

ACCOUNTING FOR DELAYED HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES IN CALIFORNIA

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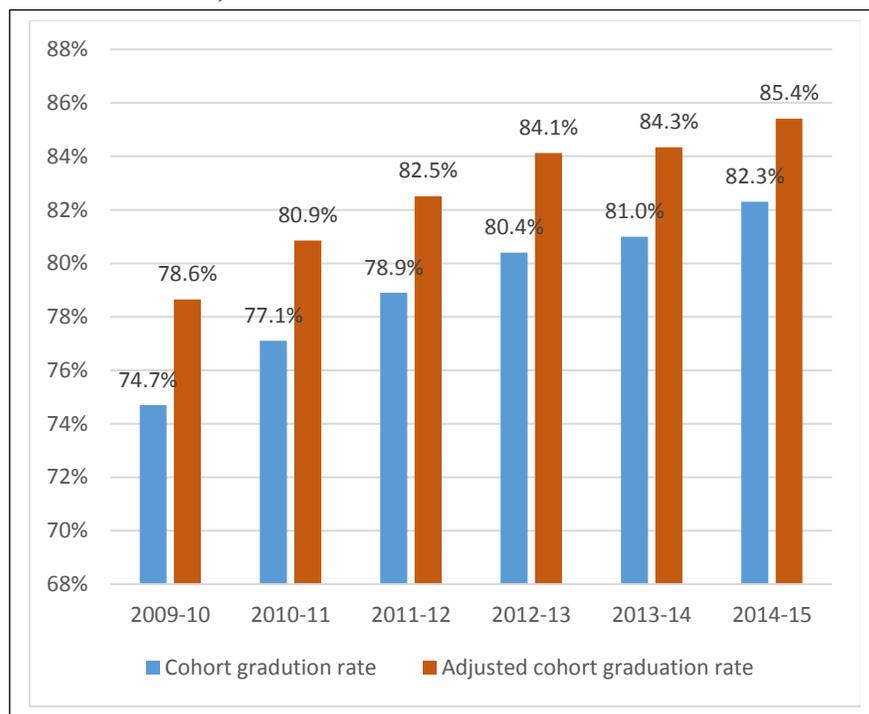
Highlights:

- The most common measure of high school graduation is based on the percentage of students who successfully graduate with a regular diploma within four years of first entering the ninth grade. Yet this measure fails to account for students who take more than four years to graduate, which we refer to as “delayed high school graduates.”
- Accounting for these delayed graduates would increase California’s graduation rate by 3 to 4 percentage points.
- Alternative and charter schools account for only 15 percent of “on-time” graduates, but account for 80 percent of delayed high school graduates.
- Based on the percentage of 12th grade students who graduate, alternative and charter schools appear more effective than their 4-year graduation rates suggest.
- California should use more than the 4-year graduation rate to measure the effectiveness of schools in getting students to earn a diploma.
- Graduation rates should not just be ascribed to the last school attended, but rather to all schools that students attend.

One of the most widely used measures of high school effectiveness is the graduation rate. This is most commonly measured by the percentage of students who successfully graduate with a regular diploma within four years of first entering the ninth grade. This metric is officially known as the 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR).

Despite its widespread use, the ACGR is not the most comprehensive measure of high school graduation because it fails to account for “delayed high school graduates.” This brief summarizes a California Dropout Research Project (CDRP) study that reexamines the California high school graduation rate to account for the sizable number of students who earn a high school diploma outside of the traditional 4-year window.

Figure 1: Cohort and Adjusted Cohort California High School Graduation Rates, 2009-10 thru 2014-15



SOURCE: California Department of Education, DataQuest.

Read the full report at: cdrpsb.org

On-Time and Delayed High School Graduation

While the goal for all students may be to graduate high school “on time,” some students need more time to complete the requirements for a diploma. This could be due to entering high school with low math and/or reading skills, experiencing a dropout event, or simply failing to earn sufficient credits in a 4-year time frame. Regardless of the reason, many of these delayed graduates *do graduate*. Yet the 4-year ACGR does not account for these successes because they occur outside of the 4-year window.

A number of national studies suggest 10 to 16 percent of high school students are delayed graduates. Further evidence that the ACGR may underestimate the graduation rate comes from a number of state data systems that publish 5-year cohort graduation rates. These systems generally show that 5-year graduation rates are four to five percentage points higher than the standard 4-year rates.

Summary of Findings

Using public data from the California Department of Education, the study addressed three questions.

How Many Delayed Graduates Exist in California?

Between 2009-10 and 2014-15 roughly 7 to 8 percent of students in each graduating cohort were still enrolled in school and could eventually graduate. We conceived of two methods for estimating how the California’s ACGR would change if the state’s delayed graduates were factored in for a

given year. The first was to add the number of non-cohort graduates from one year to the reported number of cohort graduates from the previous year. This approach assumed that all of the students who earned a high school diploma outside of the cohort were members of the previous cohort.

Prior research suggests that half to two-thirds of delayed students eventually return to graduate. Consequently, our second method was to add half of the “still enrolled” students for a given year to the reported cohort graduates total for that same year. Both methods yielded “adjusted” graduation rates that were 3 to 4 percentage points above the standard 4-year ACGR (Figure 1).

Figures from either method suggest that the ACGR underestimates the success rate of California high school students.

Which Schools Produce the Most Non-Cohort Graduates?

We grouped districts schools into three categories: comprehensive schools, charter schools and alternative schools. The data revealed that the majority of high school diplomas in California are awarded to students attending comprehensive schools.

In 2013-14, comprehensive schools accounted for 85 percent of the 399,041 four-year cohort graduates in the state, alternative schools accounted for 8 percent and charter schools accounted for 7 percent. Yet comprehensive schools only accounted for 20 percent of the 23,136 non-cohort graduates, while alternative schools accounted for 64 percent and charter schools accounted for 16 percent. In addition, the number of

non-cohort graduates coming from alternative schools grew by over 350 percent in the three years between 2011-12 and 2013-14, while the number of non-cohort, or delayed graduates, coming from comprehensive and charter schools decreased.

Additional evidence that the greatest number of delayed high school graduates come from alternative schools is based on the percentage of students who are over 18 years of age. From 2011-12 to 2013-14 alternative schools consistently enrolled the greatest percentage of students over the age of 18 (22.4 percent), followed by charters (15.9 percent) and comprehensive schools (just 6.2 percent).

How Effective are Schools at Getting Delayed Students to Graduate?

The study investigated two ways of measuring the rate at which students attending comprehensive, charter and alternative schools succeed in earning a high school diploma. The first measure was the standard four-year ACGR. The other was the total number of graduates (cohort and non-cohort) divided by the number of 12th grade students, which we refer to as the “grade 12 graduation rate.”

Not surprisingly, the four-year ACGR was highest in comprehensive schools, and lowest in alternative schools. Yet using the “grade 12 graduation rate,” charter and alternative schools appeared to be more effective than their respective ACGRs would suggest. This is because charter and alternative schools produce greater numbers of non-cohort graduates relative to cohort graduates. For

these same reasons there was very little difference in the cohort and grade 12 graduation rates for comprehensive schools in the state.

Conclusions

The data from this study suggest that California, like other states, has students who require more than four years to earn a diploma. As a result, the ACGR, which has increased every year since 2009-10, actually underestimates the number of students in the state who earn high school diplomas. Thus, while the ACGR may serve as an accurate measure of efficiency in getting students to graduate on time, it does not necessarily serve as an accurate measure of effectiveness for students who face a number of challenges that prevent them from finishing high school in four years. This leads to a number of recommendations.

First, California should use more than the ACGR to measure the effectiveness of schools in getting students to graduate. The ACGR may be appropriate for students who enter high school fully prepared to engage in grade-level curriculum required for graduation. But students who enter high school with below-grade level skills in reading or math, or have faced past challenges such as failed classes or disciplinary actions, may need additional time to earn a diploma. Neither they nor their school should be penalized for that. Instead, the performance of students and the schools they attend should be based on students' characteristics when they walk in the door.

Second, California should consider making available 5 and 6-year graduation rate figures

routinely available along with four-year rates. Reporting these data would help provide a better picture of how many students in California are earning a diploma outside of the traditional four-year window.

Third, graduation rates should not just be ascribed to the last school attended, but rather to all schools that students attend. The ACGR and its priority towards on time completion may be providing an unintended incentive for comprehensive high schools to push delayed students into nearby alternative schools, which may or may not provide students with the help they need to graduate. And once a student transfers, the original school is no longer accountable for that student's success or failure in graduating, no matter how long the student attended the school. Instead, graduation rates should be attributed to all schools that a student attends based on how long the student attended.

Fourth, alternative schools serve many more delayed high school students relative to comprehensive schools. Alternative schools also enroll many more adult students (i.e., students 18 years of age or older). An obvious implication here is that funding in the state must begin to account for other student subgroups that present challenges to schools beyond the current English learner, socio-economically disadvantaged, and foster students. More research is also needed to determine the unique factors and programs that assist delayed or re-entry students to earn high school diplomas.

Finally, the ACGR favors comprehensive schools in the state over schools with greater numbers of delayed high school students

such as alternative schools. Comprehensive schools enroll the vast majority of on-time students in the state and, as a result, they have much higher four-year graduation rates relative to alternative and charter schools. And while alternative schools are not supposed to be compared to traditional, comprehensive schools, the prominence of the ACGR in so many of the consequential metrics used to evaluate schools in the state ensures that they are.

Instead, alternative and dropout recovery schools – schools that serve a high proportion of at-risk students or former dropouts – should also be judged on their effectiveness in getting students to graduate based on their preparation when they walk in the door. This may include how many credits the students have earned prior to entering, their prior grades, how long they have been out of school, and their reading and math skills. Accounting for these characteristics, students and schools should be judged on the credits and grades students earn given the period of time they attend. The longer students attend, the more credits they should earn and the more progress they should make toward completing the requirements for a diploma.

In short, the ACGR is a blunt instrument for measuring the success of students and schools in graduating from high school. Although it is an improvement over ambiguous measures of high school graduation that cropped up following the passage of NCLB, it fails to account for the many pathways to high school graduation that should and do exist in California.

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2008 Policy Committee Report

"Solving California's Dropout Crisis"

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All of the above Research Reports and Policy Briefs, as well as Statistical Briefs, are available at www.cdrpsb.org

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