

Published Online: April 3, 2012

Published in Print: April 4, 2012, as **New Rules Push Down Grad Rates**

Includes correction(s): April 3, 2012

States Gird to Report Revised Graduation Rates

All states now required to use uniform formula

By **Jaclyn Zubrzycki**

States are grappling with a federal requirement that is forcing them to use a new, more uniform method of calculating high school graduation rates—a method that, in some states, is yielding rates that are 20 percentage points lower than those states have reported in the past.

Under a **2008 update** to federal education rules, the states were required to replace their patchwork of graduation-rate formulas with a four-year "cohort" rate, beginning in the 2010-11 school year, and to use that number this school year to determine whether schools are making adequate progress under the No Child Left Behind Act.

"This is the first year we have true grad-rate accountability," said Robert W. Balfanz, the co-director of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore. Because of a lag in reporting graduation rates, not all the states' rates for 2010-11 have been reported yet. But as they come out, the adjusted cohort rate will be "empowering for communities" wishing to get a picture of what's going on in their systems, according to Mr. Balfanz.

New Perspectives



SOURCE: Education Week

At the same time, the gap between states' old and new rates is also presenting communications challenges for some states, which are undertaking intensive efforts to explain to policymakers and the public why the rates differ.

Even as states begin to use the new method, applications for federal waivers of some NCLB mandates show states continuing to tinker with how graduation rates should factor into schools' scores on state accountability measures.

Accurate Measures

The rate at which students graduate from high school has been at the center of the national dialogue on education for years, but how to determine that rate accurately has been anything but clear.

Each state traditionally used its own calculation, but many of those formulas "had some real distortions," said Russell W. Rumberger, the vice provost for education partnerships for the University of California's office of the president and the director of the California Dropout Research Project.

The new rate is part of an effort to improve both the consistency and accuracy of graduation-rate records across the country and to move closer to allowing for state-by-state comparisons.

As the 2008 regulations themselves note, "establishing a uniform and more accurate measure of calculating graduation rate that is comparable across states is a critical and essential step forward in improving high school accountability."

The four-year adjusted cohort rate set out in the regulations requires states to track individual students and capture how many first-time 9th graders in a given class proceed to graduate with a standard diploma four years later. That method is considered more accurate than previous methods but often yields a graduation rate that is lower than the results of states' old formulas.

By way of comparison, the so-called "leaver rate," which was at one point in use in 32 states, calculates a percentage to represent the number of students who graduate with a standard diploma compared with the sum of those students, students who receive an alternative completion credential, and students who have dropped out over the course of

high school. Students who do not fit one of those school-leaving categories can fall through the cracks using this formula.

Another commonly used formula, the "averaged freshman graduation rate," calculates the number of students who graduate with a standard diploma in four years but relies on an estimate rather than an exact number of 9th graders.

The new calculation means that the graduation rate may appear dramatically different even if the number of students who actually graduate hasn't changed.

"It's important that it gets out that these drops aren't the result of a state doing worse. Now, we have an accurate picture," said Tara N. Tucci, a senior research and policy associate for the Alliance for Excellent Education, a Washington-based advocacy group.

States are using the new rate to improve their policies, said Ryan Reyna, a program director at the National Governors Association's Washington headquarters.

"Cohort rate and calculation has helped in development of early-warning data systems," he said. "States pushed for the new rate in the hope that with precision would come better interventions and improved outcomes."

States are staggered along the path to the new rate: Some have been using it for several years, while others are just now beginning to collect the data they need to report it. Kentucky, Idaho, and Puerto Rico received extensions from the U.S. Department Education, as they did not have data systems well-developed enough to report a cohort rate. Reporting a cohort rate requires at least four years of individual student data.

Idaho will report a cohort rate for the first time in 2013-14 and will use it for accountability in 2014-15. Kentucky will also begin using the cohort rate in 2013-14.

Other states, like Florida, made the transition quickly.

"We have had a student-identification process that allows us to do cohort for many years. We didn't have to go through as much of a change as other states," said Jane A. Fletcher, the Florida department of education's director of accountability and policy research.

"At this point, all states are reporting that they've got that basic infrastructure in place to calculate," said Paige Kowalski, the director of state policy initiatives for the Data Quality

Campaign, a Washington-based nonprofit that works to help states collect and use longitudinal education data.

"This was a policy lever that encouraged them to develop systems more quickly than they would have otherwise," she said.

Though the 2010-11 adjusted cohort rates had to be reported, the regulations did not specify when, and some states' 2010-11 rates still have not been released. States often release graduation rates up to a year after graduation so they can account for students who may have finished at the end of the summer.

Apples to Apples?

The cohort rate is considered the most accurate way to track graduation rates, but the NGA's Mr. Reyna emphasized that states' rates are still not exactly comparable.

States may define when a student enters a cohort differently, for instance, or may track students leaving their systems differently. Some states also report the number of students from a cohort who have graduated in five or six years and use that number in their accountability formulas.

Judi Miller, the assistant director for title programs and services at the Kansas department of education, echoed that concern.

"There are some nuances in the parameters that each state set, so really you can't say they're exactly the same in each state," she said.

Ms. Miller singled out home-schooling as an issue in her state: Kansas students who transfer to unaccredited homeschooling programs are recorded as dropouts, but their counterparts in Indiana, for instance, are not.

As states began reporting the new graduation rates, they undertook efforts to communicate that the apparent drop in graduation rates largely stemmed from a calculation change, not a sudden surge in dropouts.

In Oregon, for instance, "in addition to the press releases, we had articles in newsletters directly targeting district staff, and, more broadly, stakeholders," said Crystal Greene, a senior program and accountability officer in the state department of education.

That was important because "the numbers looked quite different," Ms. Greene said. For example, she said, the 2008-09 graduation rate was 85 percent using the previous calculation, but just 66 percent by the new federal rate.

In Alabama, where the graduation rate using the federal number also looks approximately 20 percentage points lower, "we've been working on this since 2008 in anticipation ... and have notified the schools and the press," said Kay Atchison Warfield, an education administrator in that state's education department.

The state will report the federal number for the first time this coming August, and Ms. Atchison Warfield says there will be a "very detailed rollout."

Some states, such as Virginia, still report an older calculation alongside the new federal rate in order to indicate trends.

But the improved data systems needed to calculate the new rate have also led some states to discover a silver lining, said the Data Quality Campaign's Ms. Kowalski.

"While graduation rates are going down, dropout rates are going down, too," she said. "'Dropout factories' are going away because it turns out kids weren't dropping out—we just lost track of them."

Ms. Kowalski said the attention to reporting data has led to a focus on "basic data-quality issues: How do we support districts and schools on data entry?"

In Alabama, Ms. Atchison Warfield said part of the state's efforts to improve its graduation rate includes training school receptionists and secretaries in data entry.

Ensuring that students are tracked properly can be complicated. States use exit codes to track where students go, and those codes, said Mr. Reyna, "vary from state to state. States have anywhere from four to near 40" such codes.

Tenuous Step Forward?

Meanwhile, states' attempts to get waivers of the No Child Left Behind law's accountability requirements may leave behind the effort to synchronize states' graduation-rate reporting. Many states' applications for such waivers would change how graduation rates are used for accountability purposes.

"In the year where finally accountability is real, waivers come along and challenge it," said Johns Hopkins' Mr. Balfanz.

"Under the regulations, you had to make AYP based on test scores and make AYP based on grad rates," said Ms. Tucci of the Alliance for Excellent Education. "But we're seeing in some states' [waiver applications] that graduation rates are weighted between 15 and 30 percent and test scores are the remainder.

"Schools could see a strong mathematical boost in accountability scores by pushing students out," she said, whereas before a graduation rate that missed a target could have prevented a school from making AYP.

In Colorado, which received one of the first NCLB waivers, the graduation rate is currently weighted at 12 percent of the overall points for high schools. In Oregon's waiver proposal, it's closer to 35 percent.

Kentucky had proposed that the graduation rate be weighted at 14 percent, but changed that to 20 percent in its approved plan.

The graduation-rate regulations also require states to break down the figures for student subgroups to highlight the performance of various groups deemed academically at risk. Some states' old rates were already disaggregated; others, like Kansas', were not.

But many states have used the waiver application to change how their subgroups are defined.

For instance, some waiver applications include the creation of a so-called "super subgroup"—a group that combines several at-risk groups—that allows the state to boost the number of schools with small numbers of minority students that are held accountable for minority-student achievement.

But, Ms. Tucci said, that approach may also mean the graduation rates of certain groups are masked.

For its part, the federal Education Department said in a March 23 email to *Education Week* that it had "not, to date, granted any waivers of the 2008 grad-rate regulations," and that each state is considered on its own for its waiver application and proposed accountability system.

While the new graduation rates will give educators and policymakers "a better idea of what the nature of the problem is," said the University of California's Mr. Rumberger, the real work is yet to come.

"Improving graduation rates is a huge challenge still," he said, "and I think it requires effort at federal, state, and local levels."

Special coverage of district and high school reform and its impact on student opportunities for success is supported in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.