

Brief 2: Assessing the North Carolina Dropout Challenge

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Does North Carolina have a dropout crisis?

Different definitions and figures for dropout rates and graduation rates abound in the policymaking world (see Brief 3). Depending on what number we are looking at, school dropout may or may not seem like a crisis; however, too many students in the United States and in North Carolina are not graduating from high school. While certain figures might show the dropout problem to be minimal, it is important for us to consider these numbers in a wider context and not to take any individual figure at face value.

This brief provides an overview of the school dropout circumstances at play in North Carolina. Much of what holds in this state is true around the nation. State and local policymakers and practitioners, however, will benefit from as thorough an understanding as possible of the characteristics and conditions that contribute to North Carolina's dropout problem.

Graduation rates and dropout rates in North Carolina

Dropout Rates. North Carolina State Board of Education Policy (HSP-Q-001) defines a dropout as “any student who leaves school for any reason before graduation or completion of a program of studies without transferring to another elementary or secondary school.”

For purposes of data reporting, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) breaks the definition down into smaller pieces. According to the “Dropout Data Collecting and Reporting Procedures” manual, a student is counted as a dropout if he/she meets the following criteria:

(1) student “was enrolled in school at some time during the reporting year;”

- (2) student “was not enrolled on day 20 of the current year;” and
- (3) student “has not graduated from high school or completed a state or district approved educational program and has not met any exclusions.”^{1,2}

Students who meet these criteria are counted in a rate called the “event dropout rate.”

Graduation Rates. In 2005, the averaged freshman graduation rate in North Carolina was 72.6 percent; nationwide, this rate for 2005 was 74.7 percent.³ This means that of 100,000 incoming ninth-graders in North Carolina in 2001, approximately 27,000 had not graduated at the end of four years. (Please see page 15 for further explanation of the averaged freshman graduation rate.)

In 2006, North Carolina began using a “four-year cohort graduation rate.” The change in the graduation rate formula came in response to No Child Left Behind. Prior to 2006, North Carolina was calculating its graduation rate as the percentage of each year's 12th-graders who graduated in four years or less, which yielded a much higher rate.

Using this new formula to get a cohort rate, the NCDPI found that, of the students who entered ninth grade in North Carolina in the 2002-2003 school year, 68.1 percent graduated in 2006.

The newly calculated four-year cohort graduation rate represents the emerging national consensus about how to look at the dropout issue. Researchers and policymakers agree that the event dropout rate alone may no longer suffice as a valid measure of how many students are leaving school. However, it is important to consider the event dropout rate and the cohort graduation rate in the context of one another.

- At 5.24 percent, the 2006-2007 event dropout

rate was the highest that it has been since the 2001-2002 school year (5.25 percent).

- The event dropout rate increased by 6 percent from the 2004-2005 school year to the 2005-2006 school year.
- The event dropout rate increased by 4 percent from the 2005-2006 school year to the 2006-2007 school year.

Please see page 14 for further explanation of the event dropout rate.

There are several explanations for the discrepancy between the cohort graduation rate and the event dropout rate as Jay P. Greene explains in a 2002 report for the Manhattan Institute. First, district- and state-reported dropout rates often face self-reporting errors. These errors stem in part from the pressure on districts and individual schools to keep dropout rates low. As a result, they are more likely to assign a student whose whereabouts are unknown into one of the exempt categories rather than to the dropout category. This results in a reported dropout rate that is lower than the true dropout rate.

Second, because dropout rates are reported as a one-year rate, they are often deceptively low. Students drop out of school in each of the years between the eighth and 12th grade, but the dropout rate only captures one year of this span. Greene explains, “It is like calculating a credit card interest rate as a monthly percentage instead of an annual percentage: The rate feels low, but in truth it compounds over a longer period of time.” He and a growing number of researchers feel that the four-year cohort graduation rate is a much more accurate picture of who is actually graduating from high school than the event dropout rate.

The 2006 four-year cohort graduation rate also reveals

gaps in graduation rates between different groups of students. It is clear from the table below that minority and low-income students in North Carolina and across the United States are graduating at a lesser rate than their white or higher income peers. The table shows the graduation rates for the class of 2006 by demographic group.

Overview of North Carolina dropout policies and legislation

Both North Carolina and the federal government have passed numerous laws and associated policies that have implications for school dropout prevention. Some of the key statutes and policies in North Carolina are highlighted here.

The age of compulsory school attendance in North Carolina is set by Article 27 of N.C. General Statute 115c-378, which requires all students between the ages of 7 and 16 to attend school.

North Carolina Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rates, 2006

	Ninth-Graders in 2002-2003	Graduates in 2005-2006	Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rate
All Students	103,441	70,484	68.1
Male	51,754	33,045	63.9
Female	51,687	37,439	72.4
Native American	1,415	723	51.1
Asian	2,065	1,530	74.1
Black	30,261	18,155	60.0
Hispanic	5,091	2,636	51.8
Multiracial	1,410	920	65.2
White	63,199	46,520	73.6
Economically Disadvantaged	7,804	4,314	55.3
Limited English Proficiency	1,022	558	54.6
Students with Disabilities	9,310	4,645	49.9

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

North Carolina Legislation and Policies Related to School Dropout Prevention

Legislation/Policy	Description	Status
Session Law 2007-323 (House Bill 1473)	\$7 million appropriation for dropout prevention	Dropout prevention grant committee allocated funds in January 2008. Details page 11.
Session Law 2007-277 (Senate Bill 1030)	Requires the State Board of Education to develop a framework for a “Reaching One’s Potential for Excellence” (ROPE) Scholars Program. This program is designed to strengthen education in middle school with long-term goals of reducing the high school dropout rate and increasing high school and college graduation rates.	State Board submitted report in October 2007. < http://www.ncleg.net/documentsites/committees/JLEOC/Reports%20Received/2007%20Reports%20Received/Ropes%20Scholars%20Pilot%20Program.pdf >
Session Law 2006-0176 (Senate Bill 571)	Requires the State Board of Education to report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee various information on school counselors and their roles in dropout prevention.	State Board submitted report in May 2007 and passed State Board Policy Q-PC-012 in June 2006, which delineates the appropriate roles of school counselors. < http://dpi.state.nc.us/docs/studentssupport/counseling/eportrevisionsl06176scdoprevfinal607.pdf > < http://dpi.state.nc.us/docs/studentssupport/counseling/report2sl06176scjob.pdf >
Session Law 2005-0271 (Senate Bill 408)	Requires the State Board of Education to identify research-based best practices and model programs to reduce the dropout rate and the number of suspended students, “especially in high-poverty schools with diverse student populations” and report findings to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee.	State Board submitted report in 2006. < www.ncpublicschools.org/sbe_meetings/0512/0512_HSP09.pdf >
Session Law 2002-178 (Senate Bill 1275)	Requires the State Board of Education to develop a plan to improve tracking of dropout data.	State Board increased the weight of dropout in the ABC growth formula, starting with the 2004-2005 school year. < www.ncpublicschools.org/sbe_meetings/0401/0401_HSP04.pdf >
State Board Policy HSP-Q-001	Defines dropout and state policy regarding dropout prevention and students-at-risk.	State Board adopted the policy in 2004. < http://sbepolicy.dpi.state.nc.us/ >

In addition to the statutory attendance requirements, there are other federal and state laws and state policies that address the dropout issue. The table on page 10 provides a brief description of recent state legislation and relevant policies.

In 2007, the North Carolina Legislature passed Session Law 2007-323, which created a one-time appropriation of \$7 million for programs and initiatives targeted at students who were at risk of dropping out. In January 2008, the funds were awarded in the form of Dropout Prevention Grants. Sixty entities across North Carolina received grants ranging from \$25,000 to \$150,000 that must be expended by Dec. 31, 2008. For a brief description of grant recipients and their programs, please see <<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/newsroom/news/2007-08/20080123-01>>.

Current efforts in dropout prevention in North Carolina

A wide range of dropout prevention efforts are under way in North Carolina. Many districts and schools employ multiple strategies for addressing the dropout challenge. Following are explanations of some of the strategies that the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) considers to be best practices and examples of these programs that are in place in North Carolina.

School-Community Collaboration

According to the NDPC/N, “school-community collaboration occurs when groups or agencies come together to establish an educational community.” These groups can include schools, homes, places of worship, community organizations and local businesses. Because schools do not exist in isolation, programs that strive for collaboration between school and community help to meet the nonacademic needs of students.

One national school-community collaboration program is Communities in Schools (CIS). CIS “bring[s] caring adults into the schools to address children’s unmet needs [and] provides the link between educators and the community.” CIS programs focus on making sure that students have

access to the “five basics”:

- (1) a one-on-one relationship with a caring adult;
- (2) a safe place to grow and learn;
- (3) a healthy start and a healthy future;
- (4) a marketable skill to use upon graduation; and
- (5) a chance to give back to peers and community.⁴

Approximately 38 LEAs in North Carolina have a local CIS program. For a list of LEAs with CIS programs, please see <<http://www.cisnc.org/code/county/loccontact.htm>>.

North Carolina also has the Child and Family Support Team Initiative (CFST). The CFST initiative has placed 100 nurse-social worker teams (called CFST leaders) in 100 schools in 21 LEAs. The CFST leaders work to identify students at risk of failing and use child and family teams to connect those students to appropriate community services.

Early Interventions

Research shows that a potential high school dropout can be identified as early as the third grade. The education foundation that a child receives early in his or her schooling can have a significant impact on academic achievement in later years. Early Interventions are programs that are designed to ensure a high level of student engagement in the early years of schooling.

In North Carolina, there are several early childhood education programs to help prepare students for academic achievement early in their academic careers:

- **Even Start Family Literacy.** Even Start programs aim to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy and improve educational opportunities of low-income families through “integrated early childhood education, adult literacy and parenting information.” There are currently 14 Even Start programs in North Carolina. For more information, please see <<http://www.osr.nc.gov/EvenStart/indexFull.asp>>.
- **More at Four.** More at Four “is a high quality pre-kindergarten program that serves children who are at-risk and prepares them for success in school.” More at Four programs are located in all

LEAs. For more information, please see <<http://www.osr.nc.gov/MoreFour/index.asp>>.

- **Smart Start.** Smart Start is a nationally recognized, statewide early childhood initiative in North Carolina designed to ensure that all children enter school ready to learn. Smart Start is funded by state and private funds and currently provides services in all 100 North Carolina counties. For more information, please see <<http://www.smartstart-nc.org/>>.
- **Kindergarten Health Assessment.** North Carolina has one of the most comprehensive health assessments in the United States. The Kindergarten Health Assessment identifies undiagnosed health or developmental needs. For more information, please see <<http://www.nchealthyschools.org/docs/home/kha0809.pdf>>.

In addition to these four programs, low-income children in North Carolina also have access to Title I preschool and Head Start preschool programs.

Alternative Learning Opportunities

Many schools and districts are beginning to develop programs designed to engage students who are disconnected from the traditional high school model. These types of programs include early college high schools, content-specific high schools and smaller programs within regular schools to engage students who are at risk of dropping out.

- **Learn and Earn.** The statewide Learn and Earn initiative allows students to take college courses online and receive both high school and college credit for the course. For more information, please see <<http://ncclearnandearn.gov>>.
- **Early College High Schools.** There are many Early College High Schools across the state. These schools are typically collaborations between an LEA and a local college and are often located on a college campus. Students at Early College High Schools earn a high school diploma and an associate's degree or two years of credit toward a bachelor's degree during their four years of high school. Approximately 45 LEAs in North

Carolina have Early College High Schools.⁵

- **Specialized Content Schools.** Some districts are also beginning to develop schools that focus on a specific area, such as science or engineering. In these schools, the curriculum for all of the courses typically relates to the focus of the school. One example of this in North Carolina is the AHS Zoo School at Asheboro High School. The AHS Zoo School is “a science-themed, cross-curricular focused small learning community that actively engages students in real life experiences in our 1,500 acre campus [where] students have the opportunity to work with NC Zoo staff and apply their scientific investigation skills to solve problems.”⁶

High School Transition Programs

Research shows that students often struggle with the transition from middle school to high school. Several studies have found that students who perform poorly in the ninth grade are more likely to drop out of school even when controlling for individual student and school characteristics and previous academic performance. In North Carolina, approximately 15 percent of ninth-grade students do not earn enough credits to be promoted to the tenth grade each year.

To address this problem, many LEAs and schools have developed freshman transition programs to help students succeed in the ninth grade. These programs include freshman academies, “double dosing” of math and reading, and grouping teachers into interdisciplinary teams with the same groups of students.

Following are some of the LEAs that have a transition program in place at one or more of their high schools: Alamance-Burlington, Asheboro City, Caldwell, Columbus, Cumberland, Durham, Edgecombe, Gaston, Iredell-Statesville, Lenoir, Moore, New Hanover, Onslow, Stokes, Surry, Union, Wake and Weldon City.

For more about the challenge of transitions at all phases of students' school experiences, please see Brief 4, beginning on page 18.

Other dropout prevention efforts in North Carolina

In addition to the State Board of Education, NCDPI and the LEAs, many other national, state and local organizations are working toward solving the dropout crisis in North Carolina and beyond. The following list provides a sample of North Carolina organizations that have launched dropout prevention efforts or have held major conferences or meetings on the problem:

Communities in Schools North Carolina
<<http://www.cisnc.org>>

James B. Hunt Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy
<<http://www.hunt-institute.org/>>

John Locke Foundation
<<http://www.johnlocke.org/>>

The New Schools Project
<<http://www.newschoolsproject.org>>

North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research
<<http://www.nccppr.org>>

North Carolina Chamber of Commerce
<<http://www.ncchamber.net>>

North Carolina Joint Legislative Commission on Dropout Prevention and High School Graduation
<http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/gascripts/Committees/Committees.asp?sAction=ViewCommittee&sActionDetails=Non-Standing_6358>

North Carolina Justice Center
<<http://www.ncjustice.org>>

North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center
<<http://www.ncruralcenter.org>>

Public School Forum of North Carolina
<<http://www.ncforum.org>>

For the sake of students' futures—not to mention the future vitality of the state as a whole—North Carolina must address its dropout rate. High school graduation rates must be improved. While the challenge is great, it is encouraging that such a diverse array of committed organizations and individuals are working hard to address the dropout challenge. Brief 4 of this briefing report focuses on strategies and policies for dropout prevention.

¹ Exclusions: “transferred to another public school district, private school, home school or state/district approved education program;” “temporarily absent due to suspension or school approved illness;” “death.”

² Public Schools of North Carolina. *Dropout Data Collecting and Reporting: Procedures 2007*.

³ IES Education Digest. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07_102.asp?referrer=list>.

⁴ Communities In Schools. <<http://www.cisnet.org/>>.

⁵ The New Schools Project. <<http://www.newschoolsproject.org/current.html>>.

⁶ Asheboro High School. <<http://www.asheboro.k12.nc.us/cms/ahs+200+school/64.html>>.