectors now put considerable effort into finding students who leave school because their school or agency will be held accountable for students whose transfers cannot be verified. But a heavy emphasis on “accountability” during data reporting can also have unintended consequences, including disputes over which organization is accountable for a student.

SUMMER DROPOUTS: Many agencies use the NCES dropout formula to calculate their dropout rate. This requires that students who drop out of school over the summer be counted as a dropout in the grade and year they were to enroll the following fall. These guidelines are effective for measuring state and district dropout counts. At the local level, however, this formula may hold a school accountable for students who dropped out before even enrolling. For example, if a student finished 8th grade at a middle school in 2003–04 but never arrived at the 9th grade high school in 2004–05, the student is counted as a 9th grade dropout for the 2004–05 school year at a high school in which he was never enrolled. In terms of exit code reporting, data quality may be jeopardized when school staff are responsible for identifying students who have never been enrolled at the school or entered into the school’s data system.

RECURRING DROPOUTS: Schools and systems are motivated to minimize their dropout rates, both as a matter of philosophy (students need to stay in school to learn) and accountability (dropouts reflect poorly on a system). Once students have been counted as dropouts, however, encouraging them to re-enroll makes the school susceptible to having to count the same individuals as dropouts more than once, seemingly raising the school’s dropout rate. This unintended consequence of an accountability initiative may discourage schools and districts from implementing dropout re-enrollment programs.





CHAPTER 4 : Good Practices for Collecting Exit Code Data

The taxonomy presented in chapter 2 was developed after reviewing over a thousand exit codes used by state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) across the nation. During the review process, the Exit Codes Task Force also examined related data collection and reporting policies. This chapter summarizes the practices the Task Force associated with properly collecting data about students who exit school. These “good practice” recommendations are organized around two central themes:

- characteristics of sound exit code taxonomies; and
- collection practices that support exit code data quality.

The Task Force hopes that these good practices will be helpful and encourage education agencies to adopt similar policies. The good practices presented here are not “mandates”; rather, they are examples of good, practical data management practices that, if implemented uniformly, would greatly increase the quality of data used to inform policymaking throughout the nation.

Characteristics of Sound Exit Code Taxonomies

This section presents a host of characteristics common to sound exit code taxonomies. These good practices focus on the following features:

- exhaustive and mutually exclusive coding options;
- precise and understandable coding language;
- intuitive coding nomenclature;
- attributes that further describe coding terms;
- properly aligned exit codes and reason codes; and
- clear rules for aggregating exit codes into broader categories.

The taxonomy presented in chapter 2 incorporates many of these recommendations. Well-designed SEA and LEA taxonomies should be transferable to this structure with relative ease. If the correspondence is problematic, planners may wish to review their current taxonomies in light of the good practices reported here.

EXHAUSTIVE AND MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE CODING OPTIONS: Exit code taxonomies should account for the enrollment/exit status of 100 percent of students at any given point in time—not 90 percent and not 110 percent. To accomplish this goal, the taxonomy’s code lists must be exhaustive and mutually exclusive. “Exhaustive” means that available options accommodate the full range of possible exit scenarios, yet are specific enough to generate meaningful information. For example, an option list of “dropped out, graduated, and other” covers every conceivable exit status. However, the “other” category doesn’t convey meaningful information about what happened to students.



Coding options must also be “mutually exclusive”—no more than one coding choice can be true for a single event at any single point in time. Code sets are not mutually exclusive when they overlap, whether this is due to easily misinterpreted language or fundamental errors in the taxonomy’s design. In this context, one and only one exit code in the option list should be necessary and sufficient to categorize any student’s exit status.

PRECISE AND UNDERSTANDABLE CODING LANGUAGE: Staff responsible for assigning exit codes must clearly understand coding terms if they are to apply them accurately and consistently. For example, a taxonomy with general codes such as “transferred to nonpublic school” and “transferred to public school” may leave a data collector uncertain about how to code a student who is homeschooled, unless there are explicit instructions that home-schooling is considered to be a transfer to a nonpublic school. Taxonomies with precise and understandable language encourage the appropriate application of exit codes.

INTUITIVE CODING NOMENCLATURE: “Coding nomenclature” refers to the alphanumeric characters assigned to each coding category in a taxonomy (the abbreviations in a coding scheme). Ideally, coding nomenclature follows a pattern that is intuitive and predictable to a trained user. For example, the letter “D” may represent “Dropout,” enabling a user to instinctively know that code “D01” (student dropped out for personal or academic reasons) is somehow related to dropouts. With any system, skilled users may eventually recognize and apply codes by memory. However, even minimally experienced users should recognize that a code is being misapplied when the nomenclature is intuitive. For example, they would know that code “D01” cannot refer to a student who is a Transfer if all “Transferred” codes begin with “T.”

ATTRIBUTES THAT FURTHER DESCRIBE CODING TERMS: Taxonomies should include “attributes” that further describe coding categories. An attribute can be a short text description of coding options, an explanation of the rules used to apply a code, examples of frequently occurring reasons for selecting a code, or any regulations or laws related to a code. For example, the exit code “completed—regular high school diploma” might include an attribute to remind staff completing state reports that district graduation rates also include students with the exit code “completed—advanced high school diploma.” Those who analyze the reports will also find that such an attribute provides valuable information for interpreting the data.

PROPERLY ALIGNED EXIT CODES AND REASON CODES: “Exit codes” are not the same thing as “reason codes.” An exit code classifies a student’s exit status (e.g., a dropout, completer, transfer, etc.). A “reason code” indicates the *reason* why the student took the action that resulted in the exit status (e.g., graduated, moved, died, etc.). While the two concepts are different, they often appear together in taxonomies, with “reason codes” listed under related “exit codes.” For example, “dropout for personal reasons” is a “dropout” exit code with a reason code of “personal.”

A good exit code taxonomy describes both a student’s exit status and exit reason. However, despite the wide range of possible exit reasons, the number of reason codes associated with any exit status should not be so long that it becomes unwieldy. A short list of 10–15 exhaustive and mutually exclusive reason codes will probably generate more useful information than a list of 30–40 codes. This type of information is invaluable to policymakers; for example, they might use it to establish or evaluate retention/dropout prevention programs or nontraditional programs intended to encourage students to earn a credential after leaving school.





CLEAR RULES FOR AGGREGATING EXIT CODES INTO BROADER CATEGORIES: One feature of a well-designed taxonomy is that data from each category can be aggregated (combined) into broader groups for analytical purposes. For example, rather than evaluating the percentage of students earning regular diplomas, certificates of completion, certificates of attendance, etc., separately, policymakers might instead consider the total number of “completers” in the system; depending on the state, this may be an aggregate of all these credential types.

Taxonomies are more useful when they permit codes to be aggregated or reported differently based on audience or need. For example, graduate counts may be limited to regular diploma recipients for federal reporting, but include GED recipients when reporting to a state legislature that includes GEDs in its definition of “graduate.” An exit code taxonomy such as the one recommended in chapter 2 also permits users to relate exit codes across categories. For example, students in adult education may be coded as “transfers” for district-level reporting, or as “dropouts” when a different audience demands such a classification.

Any aggregation of exit codes for analytical or reporting purposes should be based on clearly defined procedures that delineate aggregation rules for each coding category.

Collection Practices that Support Exit Code Data Quality

This section presents data collection practices that serve as a foundation for good data quality. Presented in the context of exit code collections, they apply to many data collection efforts within and outside the education community. These recommendations focus on the following features:

- 📍 appropriate data collection schedules and report availability;
- 📍 rigorous verification and documentation requirements;
- 📍 thorough validation procedures;
- 📍 clear, accessible, and customized coding instructions;
- 📍 effective training and support programs;
- 📍 accurate and consistent data entry;
- 📍 unique student identifiers; and
- 📍 individual student record systems.

Education agencies that reinforce a well-designed exit code taxonomy (as presented in chapter 2) with the collection procedures in this section can feel confident they are producing quality information. In addition, the taxonomy should be periodically reviewed and outdated codes deleted.

APPROPRIATE DATA COLLECTION SCHEDULES AND REPORT AVAILABILITY: In a state-level individual student record system, a student’s exit status is recorded as soon as an exit event occurs. In a reporting system based on annual collections, however, exit status changes are recorded only once each year. Either collection period is acceptable as long as high quality data are available to policymakers, instructors, and public constituents in time to inform their decisionmaking. In addition to the periodicity of collection cycles, data availability also depends on the amount of time required to verify, validate, and present collected data. “Correction windows” (periods of time that data are embargoed for verification and validation) are a necessary part of the data reporting cycle; but they must be balanced against the need to release data in a timely manner. Validation procedures that can be automated and introduced prior to data submission minimize delays without unduly decreasing data quality.





RIGOROUS VERIFICATION AND DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS: “Verification” is the process of ensuring that information is correct. For example, “verification” that a student has been correctly identified as a “transfer” would require proof that the student has enrolled in another school. This “proof” comes in the form of “documentation,” such as written parental notification, a formal transcript request from another school, or an official copy of enrollment records from the new school. Rules for “documentation requirements” formalize the proof a state or district accepts for each exit code status. Without the required evidence, for example, a student thought to have transferred must be assigned a dropout code; otherwise it might become routine to assume that students no longer enrolled in one school “must have” transferred to another school.

Data accuracy increases when a state establishes standard documentation requirements that are enforced by all districts. In fact, many states send validation teams to districts to review the documentation used to justify exit code assignments.

THOROUGH VALIDATION PROCEDURES: As described above, verification focuses on ensuring that the data reflect the reality and that the information is correct. Validation, on the other hand, ensures that data agree with expectations for reasonable values and accepted norms; in other words, that an entered piece of data falls within a reasonable range of possible values.

Sometimes submitted data are clearly not valid. For example, when a school reports more graduates than there are students in its 12th grade class, an error has probably been made in the data collection or entry process. Several types of edit checks can be integrated into data submission software to confirm that data entries make sense. These include cross-checks—data reported in different files are checked against each other for consistency; edit analyses—basic data analysis, such as comparisons to maximum or minimum expected values; and more. Validation techniques often are accomplished by establishing allowable ranges for various data fields, including minimum values (e.g., the total number of students cannot be less than zero), maximum values (e.g., the number of graduates in a cohort cannot be greater than the number of students originally in the cohort), and comparative values (e.g., the number of graduates cannot be greater than the number of completers). Rigorous and systematic data validation procedures often identify mistakes that might otherwise go unnoticed in large data submissions.

CLEAR, ACCESSIBLE, AND CUSTOMIZED CODING INSTRUCTIONS: Supplementary written guidance must be provided to data collectors to help clarify exit code assignment criteria. This demand for clear guidance can be satisfied by developing instructional materials to accompany an exit code taxonomy. These materials must be readily accessible and the guidance provided must be consistent. Helpful instructional tools often include definitions of terms, examples of common exit scenarios, flow charts for applying rules, and frequently asked questions. One especially effective practice is to customize instructions for different audience types, such as school secretaries, guidance counselors, principals, and district technology staff. While exit coding procedures are generally relevant to each job type, specific guidance may focus on the different, frequently specialized, responsibilities of each audience in the data collection and reporting process. For example, guidance counselors may require a detailed description of exit codes, definitions, and regulations; whereas data entry staff would find a one-page list of codes and entry items more useful.

EFFECTIVE TRAINING AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS: Even when a taxonomy is properly constructed and collection instructions well-written, data collectors may still not master its use without training. To ensure quality, site-based staff must initially be taught to use a taxonomy as intended by its developers, then continue to receive periodic training as changes arise. Data collectors must also have access to additional support for assistance





whenever problems arise. Many organizations offer help desk service via telephone, e-mail, or a website. Others maintain listservs that share answers to all questions submitted by data collectors.

ACCURATE AND CONSISTENT DATA ENTRY: Entry errors lead to many data quality problems in schools, school districts, and states. Tools such as prepopulated student-records (when a state sends a district a reporting template based on student names previously reported by the district) help minimize data entry errors because they ensure that reported records match enrollment records, excepting changes since the previous report submission. Other procedures also decrease entry error and improve data quality, including templates that streamline data entry in reports completed on a routine cycle (e.g., weekly or monthly), staff assignments that ensure routine reports are completed by the same people each cycle (week, month, or year) so that they develop expertise in data entry procedures, and office organization that permits staff to enter data without unnecessary distractions (e.g., school receptionists cannot be expected to enter data accurately if they are constantly interrupted by other job responsibilities).

UNIQUE STUDENT IDENTIFIERS: Matching student records to individual students is a major challenge even with the best systems. Duplicate records can only be eliminated when an individual student record identifier is assigned to each student in a system or state. A “unique student identifier” is a number or alphanumeric code associated with one, and only one, student that is used to identify that student in every record system throughout the agency. Without a unique identifier, name variations entered into the system may lead to record duplication; for example, a single student may have one record under “Tom Jones” and another under “Thomas Jones.”

The benefits of unique identifiers are even greater when tracking students who transfer from one school district to another within a state. In the absence of statewide, unique identifiers, different school districts may independently assign the same identification number to different students. In contrast, when unique identifiers are assigned to students statewide, they can be used to identify and track transferring students anywhere within state boundaries.

INDIVIDUAL STUDENT RECORD SYSTEMS: A well-designed, individual student record system offers many benefits to those who collect and use exit code data. For example, updating and sharing student information across organizations is much easier with an individual student record system than an aggregate reporting system. Similarly, individual student record systems simplify exit status verification, particularly the matching of individual students to their documentation evidence.

In a more general sense, individual student record systems also produce cost savings and cost avoidance, quicker response times, improved data accuracy and accessibility, and enhanced capabilities for information exchange. Most states that have switched from aggregate record collections to student-level systems will attest to these benefits and confirm an increase in the overall quality of their exit code data.







CHAPTER 5 : Distinguishing Among High School Completion Credentials

Not all credentials that recognize the culmination of a high school experience represent comparable academic achievement. Such variation in credential names and types has a profound effect on how (and how many) graduates and completers are reported throughout the nation. This chapter reviews different types of diplomas and certificates awarded to students, distinguishes between high school “graduates” and high school “completers,” and explores other factors that distinguish among credentials for academic achievement.

Types of Diplomas and Certificates

High school completion credentials awarded to students across the nation include regular/standard diplomas, endorsed/advanced diplomas, certificates of completion, certificates of attendance, certificates of achievement, vocational education certificates, and high school equivalency certificates. No definition for any of these credential types is universally accepted, but in broad terms:

- ❖ Regular or standard diplomas, endorsed or advanced diplomas, and (in some states) regent’s diplomas and international baccalaureate diplomas are awarded to students who complete an approved program of study and meet all state or district requirements for a high school diploma.
- ❖ Certificates of completion are awarded to students who complete an approved program of study for high school completion, but do not meet all state or district requirements for a high school diploma.
- ❖ Certificates of attendance or achievement are awarded to students who complete a program of study that did not address state diploma requirements; in some states this would include special education students who complete their Individualized Educational Program.
- ❖ Vocational education certificates are awarded to students who complete a vocational education program recognized by a state or district.
- ❖ High school equivalency certificates are awarded to students who pass an approved equivalency examination such as the Tests of General Educational Development (GED), as well as other applicable state or district equivalency requirements.

While the above categories may seem definitive, the definitions and application of each of these credential types vary widely across the nation, making comparisons difficult. For example, some states award regular diplomas to students who complete a special education program, while others recognize this status with different completion credentials.



Similarly, some states do not bestow any credential at all on students who pass the GED, whereas a few confer a regular diploma for the same achievement. Clearly, caution is required when comparing “graduation rates” across states.

Credentials Signifying Graduate or Completer Status

Most states establish general standards for awarding high school credentials. However, local education agencies may retain ultimate authority for credentialing criteria in their schools, and they sometimes modify these standards. When this occurs, discrepancies may arise in the definitions of “graduates” and “completers” within a state as well as across states. Sound exit code taxonomies help distinguish between completion types; but if they are applied or defined inconsistently, comparisons of graduation and completion rates become tenuous at best.

Although regular diplomas do not represent the same achievement across all states because of varying academic expectations, consensus does exist on what credentials constitute “graduate” status for reporting purposes at the national level. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), “high school graduates” are limited to individuals who receive a diploma that recognizes the completion of secondary school coursework, tests, or other requirements, as established by appropriate authorities. Graduates thus include individuals who receive regular or standard diplomas, as well as other diplomas conferred for high academic performance, such as endorsed or advanced diplomas, regent’s diplomas, or international baccalaureate diplomas. This definition of “graduates” deliberately excludes students awarded credentials that do not reflect all applicable academic requirements, such as equivalency certificates, certificates of attendance, or other non-diploma completion credential.

Although the NCES definition is precise with respect to which credentials convey graduate status, states may choose not to follow the definition. For example, some states award a regular diploma to special education students who complete an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) even though they did not meet all of the regular requirements for a high school diploma. While states are not required to adhere to the NCES definition of “high school graduates” in their own data collections and reporting formulas, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) requires states to count only regular high school graduates when calculating graduation rates for NCLB reporting purposes.

Students who receive credentials other than those approved for “graduates” (see above) are considered “completers” for federal reporting purposes. This classification category is broader than the “graduates” classification category because completer counts include all graduates, as well as all other high school completers (e.g., recipients of certificates of completion or certificates of attendance), vocational education certificate recipients (e.g., work-ready certificates and trade/vocational certificates), high school equivalency recipients (e.g., individuals who pass the GED exam), and recipients of any other completion status or credential approved by an authority such as a State Board of Education. (See box at right.)

Other Complicating Factors

Without a standardized taxonomy, different state policies make comparing graduate and completer counts impossible on the basis of a credential’s name. Other issues further complicate counts of graduates and completers.

CREDENTIALS FOR GENERAL EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (GED) EXAM PERFORMANCE:

Several states award regular diplomas to individuals who earn a GED, making them “graduates”; others issue certificates of high school equivalency to GED recipients,



Distinguishing Between Graduates and Completers

All graduates are completers, but not all completers are graduates.

“Graduates” include recipients of:

- >>>>> regular or standard diplomas;
- >>>>> endorsed or advanced diplomas;
- >>>>> regent’s diplomas; and
- >>>>> international baccalaureate diplomas.

“Completers” include recipients of:

- >>>>> regular or standard diplomas;
- >>>>> endorsed or advanced diplomas;
- >>>>> regent’s diplomas; and
- >>>>> international baccalaureate diplomas.

They also include recipients of:

- >>>>> high school equivalency certificates;
- >>>>> certificates of completion;
- >>>>> certificates of attendance; and
- >>>>> other completion credentials recognized by a degree-granting body, including work-ready certificates, trade or vocational certificates, special education certificates, and other state-authorized credentials.

Differences in criteria for awarding credentials in states and districts nationwide warrant caution when comparing graduate and completer counts.

making them “completers”; and some do not award any type of credential to GED recipients, making them “dropouts.”

Discrepancies in counting GED students begin when the students leave school. A large majority of states count students who leave to enter an adult or private GED program as dropouts, but some states have established a “window of opportunity” (usually the same school year) during which students can be removed from the dropout count if they earn a GED credential. After the “window of opportunity” has expired, the students remain in dropout counts even if they later earn a GED. To further complicate comparisons, some states are piloting programs that allow students to remain enrolled in the public school system while preparing for, and taking, the GED exam. Such initiatives illustrate the evolving nature of the GED program and related exit codes, and how counting GED recipients will continue to be complicated for some time.

The GED Testing Service and its parent, the American Council on Education (ACE), administer GED exams and report results to credentialing agencies that maintain records of student scores. Tracking (and data quality) concerns arise when the state issuing a credential, the state in which the test is taken, and the state in which the student was last enrolled are different. The task of matching exam results to individual student records is not inconsequential. Without individual student records, this undertaking can be almost impossible—perhaps a reason some states and districts do not track GED credentials at all. If they are not tracked at all, GED scores cannot be used to qualify students for any



type of credential, and GED recipients are not considered to be high school completers; rather, they retain their status as dropouts.

EXIT EXAMS: By 2009, half of all states plan to withhold regular diplomas from students who do not pass a final state exit examination, even if they have met all other graduation criteria.¹ Each state will then determine what exit status to assign students who fail the exam and what credential, if any, to award them—a certificate of completion, a certificate of attendance, or no credential at all. Clearly, these counts will not be comparable across states.

MEASURES OF “ON-TIME” STATUS: In addition to including only regular diploma recipients in their graduation rates, NCLB legislation mandates that states report an “on-time” graduation rate. However, state definitions of “on time” vary. Many, but not all, education agencies define “on-time” graduation as the completion of one grade per year from the beginning of high school (usually 9th grade) through the completion of high school (usually 12th grade). The typical high school time span is four years, but some states allow students five years to graduate “on-time” and others only three (i.e., the count does not begin until grade 10). Differences in the defined year span for “on-time” graduation may influence statistics and the comparability of graduation data. For example, given the higher retention rates in 9th grade as compared to 8th or 10th grades, schools tracking students over three years, from grade 10 through 12, will report higher on-time graduation rates than those tracking students over four years, from grade 9 through 12.

SPECIAL EDUCATION: Some states award regular diplomas to special education students who complete an Individualized Educational Program (IEP), whereas others issue certificates of completion or comparable credentials to such students. Similarly, special education students who leave school without completing an IEP may receive credentials in one state but be counted as “dropouts” in another. Such variation in state and local policies regarding special education make exit code data difficult to compare across administrative boundaries.

DATA COLLECTION POLICIES: States and districts vary in how, or whether, they maintain data about students served by entities other than the public school system. Thus, the numbers of “completers” may be biased by the way these students are counted. For example, a district that cannot identify non-public school settings will not be able to determine whether students who left the system completed their education.

Depending on state or local policies, a student may be removed from a district’s reporting authority in the following service settings:

- 📍 homebound placement;
- 📍 hospital placement;
- 📍 itinerant services outside the home placement;
- 📍 outpatient service placement;
- 📍 private residential placement;
- 📍 private separate day school placement;
- 📍 residential facility placement;
- 📍 respite care placement;
- 📍 short-term detention facility placement;
- 📍 prison/correctional facility placement; and
- 📍 other court ordered placement (e.g., child welfare programs).

¹ State High School Exit Exams: A Maturing Reform, Center on Education Policy: Washington, DC. (2004)



Appendix: State by State Code Chart

The taxonomy was developed through an iterative process, informed by the collection of existing exit codes used by states. After the Task Force drafted its first list of basic categories, exit codes were collected from all 50 states and 4 other jurisdictions. The model was tested by crosswalking the state exit codes to the taxonomy. The chart on the following pages represents all the codes that were crosswalked to develop this taxonomy. The number in each cell represents the exit codes used in each state that were mapped and folded into the taxonomy presented in this book.



	AK	AL	AR	AZ	CA	CO	CT	DC	DoDEA	DE
States	18	23	15	13	25	19	4	23	14	41
Number of State Codes	17	23	15	14	26	19	4	23	14	42
Number of Codes in Taxonomy										
Category 1: Still Enrolled in the District Students are receiving education services and funding in the district. They have an entry code in their record, but no exit codes.										
1A Students are in the same school and program						1				
1B Students are in a different school (or a different program within a school) within the same district	2					1			2	
1C Students are in the same district and receiving education services but not assigned to a particular school						1				
1 General					1			1		
Category 2: Transferred Students are known to be receiving services										
2A Students are enrolled in another public school district or public agency in the same state	1		1	1	1	2		2	4	27
2B Students are enrolled in a non-public K-12 school or setting in the same state.	3			2	3	2		2	3	2
2C Students are enrolled in a public or nonpublic school that is in another state or outside the United States.	1				3	1		1		1
2 General	1		1	1		1				
Category 3: Dropped Out		14	8	1	2	1	1	1	1	1
3A Students withdrew for personal or academic reasons										
3B Students exceeded age requirements, including any religious or cultural age limits recognized by state law or policy	2			1		1				
3C Students were removed from the education system for other than health reasons and their return is not anticipated			1		1			1		
3D Students have enrolled in adult education, or some type of program whose education services do not lead to a diploma or other credential recognized by the state (Codes associated with GED have been placed in 3D.1, codes associated with military enlistment have been placed in 3D.2)		1	1	1	2	1	1	2		
3E Students are not enrolled and status unknown; this includes students withdrawn from the rolls for excessive truancy.	1			1	5		2	3		1
3 General	1	1						1		1
Category 4: Completed A previously enrolled student who has exited the system and meets certain criteria		4	1	1	1	2		1	1	2
4A Students completed an approved program of study and met all state or district requirements for a high school diploma										
4B Students completed an approved program of study for high school completion, but did not meet all state or district requirements for a diploma requirements	1	1		1				1		
4C Students completed a program of study that did not address state diploma requirements and received a certificate of achievement or attendance (e.g., some special education student IEPs)	1	2			1	1		1		1
4D Students completed a vocational education program and earned a certificate recognized by the state or district.										1
4E Students passed an equivalency examination such as the GED, through an approved program, and other state or district requirements for a high school equivalency certificate or diploma					2	1				
4 General										
Category 5: Not Enrolled, Eligible to Return			1	1		1		3	1	1
5A Students are not attending for disciplinary or other eligibility reasons, but are eligible to enroll at a later date										
5B Students are experiencing a long-term medical condition that prevents them from receiving services, or are in drug treatment or rehabilitative centers, but are eligible to return to school				1	2	1		1	1	2
5C Students are enrolled in a foreign student exchange program, and are eligible to return to school in the United States										
5D Students are enrolled in a college program (early admission) but are eligible to return to graduate (Such students often re-enroll and graduate on the same day)					1					
5E Students who are under the compulsory age for school attendance are withdrawn from school (usually for reasons of immaturity) but are eligible to return to school				1				1		1
5 General										
Category 6: Exited Neither Completed nor Dropped Out			1	1	1	1		1	1	1
6A Students have died or are permanently incapacitated										
6B Students have returned to school after receiving a completion credential or passed the age for which the state guarantees a free, appropriate public education; and have subsequently exited school										
6 General										

	FL	GA	GU	HI	IA	ID	IL	IN	KS	KY
States										
Number of State Codes	33	18	20	22	10	-	-	17	-	16
Number of Codes in Taxonomy	34	18	22	22	10	-	-	17	-	16
Category 1: Still Enrolled in the District Students are receiving education services and funding in the district. They have an entry code in their record, but no exit codes.	-	-	-	-	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	1
	2	2	-	-	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	1
	-	-	-	1	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
Category 2: Transferred Students are known to be receiving services	1	1	5	2	2	-	DOES	-	DOES	3
	2	1	3	2	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	1
	-	1	2	2	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	1
	1	-	-	1	1	-	DOES	-	DOES	1
Category 3: Dropped Out	7	4	1	2	-	-	DOES	12	DOES	2
	1	-	1	1	1	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	2	1	2	1	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	1	2	1	1	-	-	DOES	1	DOES	-
	3	1	3	2	-	-	DOES	2	DOES	1
	-	1	-	-	1	-	DOES	-	DOES	1
Category 4: Completed A previously enrolled student who has exited the system and meets certain criteria	4	1	1	2	2	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	1	-	-	1	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	2	-	-	-	1	-	DOES	-	DOES	1
	-	-	-	-	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	2	-	-	-	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
Category 5: Not Enrolled, Eligible to Return	1	1	1	1	1	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	1	1	-	1	-	-	DOES	1	DOES	1
	-	-	-	-	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	-	-	1	-	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	1	-	-	1	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
Category 6: Exited Neither Completed nor Dropped Out	1	1	1	1	1	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	1	-	-	-	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-	DOES	1	DOES	1
	1	1	1	1	1	-	DOES	-	DOES	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-	DOES	-	DOES	-

States	LA	MA	MD	ME	MI	MN	MO	MS	MT	NC
Number of State Codes	51	7	35	27	22	32	3	29	35	28
Number of Codes in Taxonomy	53	8	35	26	23	34	3	29	35	29
Category 1: Still Enrolled in the District Students are receiving education services and funding in the district. They have an entry code in their record, but no exit codes.	1 3 -	- - -	1 4 -	- 2 -	- 1 -	3 1 -	- -	2 1 -	- 1 -	- 1 -
Category 2: Transferred Students are known to be receiving services	3 2 1 -	- - -	2 3 3 -	3 7 2 -	4 2 1 -	4 1 1 -	- -	1 1 1 -	1 1 -	1 -
Category 3: Dropped Out	21 -	- -	8 -	- 1	1 1	6 2	- -	14 -	12 1	14 -
Category 4: Completed A previously enrolled student who has exited the system and meets certain criteria	2 3 2 -	- - -	1 1 1 2	1 1 2 -	1 1 1 -	3 3 2 -	- -	1 1 2 -	1 1 2 -	1 2 1 -
Category 5: Not Enrolled, Eligible to Return	1 1 1 3 3 -	1 1 1 -	2 1 -	1 1 -	4 -	2 1	1 -	1 -	1 -	1 5
Category 6: Exited Neither Completed nor Dropped Out	1 1 -	1 -	1 -	1 -	1 -	1 -	1 -	1 -	1 -	1 -

	PA	RI	SC	SD	TN	TX	UT	VA	VI	VT	
States	22	29	32	10	13	30	19	52	21	19	
Number of State Codes	25	30	32	11	13	32	19	52	21	19	
Number of Codes in Taxonomy											
Category 1: Still Enrolled in the District Students are receiving education services and funding in the district. They have an entry code in their record, but no exit codes.	1 3 - 2	2 3 - -	- 2 - -	1 - - 1	- 1 - -	- - - -	- 2 - -	1 8 3 -	- 1 - -	- 1 - -	- 1 - -
Category 2: Transferred Students are known to be receiving services	3 1 - 1	3 7 2 -	5 1 - -	- - - 2	1 2 1 -	4 2 2 1	1 2 1 -	3 5 4 -	1 2 1 -	1 2 1 -	1 2 1 -
Category 3: Dropped Out	2 - 1 1 2 1 1	1 1 - 1 2 1 1	7 1 2 3 4 1 1	1 2 - - - - -	1 - 2 - - - -	8 - 1 1 1 1 1	- - - - - - -	6 1 - - 2 - -	2 1 - - - - -	2 1 - - - - -	2 1 - - - - -
Category 4: Completed A previously enrolled student who has exited the system and meets certain criteria	- - - - - - -	1 1 - - - - -	- - - - - - -	- - - - - - -	- - 2 - - - -	1 - 1 - - - -	1 - - - - - -	4 4 1 - - - -	- - 1 - - - -	- - 3 - - - -	- - 3 - - - -
Category 5: Not Enrolled, Eligible to Return	2 1 - -	1 1 - -	1 2 - -	1 - - -	1 2 - -	1 3 1 -	2 1 - -	1 2 - -	1 1 - -	1 1 - -	1 1 - -
Category 6: Exited Neither Completed nor Dropped Out	- - - -	- - - -	- - - -	- - - -	- - - -	- - - -	- - - -	- - - -	- - - -	- - - -	- - - -

States	WA	WI	WV	WY
Number of State Codes	22	9	22	-
Number of Codes in Taxonomy	22	9	22	-
Category 1: Still Enrolled in the District Students are receiving education services and funding in the district. They have an entry code in their record, but no exit codes.	2	-	-	-
Category 2: Transferred Students are known to be receiving services	1	1	-	-
Category 3: Dropped Out	9	-	17	-
Category 4: Completed A previously enrolled student who has exited the system and meets certain criteria	2	-	-	-
Category 5: Not Enrolled, Eligible to Return	1	1	-	-
Category 6: Exited Neither Completed nor Dropped Out	1	1	-	-

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