

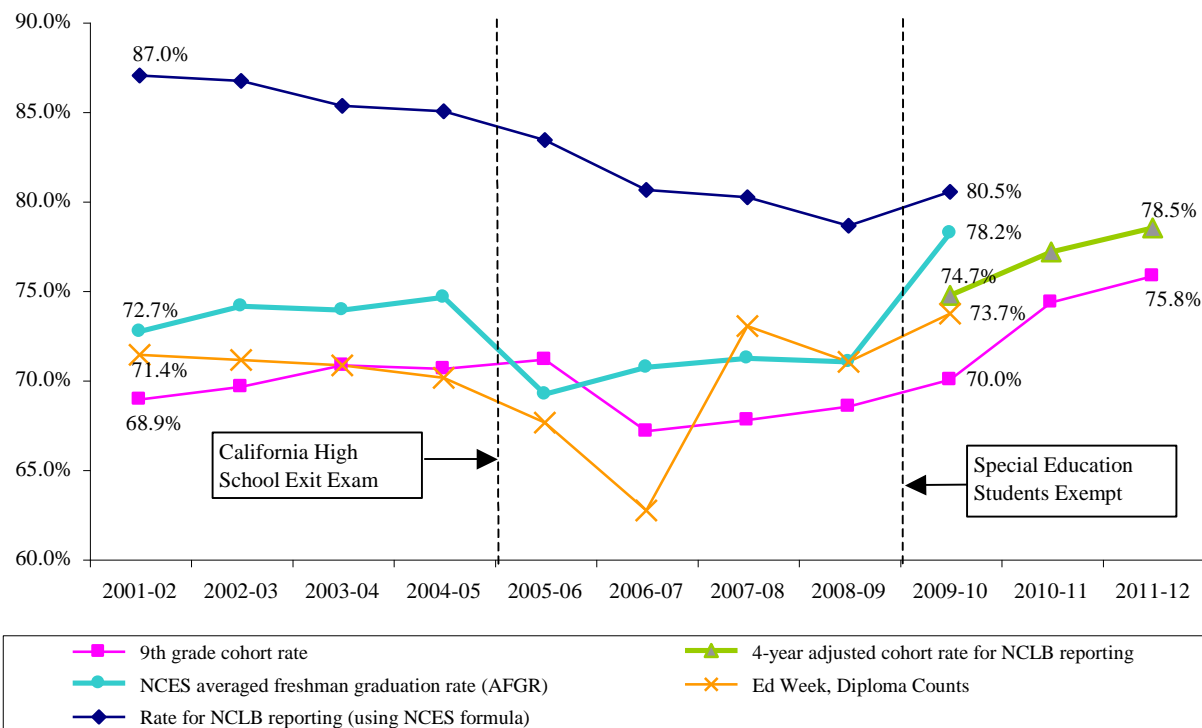
## Updated Trends in California's Graduation Rates through 2012

By Russell W. Rumberger and Lauren Taylor

California has computed and reported a number of different high school graduation rates over the years. In addition, the federal government and the national education newspaper, *Education Week*, each compute and report other measures of graduation rates for every state, including California. Because each organization can and does report their rates in the media, it can lead to confusion about what California's graduation rate really is. This brief compares these different rates over the last ten years based on the latest available data in order to sort out the confusion.

The California Department of Education has reported three different high school graduation rates over the last 10 years. The most longstanding graduation rate, known as the *ninth grade cohort rate*, is simply a ratio of the number of graduates in a given year divided by ninth grade enrollment four years earlier. This rate attempts to estimate the graduation rate for each incoming cohort of ninth graders. But because a significant number of ninth graders are retained each year, this formula tends to underestimate the graduation rate for first-time ninth graders.

California Graduation Rates, 2001-2 thru 2011-12



Beginning in 2003, California was required to report a statewide graduation rate for federal accountability under the federal law, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). California selected a formula approved by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) that was based on a ratio of the number of graduates in a given year divided by the number of graduates plus the number of dropouts from each corresponding grade level of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade cohort (9<sup>th</sup> grade dropouts four years earlier, 10<sup>th</sup> grade dropouts three years earlier, etc.). This formula tends to overestimate the actual graduation rate.

Beginning in 2012, California was required to report a statewide graduation rate based on data from the state's student longitudinal data system, CALPADS, which tracks individual students from when they first enter ninth grade. This rate, known as the *4-year adjusted cohort rate*, is simply the percentage of first-time ninth graders who graduate within four years.

Not only does each of these rates differ, they also tell a different story about the ten-year trends in California's graduation rates (see Figure). In 2009-10, when all three rates were reported, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade cohort rate was 70 percent, the NCLB rate based on the NCES formula was 80.5 percent, and the new, 4-year adjusted cohort rate as 74.7 percent. Looked at another way, the more accurate 4-year cohort rate was almost exactly half way between the underestimated 9<sup>th</sup> grade cohort rate and the overestimated NCLB-reported rate. The NCLB-reported rate also suggests that California's graduation rate had declined steadily until turning up in 2009-10, while the 9<sup>th</sup> grade cohort rate suggests California's graduation rate has been improving over the last five year.

The federal government computes another graduation rate, the *averaged freshman graduation rate*, which averages the enrollment of 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students over a three-year period, and uses that number as an estimate of entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment. That rate is reported annually in the publication, *Public School Graduates and Dropouts from the Common Core Data*.<sup>1</sup> The most recent rate reported for 2009-10 was 78.2, which was 3.5 percentage points higher than California's 4-year adjusted cohort rate. It also suggests California's graduation rate has been improving since 2005-06.

Education Week uses yet another formula for computing graduation rates, known as the *cumulative promotion index*, which is based on enrollment changes between successive grade levels in high school. These rates are reported each June in their annual dropout report, *Diplomas Count*.<sup>2</sup> The most recent rate reported for 2009-10 was 73.7, slightly below California's 4-year adjusted cohort rate. But as illustrated in the figure, this rate has been much more variable over time compared to the other rates and thus shows less definite trends.

To summarize, the 4-year adjusted cohort rate now reported by the California Department of Education is the only graduation rate based on tracking individual students over time. As a result, it is more accurate than the other rates previously reported by the state or the two rates currently reported by the federal government and Education Week.

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<sup>1</sup> To view the most recent report, see: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2013309rev>

<sup>2</sup> To view the most recent issue and a graph showing graduation rates over time, see: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2013/06/06/index.html>