CALIFORNIA STATE AUDITOR

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FACT SHEET

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The California State Auditor released the following report today:
High School Graduation and Dropout Data
California's New Database May Enable the State to Better Serve Its High School Students
Who Are at Risk of Dropping Out

BACKGROUND

To measure the performance of California's public school system, the California Department of Education (department) historically computed graduation and dropout rates based on data it collected through its California Basic Educational Data System. From school years 1991–92 through 2008–09, the dropout rates fluctuated between approximately 11 percent and 22 percent. To gather student-level data from public schools statewide so that it could comply with state and federal reporting requirements and more accurately calculate graduation and dropout rates, the department designed the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). This new system allows the department to track certain data, such as enrollment status, for individual students from the time they enter high school until they exit. CALPADS' high school graduation and dropout data are currently published only for the class of 2009–10.

KEY FINDINGS

During our review of the high school graduation and dropout data, we noted the following:

- Although the department currently has certified graduation and dropout data from CALPADS for one four-year cohort, schools cannot yet use the data to identify trends over time because it is limited to this cohort—the class of 2009–10.

- The overall dropout rate for the 2009–10 cohort was over 18 percent—and for certain groups the dropout rate was higher.

  - ✓ The dropout rate is 30 percent for African-American students and nearly 23 percent for Hispanic or Latino students.
  - ✓ Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are in general more likely to drop out of high school than their peers—by almost 22 percent.
  - ✓ The dropout rate for English Language learners (English learners) was higher than for those students who were not designated as English learners.
  - ✓ Those students who passed the high school exit examination on their first attempt were much more likely to graduate within four years than those who did not.

- School districts still face some challenges in implementing CALPADS, which could impact the accuracy of the information the districts enter into the system and thus, potentially impact the graduation and dropout calculations.

  - ✓ We reviewed 120 student records from various school districts and found that many schools had no documentation or retained minimal support for certain exit codes they assigned—which identify the reasons students left their respective high school.
  - ✓ Of the 120 student records we reviewed, we found that for almost 33 percent staff had keyed in either incorrect exit codes or it was unclear whether the schools assigned appropriate exit codes.
  - ✓ At five of the six school districts we reviewed, the written procedures for selecting exit codes were outdated or incomplete.

- Some school districts indicated that they have had to dedicate a substantial amount of time to maintaining CALPADS—San Francisco stated that it had a team of four staff devoted to maintaining it, compared to one staff prior to its use.

- Although CALPADS has the potential to collect more data, the department has no funding to expand its data-collecting capabilities at this point. Therefore, CALPADS could capture valuable student-level data, but the system's functionality is limited to fulfilling federal reporting requirements and is not as robust or innovative as some other states' systems.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

We make several recommendations to the department, including that it remind schools and school districts to align their procedures for recording data with the *CALPADS Data Guide* and to frequently update the data they transfer from their local student information systems to CALPADS, and that it provide written guidance to schools and school districts on any best practices it may become aware of. We also recommend that the department work with the Legislature, the State Board of Education, and the governor to identify priorities for building upon the system when funding is available, including tracking student participation in dropout prevention programs.