

Brief 3: What is a Dropout?

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The very definition of the term dropout is controversial. What makes a student a dropout and how to measure dropout rates vary from state to state and at the federal level. The lack of a standard definition and formula makes assessing school performance difficult and comparing schools and school systems almost impossible.

This brief provides a summary of the most commonly used definitions and measurements.

What is a dropout?

In *North Carolina*, a dropout is defined 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.”

Dropout and completion rates

Cohort Dropout Rate: The number of dropouts from a single age group or specific grade (or cohort) of students over a period of time. *North Carolina* does not currently report a cohort dropout rate.

Event Dropout Rate: The number of students in a particular grade span dropping out in one year divided by a measure of the total students in that particular grade span.

This event rate, also known as the duplicate rate, does not count the number of students dropping out, but the number of occurrences of dropout. For example, if a student dropped out in more than one year, he/she would be reported as a dropout in each of the years.

Currently, *North Carolina* rates are calculated for grades one to 12, seven to 12 and nine to 12. The seven-to-12 dropout rate is the official dropout rate, since it is more inclusive of the students who were actually dropping out of school, and thus more

accurate than the nine-to-12 rate. In *North Carolina*, the grade nine-to-12 dropout event rate in 2006-2007 was 5.24 percent.

As defined *federally*, the event dropout rate estimates the percentage of both private and public high school students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent (e.g., a GED). It is used to track annual changes in the experiences of students in the U.S. school system.

Of note: the *federal* definition of the event dropout rate does not include those who complete a GED within the academic year as dropouts, whereas the *North Carolina* rate counts those leaving to complete a GED as dropouts in its event dropout rate. Similar variations in definition occur from state to state.

Status Dropout Rate: A cumulative rate much higher than the event rate. The status dropout rate denotes the proportion of all individuals in the population who have not completed high school and were not enrolled at a given point in time.

The *federally* defined status dropout rate reports the percentage of individuals in a given age range (typically 16 to 24) who are not in school and have not earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential, irrespective of when they dropped out. The rate focuses on an overall age group as opposed to individuals, so it can be used to study general population issues.

Cohort Graduation Rate (as currently defined in *North Carolina*): The percentage of ninth-graders who graduate from high school four years later. This rate does not reflect students who may take five years to graduate from high school. In future years, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction hopes to be able to show a five-year graduation rate, as well as the four-year cohort rate. In *North*

Carolina, 68 percent of students entering grade nine in 2002-2003 graduated in 2006-2007 or earlier. Note that this rate does not account for students graduating in more than four years or those who drop out of school prior to grade nine.

The *federal* rate (also referred to as the averaged freshman graduation rate) focuses on public high school students as opposed to all high school students or the general population. It is designed to provide an estimate of on-time graduation from high school. Thus, it provides a measure of the extent to which public high schools are graduating students within the expected period of four years.

No Child Left Behind On-Time Graduation Rate (used in *North Carolina* prior to 2006): Of the students who graduated with a regular diploma, this rate reflects the percentage who graduated in four years or less. This measurement is misleading because it does not reflect all ninth-graders who entered high school four years earlier; it is limited to those completing a regular diploma and does not include dropouts in its calculation.

National Center for Education Statistics Leaver (Completer) Rate: The number of graduates divided by an estimated cohort constructed by adding the sum of graduates plus other completers and cumulative dropouts for the previous four years. In calculating this rate, most states only count regular diploma recipients. This formula does not measure the percentage of ninth-graders graduating within four years, as it includes all graduates in a given year, regardless of whether they have taken four or more years to complete high school. The formula also uses graduate and cumulative dropout counts, not actual enrollment counts, to estimate the ninth-grade class four years earlier. This estimate is more comprehensive than a cohort rate because it includes students graduating in more than four years, but it is only an estimate of the actual cohort size.

Status Completion Rate: The status completion rate indicates the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in high school and who have earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential (GED), irrespective of when the credential was earned. The age range used in federal reporting is 18 to 24. The measurement can be used to study

general population issues. *North Carolina* does not currently report a status completion rate.

Some states report status completion rates following the federal definition, and others use variations of this definition (i.e., the percentage of persons up to age 21 who have completed high school or a GED).

North Carolina guidelines

1991-1992: The Department of Public Instruction implemented federal guidelines for reporting dropouts: this meant that each event of dropping out was to be counted. As noted above, if a student dropped out in more than one year, he/she would be reported as a dropout in each of the years, so this came to be called the “duplicated count.” The state continued to count the unduplicated dropouts as well, so there were two reported rates: the state (unduplicated) and the federal (duplicated).

1998-1999: Students who left school prior to graduating and enrolled in a community college program must be counted as dropouts.

2000-2001: Dropout rates for grades nine to 12 were included in the ABCs (North Carolina’s accountability system) as a measure of high school growth/gain. Since then, this rate has become a component of the growth model for all high schools.

2005-2006: North Carolina reported a four-year cohort graduation rate for the first time; this change was in response to the No Child Left Behind legislation.

Current guidelines:

- A dropout is a student who was enrolled at some time during the previous school year but who was not enrolled (and who does not meet reporting exclusions) on day 20 of the current school year.
- A single individual may be counted as a dropout more than once if he/she drops out of school in multiple years.
- No student who drops out is counted more than once each year. (If he/she drops out twice in the *same* school year, he/she is not counted twice.)

- Dropout events do not include students below the compulsory school age or students in prekindergarten or kindergarten.
- Schools that cannot document a former student’s enrollment in a U.S. school must report that student as a dropout.
- Reporting exclusions include:
 - Students who are known to have left the country;
 - Students who are serving suspensions;
 - Students who are expelled (expelled students are counted as dropouts for federal but not state reporting);
 - Students who transfer to a private school, home school or a state-approved educational program; and
 - Students who are not enrolled on day 20 because they have serious illnesses.
- Students reported as dropouts NOT included in the dropout rate:
 - Students who leave school within 20 days of their first enrollment in a particular LEA (“initial enrollees”);
 - Students incarcerated in an adult facility¹; and
 - Students who fail to return to school after a long-term suspension.¹
- Students in other special circumstances who ARE included in the dropout rate:
 - Students who leave the public schools to attend community colleges; and
 - Students who leave school to obtain a GED.

For more information on North Carolina dropout reporting, please see: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/research/dropout/reports/>, <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/research/dropout/reports/2007dropoutmanual.pdf>, and <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/research/dropout/faq/>.

For more information on federally defined rates from the National Center for Education Statistics, please see: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/dropout05/>.

¹ Incarcerated students and those who fail to return to school after a long-term suspension are not included in the dropout rate as calculated for accountability purposes but are identified as dropouts for other reporting purposes.

North Carolina Dropout Rate *Figured Using Varied Measurements*

Rate	Statistic¹ (%)	Description	GED status
Federal Event dropout rate	3.8	Percentage of high school students who have dropped out of grades 10–12 in the past year	Students who get an equivalency certificate do NOT count as dropouts.
North Carolina 9–12 Event Dropout Rate	4.74	Percentage of high school students who have dropped out of grades 9–12 in the past year	Students who get an equivalency certificate ARE dropouts.
North Carolina 7–12 Event Dropout Rate	3.23	Percentage of high school students who have dropped out of grades 7–12 in the past year	Students who get an equivalency certificate ARE dropouts.
Federal Status Dropout Rate	9.4	Percentage of people ages 16 to 24 who are not enrolled in high school and who do not have a high school credential	Students who get an equivalency certificate do NOT count as dropouts.
Federal Cohort Graduation Rate (averaged freshman graduation rate)	75.0	Percentage of public high school students who graduate with a regular diploma four years after starting 9th grade	High school equivalency credentials are NOT counted as “graduation.”
North Carolina Cohort Graduation Rate	68.4 ²	Percentage of public high school students who graduate with a regular diploma four years after starting 9th grade	High school equivalency credentials are NOT counted as “graduation.”
Federal Status Completion Rate	87.6	Percentage of young adults ages 18 to 24 who have left high school and who hold a high school credential	People who have earned an equivalency credential count as completers.

¹2005 rates (most recent available from federal data sources).

Federal rates and definitions: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/dropout05/tables/table_A3.asp>.

²2006 N.C. Cohort Graduation Rate (first year available).