

Differences and Trends in California's Dropout and Graduation Rates

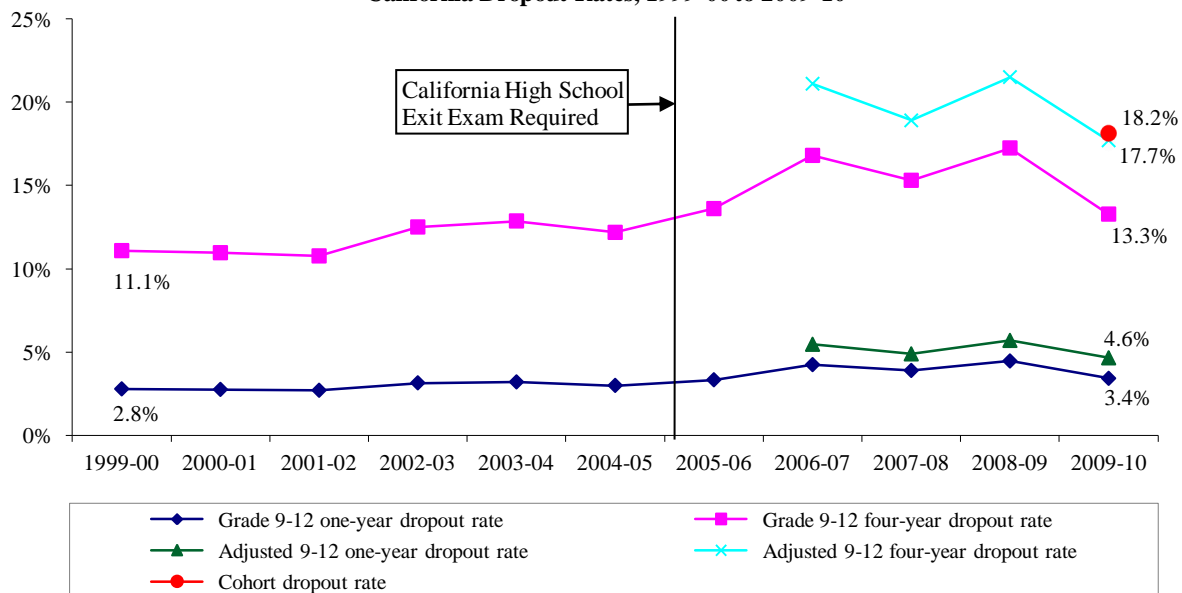
By Lauren Taylor

California has computed and reported a number of different high school dropout rates and graduation rates over the years. In August 2011, the state released new, more accurate rates based on the state's student longitudinal data system, CALPADS. This statistical brief compares these new rates with the previous dropout and graduation rates over the last ten years.

The California Department of Education (CDE) continues to calculate and report dropout rates using the original formulas (see CDRP's Statistical Brief number 12 for details about older calculations). Both one-year and four-year high school dropout rates have increased over the last ten years, but decreased between 2008-09 and 2009-10 (see Figure 1). Both rates are higher when adjusted for reported transfers who do not re-enroll in other California public schools.

Starting with the 2009-10 school year, the CDE began reporting new cohort rates. The 2009-10 cohort is defined as students who first entered 9th grade in 2006-07. At the end of the four-year period in which these students were tracked, they were classified as either graduates, other completers (special Education or GED), dropouts, or continuing students. The four-year dropout rate for this cohort of students was 18.2%, which is quite similar to the older "adjusted four-year rate" of 17.7%.

Figure 1
California Dropout Rates, 1999-00 to 2009-10

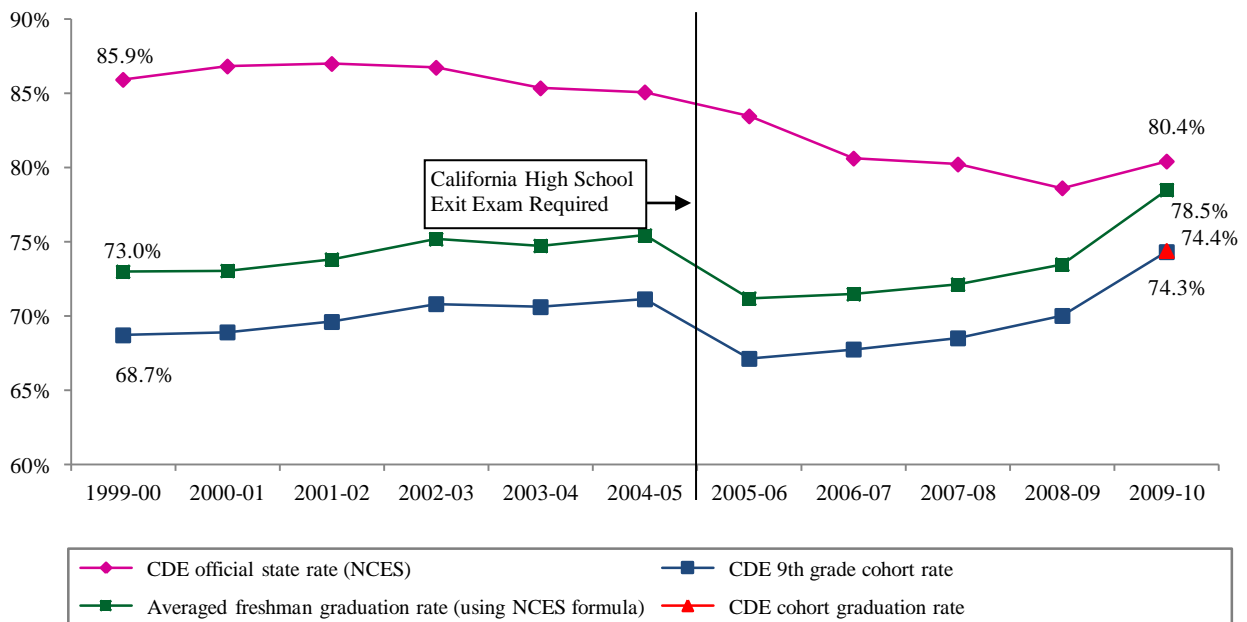


Graduation Rates

Historically, California has computed and reported two high school graduation rates, both of which attempt to estimate cohort graduation rates without longitudinal data. The federal government computes another graduation rate, the *averaged freshman graduation rate*, which averages the enrollment of 8th, 9th, and 10th grade students over a three-year period, and uses that number as an estimate of entering 9th grade enrollment. Each of these methods produces quite different rates and even different ten-year trends, although all three rates have improved over the last year.

By 2010-11, all states will be required by the U.S. Department of Education to report more accurate graduation rates, which in turn will require tracking cohorts of entering 9th grade students over their entire high school careers. In 2009-10, California reported a four-year cohort graduation rate of 74.4%. This means that almost 75% of all California public school students who first entered the 9th grade in 2006-07 graduated with a diploma four years later. As seen in Figure 2, this new rate is almost identical to the original CDE 9th grade cohort rate of 74.3%, but lower than the CDE official state rate (80.4%) and the averaged freshman graduation rate (78.5%).

Figure 2
California Graduation Rates, 1999-00 to 2009-10



Having only a single year for the new rates makes it difficult to assess differences and trends within and between the remaining rates; however, these trends will become more apparent over the years.