

REL PACIFIC ASK-A-REL RESPONSE

Dropout Definitions and Rates November 2014

INQUIRY

How are student “dropouts” commonly defined and how are dropout rates calculated?

As a first step in providing the requested information, REL Pacific reviewed available information in the IES Question Point database. Two similar Ask-a-REL responses were found from 2009 and 2010, which contained still relevant information, as well as some dead links and outdated materials. The sources identified in these responses were reviewed and considered as an initial base of information. A web-based search was then conducted for more recent sources.

SEARCH TERMS USED

Calculat* dropout; calculat* dropout rates; defin* dropout; measur* dropout; yr (2010-2019)

DATABASES SEARCHED

ERIC, ProQuest Education Journals, Google Scholar

Resources identified in the search are listed below. The hyperlink to each resource is provided. Descriptions of programs and articles have been reproduced verbatim from their respective websites or abstracts.

RESOURCE OVERVIEW

Resources from similar inquiries documented in the IES Question Point database formed initial set of sources for inclusion. Web-based searches were then conducted to identify newer sources with more up-to-date information. Publications that have strongly influenced state and national policies regarding the calculation of dropout rates were selected. Also included are publications that provide information about the rationales and potential issues associated with using various measures for student dropout. Resources included also had to be available online and in English.

Resources included in this document were last accessed in September 2014. URLs, descriptions, and content included in this document were current at that time.

Descriptions of the resources are quoted from the publication abstract (Abstract) or the publication itself (Introduction or Excerpt). An abstract is always provided (verbatim from the source) when available. However, if additional text in the resource provides important information not contained in the author’s abstract, the additional information has also been excerpted.

RESULTING ARTICLES

1. Chapman, C., Laird, J., Ifill, N., and KewalRamani, A. (2011). *Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 1972–2009* (NCES 2012-006). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2012006>

Excerpt: (Introduction, p.14)

- The **event dropout rate** estimates the percentage of high school students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or an alternative credential (e.g., a GED). This report presents a national event dropout rate for students attending both public and private schools using the Current Population Survey (CPS) and state event dropout rates for public high school students using the Common Core of Data (CCD). Event dropout rates can be used to track annual changes in the dropout behavior of students in the U.S. school system.
- The **status dropout rate** reports the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in school (public or private) and have not earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential. The rate is calculated using CPS data with supplemental information from the American Community Survey (ACS) for all analyses of those in institutionalized group quarters. It focuses on an overall age group as opposed to individuals in the U.S. school system, so it can be used to study general population issues.
- The **status completion rate** indicates the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not currently enrolled in high school and who have earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential, irrespective of when or where the credential was earned.⁶ The rate is calculated using CPS data. It focuses on an overall age group as opposed to individuals in the U.S. school system, so it can be used to study general population issues.⁷
- The **averaged freshman graduation rate** estimates the proportion of public high school freshmen who graduate with a regular diploma 4 years after starting 9th grade. The rate is calculated using data from the CCD. It focuses on public high school students as opposed to all high school students or the general population and is designed to provide an estimate of on-time graduation from high school. Thus, it provides a measure of the extent to which public high schools are graduating students within the expected period of 4 years.

More information about how the rates are derived and about the data that are used for these rates is provided briefly in the body of the report, with additional detail provided in Appendix A.

2. Dynarski, M., Clarke, L., Cobb, B., Finn, J., Rumberger, R., and Smink, J. (2008). *Dropout prevention: A practice guide* (NCEE 2008–4025). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide.aspx?sid=9>

Excerpt (p.19): Historically, states have often overestimated graduation rates and underestimated dropout rates by establishing generous definitions that do not provide a complete picture of the number of students who drop out. Definitions of dropout rates are sometimes not clearly connected to definitions of graduation rates, which can lead to contradictory impressions depending on whether graduation rates or dropout rates are examined. To respond to the dropout problem, states, districts, and schools first need an accurate understanding of its scope. This requires, ideally, the use of longitudinal student databases with unique statewide identifiers for individual students, that follow them from high school entry to graduation or dropout and that include all public, charter, and private schools to account for school or district transfers. Such longitudinal databases allow policymakers to

measure graduation and dropout rates using sensible definitions: Graduation rates can be defined as the percentage of students who graduate within four, five, or six years of entering high school, and dropout rates can similarly be defined as the percentage of students who leave school without graduating after four, five, or six years since entering high school. The National Governors Association (NGA; 2005) recently endorsed the development of consistent and accurate measures that use student-level data longitudinally to accurately measure graduation and dropout rates. The U.S. Department of Education (2008) also recently endorsed the NGA approach to be used nationwide.

3. Kena, G., Aud, S., Johnson, F., Wang, X., Zhang, J., Rathbun, A., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., and Kristapovich, P. (2014). *The condition of education 2014* (NCES 2014-083). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2014083>

Excerpt (p. 142): The *status dropout rate* represents the percentage of 16- through 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a General Educational Development [GED] certificate). This rate is different from graduation rate measures that reflect the percentage of students earning a regular diploma within 4 years of entering high school. Status dropouts are no longer attending school (public or private) and do not have a high school level of educational attainment. Based on data from the Current Population Survey, the status dropout rate decreased from 12 percent in 1990 to 7 percent in 2012, with most of the decline occurring after 2000 (when it was 11 percent). However, there was no measurable difference in the rate between 2011 and 2012.

4. Lyche, C. (2010). Taking on the completion challenge: A literature review on policies to prevent dropout and early school leaving. *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 53, OECD Publishing. DOI: 10.1787/19939019. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED529583>

Abstract: This paper reviews international research in the field of dropout from upper secondary education and training in OECD countries in order to present possible solutions to policymakers faced with the completion challenge. The paper begins by presenting existing definitions of dropout and upper secondary completion and states that dropout must be understood as the final step in a process of disengagement that begins early. Causes that lead to dropout in OECD countries are then studied, and the paper illustrates that causes of dropout are highly complex and intertwined. Finally, to address these causes or risk factors, the paper reviews research that had been carried out on piloted or implemented measures across OECD countries. It finds that successful measures address several risk factors and involve action both within school, outside school and at systemic level simultaneously.

Excerpt (p. 6): Dropout from upper secondary is widely used to refer to the phenomenon of youth not completing upper secondary education and training. Though this may seem self-evident, in practice comparing dropout rates across OECD countries is hard. In fact, countries operate with very different definitions. For the purposes of this paper, ‘dropout’ and ‘early school leaving’ are used interchangeably in reference to noncompletion of upper secondary education and training.

Defining dropout through its measurement only paints part of the picture, namely dropout as a status or educational outcome. In order to understand why dropout occurs, it is important to see dropout as a cumulative process of disengagement or withdrawal that occurs over time. Dropout can be prevented by picking up on a certain number of signals that form an early warning system. It is therefore important to understand the reasons behind the gradual disengagement that leads to dropout. This understanding of dropout as a dynamic process has a great impact on the way solutions may be viewed. In fact, correctly identifying students at risk of dropping out enables the elaboration of targeted and effective preventive measures.

5. National Governors Association Task Force on State High School Graduation Data. (2005). *Graduation counts*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/0507GRAD.PDF>

Excerpt (Summary, pp.7–8): Governors, chief state school officers, higher education executive officers, legislators, state boards of education, district officials, principals, and teachers together must lead the charge to create better systems and methods of collecting, analyzing, and reporting graduation and dropout data. Specifically, the Task Force on State High School Graduation Data makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Immediately adopt, and begin taking steps to implement, a standard four-year, adjusted cohort graduation rate using the following formula:

$$\text{Graduation rate} = [\text{on-time graduates in year } x] \div [(\text{first-time entering ninth graders in year } x - 4) + (\text{transfers in}) - (\text{transfers out})]$$

Graduates are those earning high school diplomas. Students earning modified diplomas, such as a special education diploma, count as graduates if the modified diploma is the standard that the state and the school system set for the student in an individualized education plan, for example. Students earning high school credentials by passing General Educational Development (GED) tests are not considered graduates for the purpose of this definition. Students receiving a certificate of completion or other alternative to a diploma, including special education students who receive a non-diploma credential, also are not graduates for this purpose. States are encouraged to include such students in complementary completion rates.

Special education students and recent immigrants with limited English proficiency may need more time to complete high school diploma requirements; they may be placed in different cohorts early in high school to allow for those differences. To ensure the exceptions are used appropriately, states should establish guidelines and standards for schools and districts to follow. In addition to transfers, the denominator can also subtract deceased students. Incarcerated students should be counted as transfer students as they move out of and back into the system. The graduation rate then is a measure of on-time completion, with most students, but not all, expected to finish in four years.

Excerpt (p. 8): *Recommendation 2:* Build the state’s data system and capacity to ensure that the system can collect, analyze, and report the adopted indicators and other important information. Ultimately, states should adopt a student-unit-record data system, with unique student identifiers that can track students through the state’s education system from kindergarten through postsecondary education. Student-unit-record systems take time and money to build and bring online. In the meantime states should improve their graduation rate data immediately by providing appropriate guidelines to schools and districts on how they should collect and code

data. For example, states should make it policy and standard practice that the default coding for student status is “dropout” unless it can be documented otherwise by, for example, a transcript request from a receiving school. States also should perform statistical checks and analyses and conduct on-site audits of record-keeping procedures to ensure schools and districts adhere to state data standards and guidelines.

6. National Research Council and National Academy of Education. (2011). *High school dropout, graduation, and completion rates: Better data, better measures, better decisions*. Committee for Improved Measurement of High School Dropout and Completion Rates: Expert Guidance on Next Steps for Research and Policy Workshop. R.M. Hauser and J.A. Koenig, Editors. Center for Education, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. Retrieved from http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=13035#toc

Excerpt (Preface): High school graduation and dropout rates have long been used as a central indicator of education system productivity and effectiveness and of social and economic well-being. Today, interest in the accuracy and usefulness of these statistics is particularly acute because of changing demographics, new legislative mandates, and heightened political pressures to reduce the numbers and rates of dropouts. Despite this strong need for sound and reliable measures of high school dropout and completion rates, there has been widespread disagreement among researchers, statisticians, and policy analysts about the “true” rates, how they are best measured, and what trends are evident over time. At a time when policy makers are vitally interested in tracking the incidence of dropping out of school, they are faced with choosing among substantially discrepant estimates that would lead them to different conclusions regarding both the size of the dropout problem and how it has changed in recent years.

(page 17) . . . in the past, some states reported a graduation rate based on dividing the aggregate number of graduates at the end of the year by the aggregate number of students who started the year in the senior class. This approach misses the majority of dropouts who leave school before grade 12 and can result in an overestimate of the graduation rate. Others have divided the aggregate number of graduates by the aggregate number of students enrolled in grade 9 four years earlier, an approach that may inflate the size of the cohort because of students repeating grade 9. Thus, this approach can produce an underestimate of the graduation rate.

Some states have longitudinal unit-record data systems, are able to track individual students as they move from school to school, and know whether they drop out or continue on to earn a diploma. Yet decisions about how to treat special categories of students can affect the rates. Classifying students who earn a GED credential or special education students who earn a certificate of attendance as graduates exaggerates the success of states in ensuring that students have successfully completed high school coursework and produces overestimates of graduation rates. Removing students from the cohort when they fail the state exit exam or are expelled can also inflate graduation rates. States also have different approaches for dealing with the time it takes a student to complete high school. Some calculate a 4-year rate, and some make no distinction between students who graduate in four years and students who take longer. Some of these problems may result because of inadequate record-keeping systems; others are the result of deliberate efforts to keep official dropout rates low and graduation rates high.

7. Stillwell, R., and Sable, J. (2013). Public School Graduates and Dropouts from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2009–10: First Look (Provisional Data) (NCES 2013-309rev). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

Excerpt Appendix A: Definition of a dropout. The CCD provides an event dropout count. An event dropout count represents the number of students dropping out each year. According to the CCD definition, a dropout is an individual who

- was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year;
- was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year;
- has not graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved education program; and
- does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions: transfer to another public school district, private school, or state- or district-approved education program; temporary absence due to suspension or school-approved illness; or death.

The following statements apply for the purpose of this definition:

- The school year is the 12-month period of time from the first day of school (operationally set as October 1), with dropouts from the previous summer reported for the year and grade in which they fail to enroll.
- Individuals who are not accounted for on October 1 are considered dropouts.
- A school completer is an individual who graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved educational program upon receipt of formal recognition from school authorities. A state- or district-approved educational program may consist of special education and district- or state-sponsored GED preparation.

Defining the school year. Not all states follow a fall-to-fall school year. The CCD dropout count is based on an October–September school year in which a student's dropout status is determined at the beginning of the year. Some states follow a July–June calendar in which a student's dropout status is determined at the end of the school year. Dropout rates in states that follow an alternative reporting calendar are comparable with rates for states that follow the October–September calendar (Winglee et al. 2000¹) and therefore data for states that follow alternative reporting calendars are published in the CCD data files.

Between-year (summer) dropouts. The CCD definition attributes dropouts to the grade and school year for which they do not meet their obligation. Students who complete 1 school year but fail to enroll in the next school year are counted as dropouts from the school year and grade for which they failed to return. For example, a student completing 10th grade in 2007–08 who does not enroll the next year would be reported as an 11th-grade dropout for 2008–09.

GED programs. Students who leave high school to enroll in adult education/GED preparation programs are reported as dropouts, unless the district tracks these students and reports as dropouts those who fail to complete the program. Students who have received a high school equivalency by October 1 are not dropouts regardless of where they prepared for the test, if the GED is an accepted high school credential in the state.

¹ Winglee, M., Marker, D., Henderson, A., Aronstamm Young, B., and Hoffman, L. (2000). *A Recommended Approach to Providing High School Dropout and Completion Rates at the State Level* (NCES 2000–305). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC

Calculating the event dropout rate. The event dropout rate for a given grade is the number of dropouts from that grade divided by the number of students enrolled in that grade at the beginning of the school year. For example, the 10th-grade event dropout rate for 2008–09 is the number of 2008–09 10th-grade dropouts divided by the number of students in 10th grade at the beginning of the 2008–09 school year. Beginning with the 2007–08 school year, states reported ungraded dropouts as a separate category. Therefore, ungraded students and dropouts are not prorated into any single grade. They are prorated in the aggregate grade 9–12 high school dropout counts and rates. The proration process is the same as that used for the AFGR.

8. U.S. Department of Education. (2008). *No Child Left Behind—2008: detailed summary of proposed Title I regulations*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice_guides/dp_pg_090308.pdf

Excerpt (p.3): The final regulations define the “four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate” as the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who entered high school four years earlier.

- Students who graduate in four years include students who earn a regular high school diploma at the end of their fourth year; before the end of their fourth year; and, if a state chooses, during a summer session immediately following their fourth year.
- To remove a student from a cohort, a school or district must confirm in writing that the student has transferred out, immigrated to another country, or is deceased.
- For students who transfer out of a school, the written confirmation must be official and document that the student has enrolled in another school or in an educational program that culminates in a regular high school diploma.

Rationale: An accurate method of calculating graduation rates that is uniform across states is necessary to improve high school accountability. Requiring school officials to have written confirmation before removing a student from a cohort will improve the accuracy of graduation rate calculations. Written confirmation also will ensure that students who have dropped out of school are not counted as transfers and will consequently hold schools accountable for dropouts and others who do not graduate from high school with a regular diploma.

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