

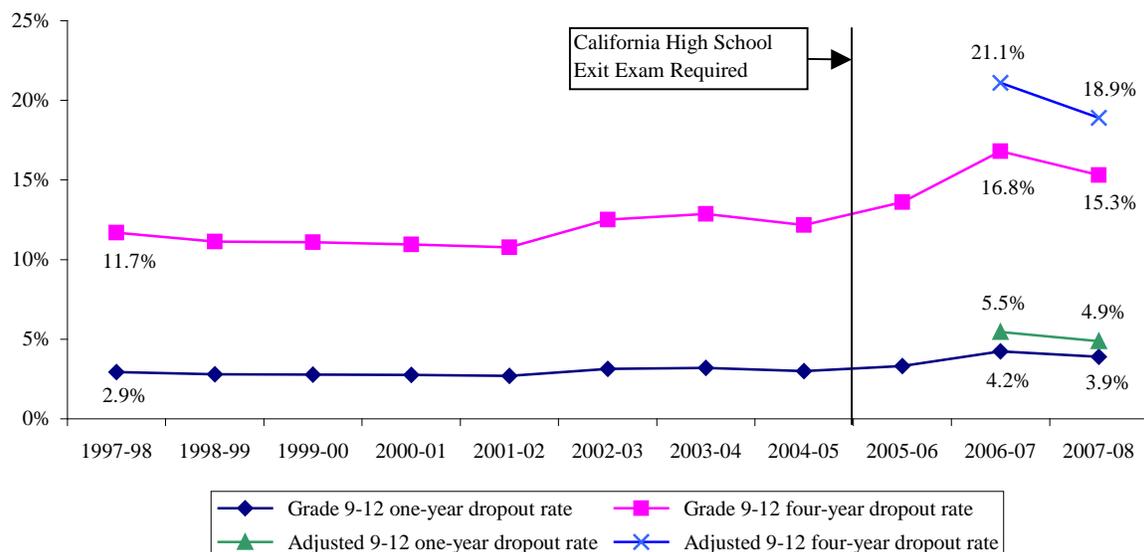
Ten-Year Trends in California's Dropout and Graduation Rates

By Russell W. Rumberger

Two important indicators of high school performance are dropout rates and graduation rates. Both indicators can be computed in several ways, each revealing something different about students' progression through high school. Yet each method is also subject to limitations based on available data. An analysis of several of these indicators over the last ten years reveals that despite recent improvements, California's dropout and graduation rates remain far worse than historical levels.

The California Department of Education (CDE) computes two dropout rates. One is an **annual dropout rate** based on the percentage of students enrolled in grades 9-12 in October of one year who were no longer enrolled by the following October, and had not earned a regular high school diploma. The other is a **four-year dropout rate**, which estimates the percentage of students who are likely to drop out over a four-year period from grades 9-12. Both rates are based on enrollment and dropouts reported by schools. Over the last 10 years, the annual rate has increased from 2.9% to 3.9%, while the four-year rate has increased from 11.7% to 15.3% (Figure 1). Beginning in 2006-07, the CDE has also reported "adjusted" dropout rates based on the state's new student longitudinal data system, CALPADS, which can verify whether transfers re-enroll. Because a large number of transfers were reclassified as dropouts, the two "adjusted" dropout rates are markedly higher than the traditional rates. All four rates decreased this past year, but the two unadjusted rates remain substantially higher than 10 years earlier.

Figure 1
California Dropout Rates, 1997-98 to 2007-08

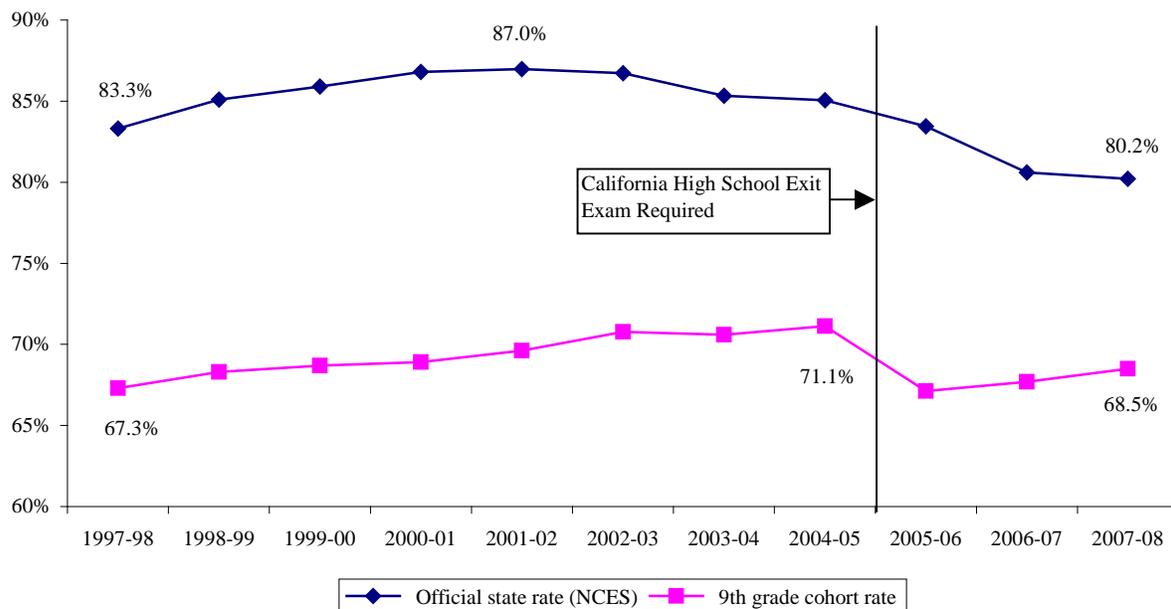


Graduation Rates

The most useful graduation rate is the percentage of entering ninth-grade students who graduate with a regular diploma within a four-year period. The federal government will require all states to report this rate for federal accountability purposes beginning in 2010-11.¹ To compute the rate accurately requires tracking individual students over their entire high school careers and CALPADS will not provide such data for at least another year.

In the meantime, the CDE estimates two graduation rates. The first rate—based on a formula approved by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)—estimates ninth-grade enrollment from graduation and dropout figures. This rate overstates the graduation rate because it excludes twelfth-grade students who neither graduate nor drop out—California had more than 49,000 such students in 2007-08. This rate has been declining for the past six years and is lower than 10 years ago (Figure 2). The second rate is based on the number of ninth-graders enrolled four years prior to graduation. This rate understates the graduation rate because it includes repeat ninth graders. This rate declined markedly after the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) was required for graduation in 2005-06, but has been increasing since then. Nonetheless, the rate is lower than eight years ago and only slightly higher than ten years ago.

Figure 2
California Graduation Rates, 1997-98 to 2007-08



Another way to look at trends is to compare growth rates of different populations. Over the last ten years, enrollment in grades 9-12 increased 25 percent, the number of high school graduates increased by 33 percent, and the number of dropouts from grades 9-12 increased by 66 percent. In other words, the number of high school dropouts in California increased twice as fast as the number of graduates. And the number of high school seniors who neither graduated nor dropped out increased by more than 100 percent.

¹ See federal requirements at: <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/reg/proposal/uniform-grad-rate.html>