

# Defining Dropout

## FACTS ON DROPOUT PREVENTION

One important dropout prevention tool is found within the practice of accurately counting, tracking, and reporting high school dropout rates. The implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), sparked, "...controversies over graduation rates" that "helped push high school reform to the forefront..." according to a 2004 report.<sup>2\*</sup>

While NCLB has instituted reporting requirements

for graduation rates, research shows that varying methods of counting and defining dropout from state to state make it difficult to accurately assess the high school dropout problem. Researchers suggest that the system instituted to ensure accountability seems to have skewed the numbers.<sup>9</sup>

### What to Count: Completers vs. Leavers

While NCLB legislation requires that schools report their graduation rate, little attention is given to the distinction between graduation rate versus dropout rate, when, in fact, the numbers are calculated quite differently.

Chris Swanson, a leading dropout

researcher, points out that, "...several states are even being allowed to use dropout rate in their accountability systems despite the laws stipulation of graduate not dropout rates...."<sup>7</sup> This assertion illuminates how important this consideration may be for schools adopting a dropout prevention program.

Dropout counts differ from gradua-

state and local educational agencies and schools across the nation, dropout and completion data are collected at educational agencies and schools across the nation.<sup>6</sup>

When NCLB was implemented in 2002, schools were required to define graduates according to its standards—not the standards of

NCES.

In fact, when a 2006 Task Force

**Arkansas Department of Education Dropout Rate:** The percentage of students dropping out of school in Grades 7-12 from October of one school year to October of the next school year. Students who enter a GED program are considered as dropout students under the mandates of NCLB.<sup>1</sup>

tion rates, because they are used to count completion rates. Since there is not a consensus on how to identify a student as a dropout, graduation rates have become unreliable.

### Whose Count: School Accountability

The federal requirement for schools to count "graduation rate" and not "drop out rate" often leaves the close examination of drop out numbers in the dark. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has been counting drop out numbers since the early 80's. This arm of the U.S. Department of Education collects data on high school completion and drop out each year through the Common Core of Data (CCD), a census of public sector

examined what it termed "GCD (graduation, completion, and dropout) indicators" closely, it urged policymakers to begin discussions to initiate the dissolve of this discrepancy:

"...the Census Bureau defines a high school graduate as a completer not only by graduation from a diploma-granting program but also by equivalent means such as the GED....this inconsistency seems destined to engender confusion...."<sup>4</sup>

A GED earner is considered neither a "completer," nor a "leaver" by census guidelines. If they are not counted as a graduate, with consideration to NCLB requirements, but not counted as a dropout by census bureau calculations, then where do

Figure A:<sup>3</sup>

## How does the EPE Research Center calculate graduation rates?

In this report, the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center uses the **Cumulative Promotion Index** (CPI) method to calculate graduation rates. The CPI represents graduating from high school as a process rather than a single event. Specifically, it captures the four key steps a student must take in order to graduate – three grade-to-grade promotions (9 to 10, 10 to 11, and 11 to 12) and ultimately earning a diploma (grade 12 to graduation).

The formula below illustrates the CPI formula for calculating graduation rates. The class of 2002-03, the most recent year for which data were available, is used as an example.

$$\text{CPI} = \frac{10\text{th graders, fall 2003}}{9\text{th graders, fall 2002}} \times \frac{11\text{th graders, fall 2003}}{10\text{th graders, fall 2002}} \times \frac{12\text{th graders, fall 2003}}{11\text{th graders, fall 2002}} \times \frac{\text{Diploma recipients, spring 2003}}{12\text{th graders, fall 2002}}$$

By multiplying grade-specific promotion ratios together, the CPI estimates the likelihood that a 9th grader will complete high school on time with a regular diploma, given the schooling conditions prevailing during a particular school year. The CPI counts only students receiving standard high school diplomas as graduates, following the definition of a graduate adopted by the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

GED recipients fall?

In light of the debate on how to calculate dropout rates, it has become difficult to define dropout, and, consequently, to assess the dropout problem. This difficulty has been noticed by the U.S. Department of Education. In fact, at a 2008 press conference held by America's Promise Alliance, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings supported moving to a uniform method of calculating graduation rate, which has been adopted by the National Governor's Association (NGA).<sup>8</sup> Sixteen states are already

using the NGA formula, known as the "Compact Formula," including Arkansas.<sup>5</sup>

### How to Count: Multiple Perspectives

Identification of a GED recipient as a dropout or a graduate is not the only source of confusion when it comes to defining dropout across districts. Some schools grapple with how to track transfer students, incarcerated students, and others who become invisible once they leave the building. The Compact Formula does allow for adjustment

follows:<sup>5</sup>

$$\text{Graduation Rate} = \frac{\text{[students graduating within four years with a diploma]}}{\text{[(first-time entering ninth graders four years earlier)]} + \text{[Transfer In - Transfer Out]}}$$

While the NGA poses one formula, until the issue of how to define and count a dropout versus a graduate is resolved, it may be good to consider using more than one method to accumulate data. For instance, using multiple formulas such as the CPI (see Figure A<sup>3</sup>) along with the Compact Formula may render more definitive dropout numbers.

As one of the 16 states using the Compact Formula, Arkansas may also consider collecting longitudinal data, especially with the implementation of a statewide grant to help collect such data (see *Tools You Can Use Fact* sheet.)

### What Experts Are Saying...

- *It is clearly imperative that we develop more accurate information on the true dropout rates that prevail in schools and districts across the country....<sup>6</sup>*
- *It is likely that the bulk of the dropout undercount results from a...troubling root cause—an underdeveloped and underresourced data collection infrastructure.<sup>7</sup>*
- *...the accountability movement that is fueling the need for more accurate dropout reports could be helping to skew the numbers.<sup>9</sup>*

of the denominator to include transfers in and out of the system, being calculated as