

## **High School Dropouts: The Story Behind The Numbers**

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High school dropouts have been the focus of unprecedented attention, and rightly so if our education system is to meet the needs of an increasingly demanding workplace. But for all the attention dropouts receive, the results are, at best, ambiguous and, at worst, inadequate.

The United States Department of Education requires state departments of education to report graduation rates. These rates help to determine whether schools are meeting the federal mandate for “adequate yearly progress” in educating the youth of America. Just as importantly, accurate dropout data holds the potential to establish and sustain public trust and improve the education services we provide to our youth.

South Carolina currently uses a number of terms when reporting high school dropouts: completion rate, dropout, dropout collection cycle, dropout rate and high school completer. They can be very confusing if one is not familiar with their specific meanings and how each factors into the equation of calculating a dropout. This confusion is a pivotal characteristic in the discussion about shaping education policy.

A South Carolina dropout is someone who leaves school before graduation or completion of a “program.” A dropout rate is the proportion of students who leave during a single year without completion of a program or entering another school. The confusion arises with how, and how many ways a dropout is defined and the data that is actually reported.

For example, in 2004, South Carolina awarded 32,310 diplomas. Those same students in 2001 (while in the ninth grade) numbered 64,735. The high-school completion of this specific group closely corresponds to independent analyses that reported South Carolina graduation rates between 51 percent and 53 percent. For the same student group, the state reported an average dropout rate of 3.17 percent and graduation rate of 76.81 percent for 2004.

South Carolina is certainly not alone when it comes to creating public confusion over defining, calculating and reporting school completion information. With very few exceptions, states provide highly ambiguous dropout data and have set extremely small goals to improve their progress. Most states have said that any improvement in their rate is sufficient to meet the adequate year progress standard. Four states have said that progress of at least 0.1 percent is adequate (California, Louisiana, Maryland and North Carolina). Two states have said no progress whatsoever, as long as the graduation rate doesn't decline is sufficient, to meet the standard New Mexico and South Carolina.

Federal education officials want better accountability. U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education Ray Simon recently has stressed the importance of high school reform and thoroughness in calculating and reporting information. He emphasized the "urgent need for better graduation rate data to make high schools more accountable and to help prevent students from dropping out. "

High school dropout rates affect us all via economies and public welfare, not to mention the tax revenue earmarked for education. The ultimate goals of education are to serve students, practice sound leadership and exercise stewardship of taxpayer dollars. It's worth wondering aloud if we are doing our best to fulfill those goals when no progress is viewed as adequate progress in South Carolina.

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