

Wyoming's High School Graduation and Dropout Rates and Policies: An Overview

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1. Who has authority to decide what “high school graduation rate” means, and how is it currently defined?

Graduation rate is a key component of federal Title I (NCLB) accountability provisions for states, districts, and schools. In October of 2008, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) announced final regulations establishing a uniform and more accurate way of calculating high school graduation rates that will be comparable across states. After issuing the proposed regulations in April 2008, the USDE reviewed the more than 400 comments received from stakeholders around the nation and made several substantive changes based on those comments. The October 2008 announcement, “A Uniform, Comparable Graduation Rate¹,” provides a straightforward and detailed definition for use by all states:

A Uniform and Accurate Definition of Graduation Rate: The Four-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate

An accurate method of calculating graduation rates that is uniform across states is necessary to improve high school accountability. Requiring school officials to have written confirmation before removing a student from a cohort will improve the accuracy of graduation rate calculations. Written confirmation will also ensure that students who have dropped out of school are not counted as transfers and will consequently hold schools accountable for dropouts and others who do not graduate from high school with a regular diploma.

- The final regulations define the “four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate” as the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who entered high school four years earlier (adjusting for transfers in and out, émigrés and deceased students—see below).
 - Students who graduate in four years include students who earn a regular high school diploma at the end of their fourth year; before the end of their fourth year; and, if a state chooses, during a summer session immediately following their fourth year.
 - To remove a student from a cohort, a school or district must confirm in writing that a student has transferred out, emigrated to another country, or is deceased.
 - For students who transfer out of a school, the written confirmation must be official and document that the student has enrolled in another school or in an educational program that culminates in a regular high school diploma.

¹ <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/reg/proposal/uniform-grad-rate.html>

2. Is there documentation that provides specific, detailed guidance for data collection and calculation needed to meet federal graduation rate reporting requirements?

In December of 2008, the USDE released detailed guidance for implementation of the uniform graduation rate across the nation. The guidance was announced as a part of a press release, “U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings Announces Guidance to Assist in Establishing Uniform High School Graduation Rate²,” and attached as a PDF document, “High School Graduation Rate Guidance³.” Select definitions and guidance that follow are taken from this thirty eight page document.

² <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2008/12/12232008.html>

³ <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/hsgrguidance.pdf>

3. How is the four-year graduation rate calculated?

The following formula provides an example of the four-year graduation rate for the cohort entering 9th grade for the first time in the fall of the 2008-2009 school year and graduating by the end of the 2011-2012 school year.

$$\text{Four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate} = \frac{\text{Number of cohort members who earned a regular high school diploma by the end of the 2011- 2012 school year}}{\text{Number of first-time 9th graders in fall 2008 (starting cohort) plus students who transfer in, minus students who transfer out, emigrate, or die during school years 2008-2009, 2009-2010, 2010-2011, and 2011-2012}}$$

4. How is a “regular high school diploma” defined?

Under 34 C.F.R. §200.19(b)(1)(iv), a “regular high school diploma” means the standard high school diploma awarded to students in a State that is fully aligned with the State’s academic content standards and does not include a GED credential, certificate of attendance, or any alternative award. The term “regular high school diploma” also includes a “higher diploma” that is awarded to students who complete requirements above and beyond what is required for a regular diploma.

5. Which students may be “removed from a cohort”?

Only a student who transfers out and enrolls in another school or in an educational program that culminates in the award of a regular high school diploma, emigrates to another country, or dies may be removed from a high school’s or LEA’s cohort. Before removing a student from a cohort, a school or LEA must obtain confirmation in writing that the student transferred out, emigrated, or is deceased. No

other students may be removed from the cohort. Thus, schools and LEAs must ensure that a student who drops out of high school is not deemed a transfer for purposes of calculating graduation rate; rather, the student must remain in the adjusted cohort— that is, the denominator of the graduation rate calculation.

6. What is the definition of a “transfer”?

A transfer into a cohort occurs when a student enrolls after the beginning of the entering cohort's first year in high school, up to and including in grade 12. A transfer out of a cohort occurs when a student leaves a school and enrolls in another school or in an educational program that culminates in the award of a regular high school diploma. A student who is retained in grade, enrolls in a GED program, or leaves school for any other reason may not be counted in the four-year or extended-year graduation rate as a transfer and must remain in the adjusted cohort (i.e., must be included in the denominator of the graduation rate for that cohort) (34 C.F.R. §200.19(b)(1)(ii)(B)(2)).

7. If a student re-enrolls in a public high school after having dropped out of school for a period of time, how may a school or LEA count that student in the four-year graduation rate?

The adjusted cohort graduation rate requires a State to have in place an accurate student record system that can track the progress of individual students over time. This system must record when a student has dropped out of school (and may not count him or her as a student who has transferred out). If, for example, a student who was a first-time 9th grader in 2008-2009 drops out in 2009-2010 after tenth grade, and then re-enrolls in high school in 2011-2012, that student may be deemed to have transferred into the receiving school and should be assigned to the cohort in which the student was a member when he or she started 9th grade for the first time (2008-2009). Unless the student skipped a grade later in high school or caught up with the original cohort in some other manner, that student could not graduate within four years of starting 9th grade, and therefore would count as a non-graduate in the four-year graduation rate. As long as the student re-enrolls before the State determines the four-year graduation rate for that student's cohort, the student would no longer be recorded as a drop out and the student record system should be adjusted accordingly.

8. What is Wyoming's graduation rate, and how do we compare on a national basis?

Historically, and until all states are able to fully implement the United States Department of Education (USDE) “Uniform, Comparable Graduation Rate” introduced in late 2008, graduation rate calculations and related data collection methodologies have varied from state to state. To further cloud the issue, the USDE calculates a “standardized” graduation rate for each state using a different method than most states, and numerous public and private interest groups also use what they identify as “standardized”

graduation rate calculations that often vary from both states' and the USDE's methods. In all cases, published graduation rates are based on incomplete information and require complex, well-intentioned assumptions to be made.

The Wyoming Department of Education (WDE) calculates Wyoming's last four years' high school graduation rates as:

- 81.5% - class of 2005
- 81.6% - class of 2006
- 79.5% - class of 2007
- 79.3% - class of 2008

The following is a comparison of Wyoming's class of 2006 graduation rate as calculated by three different organizations: (Note – USDE and interest group calculation of graduation rates typically runs two years behind individual state ability to calculate and publish rates.)

- 81.6% - WDE
- 76.1% - U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
 - National rate published as 73.2% by the NCES
 - The NCES places Wyoming ranked 27th in the nation
- 73.2% - Education Week
 - National rate published as 69.2% by Education Week
 - Education Week places Wyoming ranked 23rd in the nation

Despite claims by various organizations on the "reliability" of their graduation rate methods, implementation of the new USDE rate will enable the first genuine opportunity to calculate accurate and reliable graduation rates, and provide ability for valid state to state comparisons to be made.

9. What are the reasons for discrepancies in the calculation of graduation rates across states and by various organizations?

Reasons include:

- Lack of a statutory base to create and enforce requirements for comparable data collection and reporting, leading to subsequent differences in the development of states' approaches;
- Lack of comprehensive guidance on the meaning of "transfers" and "dropouts" (as well as all other components of graduation rate calculations);
- Difficulty in accurately tracking student mobility across districts and states;
- Technology, data collection, and data processing limitations at schools, districts, states, and the federal government.

Fortunately, implementation of the USDE "Uniform, Comparable Graduation Rate," will eliminate the guidance and mobility problems, and technology and resources can now be expected to meet demands.

10. When will Wyoming first report using the new USDE “Uniform, Comparable Graduation Rate”?

Wyoming’s first step in enabling calculation of the new USDE rate began with student level reporting of graduates and dropouts following the 2006-07 school year. The WDE continues to work in partnership with districts and national student information system (SIS) vendors to enable the comprehensive collection of student exit status necessary to meet federal requirements.

Wyoming will officially begin reporting under USDE guidelines effective with the class of 2011. As graduation rates are cohort based, therefore requiring tracking (data collection) of a student population over four years, the phase-in process has already begun. As such, from now through several years after 2011 reporting, the accuracy of Wyoming’s reported rates will continue to grow in response to changes in data collection methodology and increasing data quality at districts.

11. The National Governor’s Association (NGA) graduation rate, endorsed by all fifty governors, has received quite a bit of press recently. Is this NGA rate the same as the new USDE rate?

The NGA rate is nearly identical to the USDE rate in most respects. The USDE rate is slightly more restrictive than the NGA rate in some circumstances. Wyoming is also in position to begin reporting the NGA rate when the new USDE rate is first reported.

12. What is the dropout rate calculation used in Wyoming?

Dropout rates are calculated annually as the number of dropouts in a grade (or span of grades) divided by the average enrollment in the grade (or span of grades) over the course of the reporting year. Dropout rates calculations are not federally defined.

13. What are Wyoming’s dropout rates?

Wyoming’s dropout rates over the last four years:

Grade / Grade Span	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
9	2.5%	3.1%	1.8%	1.8%
10	4.4%	5.9%	5.9%	6.2%
11	5.7%	6.7%	6.1%	5.9%
12	6.8%	7.0%	7.3%	6.9%
9-12	4.7%	5.6%	5.1%	5.1%

14. How are dropout rates related to graduation rates? Is one rate more informative than the other?

Graduation and dropout rates are each published annually, but dropout rates are based on a single year of data while graduation rates are high school cohort rates, based on four years of data. There is a relationship between the two rates, but the relationship is complex and neither rate is derived from the other (they are not directly comparable).

While dropout data is used in the calculation of graduation rates, students may dropout multiple times so are included multiple times in school, district, and state dropout rates while only being counted once as a dropout, or if they reenroll and graduate, as an on-time or extended-year graduate in graduation rate calculations.

15. Where are Wyoming's graduation and dropout data published?

During the transition to reporting via the FUSION portal, data reporting remains available through the "Data Collection and Education Statistics" link on the Wyoming Department of Education homepage: <http://www.k12.wy.us/>. Wyoming publishes graduation and dropout related data in two different report types:

The WDE Statistical Report Series contains graduate and dropout data, specifically in Stat Series Five different reports are available to access historical graduation and dropout counts and rates.

The WDE Every Student Counts (ESC) reports contain state, district, and school graduation rates in accordance with state and federal report card publication requirements. ESC report access: https://wdesecure.k12.wy.us/stats/wde.esc.show_menu (make sure to install Adobe SVG viewer per provided instructions in order to view these reports)