

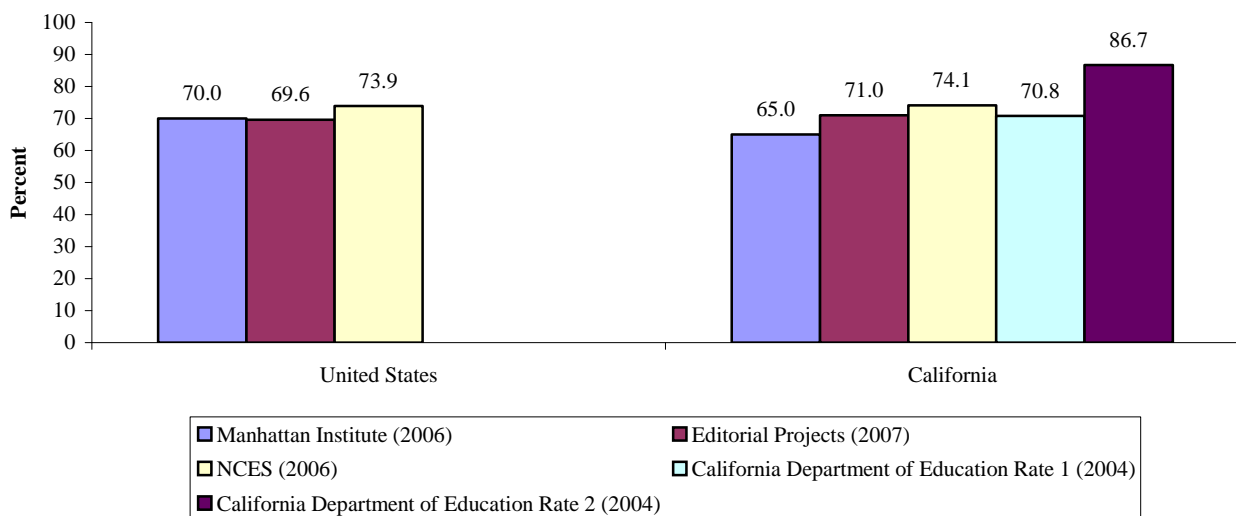
What is California's High School Graduation Rate?

By Russell W. Rumberger

One of the most important indicators of school performance is the high school graduation rate. This indicator is often included in both the federal and state accountability systems as another way to judge the performance of schools alongside the more common indicator based on student test scores.

The high school graduation rate is most often defined as the percentage of entering ninth-grade students who graduate with a regular diploma within a four-year period. Although the definition is straightforward, the measurement of this important indicator is not. The reason lies in the limitations of current student data systems that are unable to accurately measure both the size of the entering ninth-grade cohort and the numbers of students who graduate, transfer, or drop out of school in a four-year period.¹ Although some states have developed longitudinal student data systems that overcome many of these limitations, California has yet to do so. As a result, there is no agreed-upon, accurate measure of California's high school graduation rate. Instead, there are a number of alternative estimates based on different data and methods generated by a number of government agencies and private organizations.

Figure 1
Alternative Public High School Graduation Rates for 2002-03,
United States and California

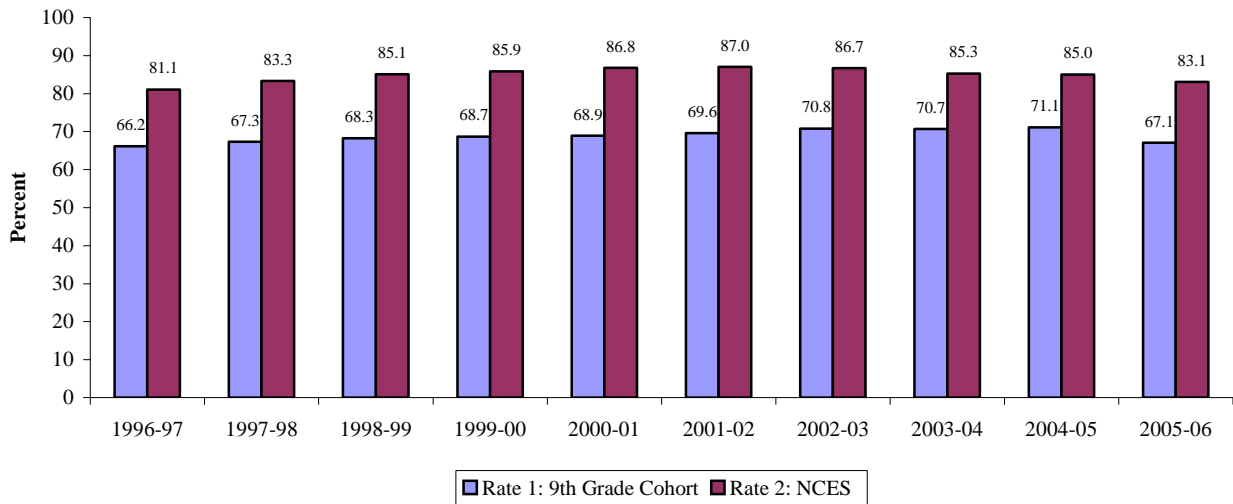


¹ See the Data Quality Campaign (<http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/>), which advocates that states calculate graduation rates based on common formula approved by the National Governors Association in 2005.

Figure 1 shows a number of different estimates of the public high school graduation rate for the U.S. and for California.² For the U.S. the estimated high school graduation rate in 2002-03 ranges from 69.6% to 73.9%. For California, the estimates range from 65.0% to 86.7%, a difference of more than 21 percentage points. Also of interest is that the same data and methods in some cases show California graduation rates *lower* than U.S. rates (Manhattan Institute), while in other cases they show California rates *higher* than U.S. rates (Editorial Projects, NCES). These differences underscore how using different data and methods can produce quite different estimates of high school graduation rates.

The California Department of Education computes two different graduation rates, based on two different formulas (see Figure 2). The first rate is based on the number of ninth-graders enrolled four years prior to graduation. The second rate—based on a formula approved by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)—estimates ninth-grade enrollment from dropout figures. The second rate is the one California uses for state and federal accountability, but the first rate is more similar to other estimates, and is considered more accurate.³

Figure 2
Alternative Public High School Graduation Rates for California,
1996-97 to 2005-06



² These estimates come from Jay P. Greene, Marcus A. Winters, *Leaving Boys Behind: Public High School Graduation Rates* (New York: Manhattan Institute, 2006) retrieved August 12, 2007, from http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_48.htm; Jennifer Laird, Mathew DeBell, and Chris Chapman, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2004* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2006), retrieved August 12, 2007, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007024>; Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, *Diploma Counts* (Washington, D.C. : Author, June, 2006), retrieved August 12, 2007, from http://www.edweek.org/media/ew/dc/2006/ca_SGB06.pdf; California Department of Education, *DataQuest*, retrieved August 12, 2007, from <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>.

³ See: Gary Orfield, Daniel Losen, Johanna Wald, and Christopher B. Swanson, *Losing our future: How minority youth are being left behind by the graduation rate crisis* (Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2004). Contributors: Urban Institute, Advocates for Children of New York, and The Civil Society Institute. Retrieved August 31, 2007, from <http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/dropouts/dropouts04.php#reports>