

Highlights of GAO-05-879, a report to congressional requesters

#### Why GAO Did This Study

About a third of students entering high school do not graduate and face limited job prospects. The No Child Left Behind Act requires states to use graduation rates to measure how well students are educated. To assess the accuracy of states' rates and to review programs that may increase rates, GAO was asked to examine (1) the graduation rate definitions states use and how the Department of Education (Education) helped states meet legal requirements, (2) the factors that affect the accuracy of states' rates and Education's role in ensuring accurate data, and (3) interventions with the potential to increase graduation rates and how Education enhanced and disseminated knowledge of intervention research.

### **What GAO Recommends**

**GAO** recommends Education provide information to all states on ways to account for different types of students in graduation rate calculations, assess the reliability of state data used to calculate interim rates, and establish a timetable to implement the recommendation in GAO's 2002 report to evaluate research and also to disseminate such research. Education agreed with GAO's recommendations on accounting for different types of students and the need for research. On GAO's other recommendation, Education noted steps it was taking to assess data reliability though it is unclear that such steps address data to be used for interim rates.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-879.

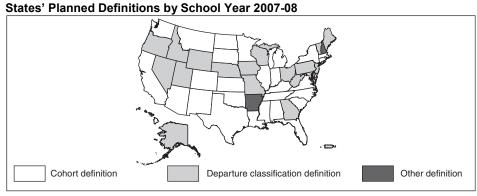
To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Marnie S. Shaul at (202) 512-7215 or shaulm@gao.gov.

# NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT

## Education Could Do More to Help States Better Define Graduation Rates and Improve Knowledge about Intervention Strategies

#### What GAO Found

As of July 2005, 12 states used a graduation rate definition—referred to as the cohort definition—that tracks students from when they enter high school to when they leave, and by school year 2007-08 a majority plan to use this definition. Thirty-two states used a definition based primarily on the number of dropouts over a 4-year period and graduates. The remaining states used other definitions. Because the cohort definition is more precise, most states not using it planned to do so when their data systems can track students over time, a capability many states do not have. Education has assisted states primarily on a case-by-case basis, but it has not provided guidance to all states on ways to account for selected students, such as for students with disabilities, thus creating less consistency among states in how graduation rates are calculated.



Source: GAO review of state accountability plans, NCES Report (NCES 2005-105), and Education's decision letters.

The primary factor affecting the accuracy of graduation rates was student mobility. Students who come and go make it difficult to keep accurate records. Another factor was whether states verified student data, with fewer than half of the states conducting audits of data used to calculate graduation rates. Data inaccuracies can substantially raise or lower a school's graduation rate. Education has taken steps to help states address data accuracy issues. However, Education officials said that they could not assess state systems until they had been in place for a while. Data accuracy is critical, particularly since Education is using state data to calculate graduation rate estimates to provide consistency across states.

Many interventions are used to raise graduation rates, but few are rigorously evaluated. GAO identified five that had been rigorously evaluated and showed potential for improving graduation rates, such as Project GRAD. In visits to six states, GAO visited three schools that were using such interventions. Other schools GAO visited were using interventions considered by experts and officials to show promise and focused on issues such as self esteem and literacy at various grades. Education has not acted on GAO's 2002 recommendation that it evaluate intervention research, a recommendation the agency agreed with, and has done little to disseminate such research.