



FACTS AT A GLANCE

Calculation of High School Graduation Rates

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Calculation of High School Graduation Rates

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Preface

This publication discusses the use of federal graduation rate requirements in school accountability measures, the evolution of the U.S. Department of Education's rules for calculating high school graduation rates, the implementation of these rules in Texas, and implications of the graduation rate calculation for school districts and campuses and for state policy makers. Appendix A compares high school graduation rates as reported by the 50 states and Washington, D.C., with rates published by the National Center for Education Statistics. Appendix B lists Texas school districts that did not meet the federal graduation rate standard for the class of 2008, and Appendix C lists Texas school districts that failed to attain the minimum "academically acceptable" completion rate required by the Texas Education Agency. All three appendixes use the most recent data available at the time of publication.

High School Graduation Rates as an Accountability Standard

Estimating dropout, graduation, or completion rates as a measure of the success of public education has been a major concern for Texas legislators and educators for a number of years. In 1999, the 76th Legislature considered Senate Bill 1561, which, among other provisions, would have required a specific definition of "dropout" and more refined calculations of annual and longitudinal dropout rates. While that measure did not pass, that legislature's general appropriations act for the 2000-2001 biennium required the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to work with the Legislative Budget Board and the State Auditor's Office to conduct a study of dropout rates and make recommendations to the legislature regarding an appropriate method of estimating the dropout population.¹ In 2003, the 78th Legislature enacted Senate Bill 186, which, in part, directed state officials to calculate high school graduation rates "in accordance with standards and definitions adopted in compliance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001."² In 2007, two bills were introduced in the 80th Legislature to define a mathematical "four-year adjusted cohort high school graduation rate formula."³ At present, Texas uses a "completion rate," the calculation of which is similar to that of the federal graduation rate, in assigning school districts and campuses an accountability rating. An entity that is rated "academically unacceptable" faces a range of sanctions that include submission of an improvement plan, investigation, or closure by the TEA.⁴

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), the federal government evaluates whether states, school districts, and schools have attained or made "adequate yearly progress" toward certain standards of student achievement, as required by the act. These standards include an acceptable graduation rate. An entity that does not meet the standards or make the required progress is subject to consequences that range from being required to provide opportunities for school transfers to being restructured.⁵

NCLB requires each state to calculate its graduation rate in accordance with rules developed by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE). As the states implemented that requirement after it went into effect, problems arose because USDE gave states wide latitude in setting their own methodologies for calculating graduation rates and because many states simply did not have the ability to track students longitudinally, or across years, at that time. As a result, historical comparisons of high school graduation rates among states and across time within the same state may be invalid because of differences in the methodology used to calculate the rate.

USDE's rules for calculating graduation rates have become more stringent over time, and states now are required to develop systems that track students longitudinally. To the extent that the states follow these rules, concerns that reported graduation rates are seriously inflated likely will diminish, and comparisons of graduation rates among states and across time likely will be more valid, beginning with rates for the 2010-2011 school year and going forward.

Meeting the Graduation Rate Standards

Federal Graduation Rate Standards

Under NCLB, entities that receive Title I funds from the federal government must attain or make adequate yearly progress toward a standard with regard to several measures, including test scores, attendance rates, and graduation rates. Entities that do not attain or make adequate yearly progress toward these standards are subject to sanctions that increase in severity for each consecutive year of failure to meet standards or progress requirements. Only a general outline of these sanctions is provided here because the exact consequences are determined on a case-by-case basis, and they depend on whether the entity is a state, school district, or school.

A school is placed in "improvement status" after the first year that it does not meet the requirements. If it does not meet the requirements for two consecutive years, the school must give each student's parent the option of transferring the student to another school. Failure to satisfy the requirements for three consecutive years results in a requirement that the school provide students with supplemental services, such as tutoring. A school that fails to meet the requirements for four consecutive years is subject to various corrective actions, such as introduction of new curriculum, dismissal of staff, advisement by outside experts, and lengthening of the school day and school year. If the school does not meet the requirements for five consecutive years, the district must develop a plan to restructure the school's organization.⁶

The restructuring plan must include one of the following alternative governance arrangements: reopen the school as a public charter school; replace all or most of the school staff, including the principal; enter into a contract to have an outside entity operate the school; arrange for the state to take over operation of the school; or any other major restructuring of the school's governance arrangement.⁷

If the school fails to make adequate yearly progress for six consecutive years, the district must implement the restructuring plan. The penalties described above are cumulative in that sanctions from previous years remain in effect even as new sanctions are added. A designation of "improvement status" is not removed until a school has met adequate yearly progress requirements for two consecutive years.⁸

NCLB standards require a graduation rate of at least 70 percent or "adequate yearly progress" toward that rate, which, according to TEA, means improvement in the graduation rate over the rate from the previous year for Texas public schools and school districts.⁹ For the class of 2008, the vast majority of Texas' school districts met the NCLB graduation rate requirement: 914 districts (90 percent) had graduation rates of at least 70 percent, and 19 districts (2 percent) whose graduation rates were below that standard showed improvement in their graduation rates from the previous year. Only 30 districts (3 percent) had graduation rates below 70 percent and did not achieve adequate yearly progress (see Appendix B).^{*,10}

* For the remaining 52 districts (5 percent) either data reporting was not applicable or for various reasons data was masked (see Texas Education Agency, "Explanation of AEIS Masking Rules," <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2009/masking.html> (accessed May 10, 2010)).

Texas Completion Rate Standards

The Texas Education Agency assigns each school district and school in the state an accountability rating of "exemplary," "recognized," "academically acceptable," or "academically unacceptable." Districts and schools that are rated as "academically unacceptable" (AU) are subject to administrative intervention from the state.

A school in its first year of AU designation must develop an "improvement plan" with assistance from TEA. In the second year of AU designation, the school must implement the improvement plan and draft a "reconstitution plan" with oversight from TEA. A third year of AU status results in implementation of the reconstitution plan. A school that is in its fourth year of AU status is subject to additional penalties that are dictated by the TEA commissioner, and after five years of AU designation, the commissioner can order alternative management or closure of the school. Interventions at the district level, though different, follow a similar pattern of increasingly severe sanctions for each additional year of an academically unacceptable rating.¹¹

"Completion Rate I," a component of the state accountability rating, is similar, but not identical, to the federal graduation rate. Although they often are used interchangeably, it is important to recognize that the terms "completion rate" and "graduation rate" have distinct meanings. "Completion Rate I" accounts for students in a cohort who either graduate within four years or continue in high school for a fifth year.¹² The graduation rate accounts for graduates only and is necessarily less than the completion rate. In 2008, for example, 3 percent of school districts failed to attain the federal graduation rate standard of 70 percent, while 2 percent, or 16 districts, fell below the state's 75 percent standard for an "academically acceptable" completion rate (see Appendix C).^{13,14}

Calculating High School Graduation Rates

Federal Calculation Requirements

NCLB requires a state to calculate and annually report its high school graduation rate. The act defines the graduation rate as "the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years."¹⁵ The law is ambiguous because it does not specify what it means to "graduate . . . with a regular diploma," how many years constitute the "standard number of years" it takes a student to graduate, or which students should be counted as potential graduates.

These ambiguities in the law have had far-reaching, practical consequences. A graduation rate is simply a fraction with two components: the number of graduates, expressed in the numerator, divided by the number of potential graduates in the denominator. An increase in the numerator or a decrease in the denominator (or both) will cause the resulting graduation rate to rise. Since the states had a strong incentive to continue reporting graduation rates under NCLB that were consistent with their reported rates before the act, any ambiguity in the law was usually resolved in favor of higher rates.

Initially, the majority of states employed a strict interpretation of "regular diploma" and counted as graduates only those students who were awarded the state's standard diploma for completing high school or who earned an advanced diploma.¹⁶ Several states, however, took advantage of the law's ambiguity and reported what critics charged were seriously inflated graduation rates.

For example, some states raised the reported rate by counting as a graduate any student who did not complete the requirements for a regular diploma but who had a disability or who received an "adult" diploma, an "adjusted" diploma, or even a certificate of attendance. Other states reduced the number of potential graduates, and thereby raised the reported rate, by not counting any student who completed 12th grade but did not meet all graduation requirements, was expelled or incarcerated, left school but received a GED, or enrolled in an adult education program. Some states based reported graduation rates on the number of dropouts rather than on the number of graduates.¹⁷

To establish that a student has received a diploma in "the standard number of years," it is necessary to track the student through time. However, in the early years of NCLB reporting, few states had longitudinal tracking systems in place. As a result, many states simply were not able to satisfy the reporting requirement because they could not determine whether a student graduated "in the standard number of years." To get around this difficulty, some states counted any student who graduated in a given school year as a graduate, regardless of how many years it took the student to graduate, while other states based the graduation rate only on the number of students who entered 12th grade. In addition, many states could not always account for students who had dropped out of school, moved, or died.¹⁸

It quickly became apparent that, because of these differing methodologies and the widespread lack of longitudinal data, any comparison of graduation rates as reported by the states would not be valid. To establish some basis for comparison, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in USDE developed a uniform methodology using currently available data from the states. The first set of graduation rates to be widely recognized as comparable was published by NCES in the 2006 edition of the *Digest of Education Statistics*. In that *Digest* and editions for subsequent years, NCES reported the "averaged freshman graduation rate" for each state as

calculated using a standard methodology. Although an averaged freshman graduation rate is comparable across states, the accuracy of the rate is still open to question because it is calculated using aggregated enrollment and graduation numbers rather than student-specific longitudinal data. Because it uses aggregated figures, the NCES rate cannot fully account for all factors that must be considered when determining the numerator and denominator in a graduation rate calculation. Such factors include the number of students who transferred into and out of a state or school district or who died between their freshman and senior years.

To remedy the problems associated with both the state-reported rates and the NCES revised rates, USDE adopted new rules in December 2008 establishing "a uniform and accurate measure of the high school graduation rate that is comparable across States."¹⁹ To that end, the rules attempt to remove ambiguity in the wording of NCLB and require the states to begin collecting longitudinal data.

Beginning with the 2010-2011 school year, states are required to report a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate that is defined as "the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for that graduating class."²⁰ USDE's 2008 rules explain that a "regular high school diploma" is the standard diploma awarded to students who meet or exceed a state's academic content standards, and it does not include a GED credential, a certificate of attendance, or any alternative award.²¹ At the beginning of a school year, students who enter ninth grade for the first time form a cohort. The cohort then is adjusted "by adding any students who transfer into the cohort later during the 9th grade and the next three years and subtracting any students who transfer out, emigrate to another country, or die during that same period."²²

States were encouraged to begin reporting four-year adjusted cohort graduation rates as soon as possible,^{**} but states are prohibited from missing the 2010-2011 deadline without permission of the U.S. secretary of education. Requests for extension were due by March 2, 2009, and only four states and Puerto Rico made requests. By the end of the process, one state had rescinded its request, another request was denied, and only three exceptions were approved.²³

Implementation of the Federal Calculation Requirements in Texas

Texas was one of the first states to use a longitudinal graduation rate that measured the eventual outcomes of entering ninth-grade students. However, in the early years of NCLB reporting, Texas was criticized for inflating its high school graduation rate. Critics pointed out that Texas included GED recipients to increase the numerator of the rate and excluded students it categorized as "leavers" to decrease the denominator. "Leavers" included students who were enrolled in GED programs, incarcerated, or participating in court-ordered alternative programs; students who transferred or intended to transfer but who did not provide confirmation; unknown and unlisted leavers; and students who left under administrative withdrawal.²⁴ For the class of 2004, "leavers" accounted for 17 percent of the students who entered ninth grade four years earlier. The state excluded from that cohort another five percent of students because of data errors. Depending on how the combined number of "leavers" and "students with data errors" is included in the calculation, the state's graduation rate for the class of 2004 would have been between 66 percent and 69 percent as opposed to its reported rate of 84.6 percent.²⁵

^{**} The rules allow a state to develop and report a transitional graduation rate for the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years. However, if a transitional rate is used, it must be approved by the U.S. secretary of education. (U.S. Department of Education, "No Child Left Behind, High School Graduation Rate, Non-Regulatory Guidance," 2008.)

Many of the concerns about the Texas rate were alleviated in 2006 when the state stopped counting GED recipients as graduates and began to include GED program enrollees and unconfirmed transfer students in the cohort. Currently, Texas reports a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate.²⁶ To the extent that the state follows USDE's 2008 rules for calculating the rate, particularly in receiving proper documentation before a student is considered a "leaver" and removed from a cohort, the reported four-year adjusted cohort graduation rates for Texas should be accurate and reliable.

In Conclusion

The standards and definitions for calculating high school graduation rates that have been established by USDE have changed over time, with the result that historical comparisons of graduation rates among different states may be invalid because of differences in methodology, and graduation rates through time, even within a state, may not be comparable. The four-year adjusted cohort graduation rates that are mandated by USDE's 2008 rules should provide a more accurate picture of student achievement because they are calculated from student-level longitudinal data and use uniform definitions of key terms. To the extent that the states abide by USDE's 2008 rules, the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rates that will be reported beginning with the 2010-2011 school year should support valid comparisons of accurate graduation rates among states and across time.

For many states, the cohort-based rates will be lower than the self-reported graduation rates from earlier years because, in the past, states have included in the numerator categories of students that no longer are counted, and they have excluded from the denominator categories of students that now must be counted. The lower reported rates may result in federal sanctions, creating new policy issue challenges for the affected states.

Appendix A

Comparison of Self-Reported and NCES Graduation Rates, 2006-2007

State	State-reported rate*	NCES rate**	Difference	State-reported rank	NCES rank
Alabama	83.1	67.1	16.0	26	43
Alaska	63.0	69.1	-6.1	50	40
Arizona	73.0	69.6	3.4	43	39
Arkansas	86.0	74.4	11.6	18	32
California	80.6	70.7	9.9	32	38
Colorado	75.0	76.6	-1.6	41	25
Connecticut	92.4	81.8	10.6	2	11
Delaware	81.0	71.9	9.1	30	36
District of Columbia	75.5	54.9	20.6	39	50
Florida	69.8	65.0	4.8	47	44
Georgia	72.3	64.1	8.2	45	45
Hawaii	79.2	75.4	3.8	35	30
Idaho	88.3	80.4	7.9	11	15
Illinois	85.9	79.5	6.4	20	17
Indiana	76.5	73.9	2.6	38	33
Iowa	90.5	86.5	4.0	4	3
Kansas	89.7	78.9	10.8	6	18
Kentucky	83.7	76.4	7.3	25	27
Louisiana	NA	61.3	NA	NA	47
Maine	82.0	78.5	3.5	27	20
Maryland	85.2	80.0	5.2	22	16
Massachusetts	80.9	80.8	0.1	31	14
Michigan	75.5	77.0	-1.5	39	24
Minnesota	91.2	86.5	4.7	3	4
Mississippi	87.0	63.6	23.4	14	46
Missouri	86.2	81.9	4.3	17	10
Montana	84.6	81.5	3.1	24	13
Nebraska	88.4	86.3	2.1	9	5
Nevada	67.5	52.0	15.5	49	51
New Hampshire	85.8	81.7	4.1	21	12
New Jersey	92.8	84.4	8.4	1	6

State	State-reported rate*	NCES rate**	Difference	State-reported rank	NCES rank
New Mexico	86.8	59.1	27.7	16	48
New York	75.0	68.8	6.2	41	41
North Carolina	69.4	68.6	0.8	48	42
North Dakota	87.7	83.1	4.6	13	7
Ohio	86.9	78.7	8.2	15	19
Oklahoma	76.6	77.8	-1.2	37	23
Oregon	81.4	73.8	7.6	29	34
Pennsylvania	89.9	83.0	6.9	5	8
Rhode Island	89.2	78.4	10.8	8	21
South Carolina	71.2	58.9	12.3	46	49
South Dakota	88.4	82.5	5.9	9	9
Tennessee	81.8	72.6	9.2	28	35
Texas	78.0	71.9	6.1	36	37
Utah	88.2	76.6	11.6	12	26
Vermont	86.0	88.6	-2.6	18	1
Virginia	79.4	75.5	3.9	34	29
Washington	72.5	74.8	-2.3	44	31
West Virginia	84.7	78.2	6.5	23	22
Wisconsin	89.6	88.5	1.1	7	2
Wyoming	79.5	75.8	3.7	33	28

* U.S. Department of Education, "SY 2007-2008 Consolidated State Performance Reports Part I," <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/sy07-08part1/index.html> (accessed April 18, 2010).

Graduation rates are calculated for school year 2006-2007.

** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Public School Graduates and Dropouts From the Common Core of Data: School Year 2007-08," <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010341.pdf> (accessed June 2, 2010).

For comparison with the state-reported rates, graduation rates for school year 2006-2007 are used. The graduation rate reported by NCES is the number of graduates (students who earned regular diplomas or diplomas for advanced academic achievement) divided by the estimated count of freshmen four years earlier (the sum of the number of 8th-graders five years earlier, the number of 9th-graders four years earlier, and the number of 10th-graders three years earlier, divided by three).

Appendix B

Texas School Districts Not Meeting the Federal Graduation Rate Standard for the Class of 2008

The independent school districts shown in the table below did not attain the graduation rate standard or make adequate yearly progress for the class of 2008 because their 2008 graduation rates were less than 70 percent and their 2008 rates did not improve on the 2007 rates.*

Independent school district	Class of 2008 graduation rate	Class of 2007 graduation rate	Difference (2008 rate - 2007 rate)
Alvarado	68.7	71.0	-2.3
Bellevue	66.7	100.0	-33.3
Benavides	61.5	72.2	-10.7
Bronte	39.2	59.3	-20.1
Castleberry	67.1	70.8	-3.7
Chisum	55.6	95.2	-39.6
Cleveland	68.4	72.8	-4.4
Dickinson	66.7	67.7	-1.0
Ector County	65.7	68.9	-3.2
Freer	68.9	73.4	-4.5
Galveston	63.5	65.7	-2.2
Iraan-Sheffield	69.2	88.9	-19.7
La Villa	67.7	76.5	-8.8
Longview	68.2	68.8	-0.6
Manor	65.6	68.5	-2.9
Mexia	68.8	70.9	-2.1
North Forest	41.0	65.6	-24.6
Novice	57.1	78.6	-21.5
Port Arthur	67.6	69.9	-2.3
Premont	65.6	65.7	-0.1
San Antonio	59.1	60.5	-1.4
San Diego	69.0	72.8	-3.8
Sierra Blanca	60.0	NA	NA
Somerset	65.0	68.2	-3.2
South San Antonio	64.1	70.7	-6.6
Southside	64.8	69.4	-4.6
Taft	62.7	64.8	-2.1
Valley View	69.5	79.4	-9.9
Victoria	64.2	66.1	-1.9
Waco	65.6	67.7	-2.1

* Analysis of data from Texas Education Agency, "2008-09 Academic Excellence Indicator System," <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2009/index.html> (accessed May 10, 2010).

Appendix C

Texas School Districts that Failed to Attain the State "Academically Acceptable" Threshold of 75 Percent for 2008 Completion Rate I*

Independent school district	2008 Completion Rate I
Alice	63.4
Bellevue	66.7
Benavides	65.4
Bronte	41.2
Chisum	66.7
Freer	73.8
Karnack	72.7
Nordheim	66.7
North Forest	49.6
Novice	64.3
Premont	70.5
Robstown	66.8
San Diego	73.0
South San Antonio	73.4
Taft	65.7
West Orange-Cove	73.8

* Analysis of data from Texas Education Agency, "2008-09 Academic Excellence Indicator System," <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2009/index.html> (accessed May 10, 2010).

Notes

- ¹ Rider 71, page III-21, Chapter 1589 (H.B. 1), Acts of the 76th Legislature, Regular Session, 1999 (the General Appropriations Act).
- ² Section 1, Chapter 805 (S.B. 186), Acts of the 78th Legislature, Regular Session, 2003.
- ³ See H.B. 3621 and S.B. 1995, introduced in the 80th Legislature, Regular Session, 2007.
- ⁴ Texas Education Agency, "Framework for 2009-2010 Academically Unacceptable Performance Campus-Level Interventions" and "Framework for 2009-2010 Academically Unacceptable Performance District-Level Interventions" (August 2009), http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/pmi/accmon/2010/resources/AU_Framework_10.pdf (accessed May 18, 2010).
- ⁵ GreatSchools, "No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Requirements for Schools," <http://www.greatschools.org/definitions/nclb/nclb.html> (accessed May 18, 2010).
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Texas Education Agency, "2009 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Guide for Texas Public School Districts and Campuses" (June 2009), <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/ayp/2009/guide.pdf>, p. 53 (accessed May 18, 2010).
- ¹⁰ Analysis of data from Texas Education Agency, "2008-09 Academic Excellence Indicator System," <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2009/index.html> (accessed May 10, 2010).
- ¹¹ Texas Education Agency, "Framework for 2009-2010 Academically Unacceptable Performance Campus-Level Interventions" and "Framework for 2009-2010 Academically Unacceptable Performance District-Level Interventions" (August 2009), http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/pmi/accmon/2010/resources/AU_Framework_10.pdf (accessed May 18, 2010).
- ¹² Texas Education Agency, "2009 Accountability Manual: The 2009 Accountability Rating System for Texas Public Schools and School Districts" (May 2009), <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/2009/manual/manual.pdf> (accessed May 18, 2010).
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Analysis of data from Texas Education Agency, "2008-09 Academic Excellence Indicator System," <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2009/index.html> (accessed May 10, 2010).
- ¹⁵ No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Public Law 107-110, <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/107-110.pdf> (accessed May 18, 2010).
- ¹⁶ Analysis of states' files from Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE), "Federal High School Graduation Rate Policies and the Impact on States," http://www.all4ed.org/publication/material/federal_grp (accessed May 5, 2010).
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ U.S. Department of Education, "No Child Left Behind: High School Graduation Rate: Non-Regulatory Guidance" (December 22, 2008), <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/hsgrguidance.pdf> (accessed May 18, 2010).
- ²⁰ 34 C.F.R. Section 200.19(b)(1)(i)(A), http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/cfr_2009/julqtr/pdf/34cfr200.19.pdf (accessed May 18, 2010).

²¹ U.S. Department of Education.

²² Ibid.

²³ Victoria Hammer, U.S. Department of Education, telephone conversation (202-260-1438) on April 16, 2010.

²⁴ Lyndsay Pinkus, Alliance for Excellent Education, "Who's Counted? Who's Counting? Understanding High School Graduation Rates" (June 2006), <http://www.all4ed.org/files/WhosCounting.pdf> (accessed May 18, 2010).

²⁵ Statistics calculated from data presented in Pinkus.

²⁶ Tony Wallette, Texas Education Agency, telephone conversation (512-936-2508) on May 3, 2010.