

High school dropout rate gets another look

Statewide group sounds alarm about students leaving school

Wednesday, June 22, 2005

By Eleanor Chute, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children today is releasing a report on a high school "graduation gap" that's sure to stimulate debate.

According to the report, 21.7 percent -- about 1 in 5 -- ninth-graders entering high school in 2000-01 didn't graduate from that same district four years later.

The report could not show, however, why the students left, because individual student data wasn't available. Some students transfer to other districts and graduate, but many others are dropouts, some of whom are not counted in the state Department of Education dropout rates, said Joan Benso, president and CEO of the Harrisburg-based nonprofit organization that focuses on children's issues.

Whatever the reason a student leaves high school, Benso said the numbers indicate students need more help to complete their education.

"When you look at the overall big picture, we need to be doing more," said Benso, noting the problem exists statewide in urban, rural and suburban districts.

Benso said the graduation gap occurs for a host of reasons, noting it tends to be larger in districts where more children are low-income, disabled or have limited English proficiency.

The state Department of Education uses a different formula to calculate its graduation rate.

Its preliminary tally for 2003-04 shows a graduation rate of 87.7 percent, a graduation gap of 12.3 percent.

The state figures are based on dropout rates -- students who meet strict definitions of a dropout -- and graduation figures.

Nationwide, the calculation of dropout and graduation rates have long been a source of controversy, in part due to different approaches and in part because of the way data is kept.

Using a technique some national groups have used, the children's organization took the number of students entering ninth grade and graduating from high school from state reports.

Michael Golden, state deputy secretary for the office of information and educational technology, said the state has been refining its method, but "until we get to the point when we have student level data to see and determine who started and who graduated, we won't be able to really get to the fine-tuned definition of graduation rates."

On the Internet

■ [Read the report online](#)

Graduation gap

The Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children took a look at the number of ninth-graders in 2000-01 and the number of graduating seniors in 2003-04. The results show a "graduation gap" of 21.7 percent statewide.

The tally of how many ninth-graders didn't graduate from high school in the same district in 2003-04:

Statewide	21.7%
Urban	44.8%
Rural	16.1%
Suburban	12.5%

Source: Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children Post-Gazette

The result is the children's group lists Chartiers Valley's as having a "graduation gap" of 22.9 percent.

But when the district's individual student data is reviewed, however, the reasons that the students left become more clear.

Of the 59 ninth-graders who didn't finish in the district, only 14 were dropouts, said Charles McCartney, spokesman for Chartiers Valley. The most recent graduation rate for Chartiers Valley listed by the state is 96.22 percent.

In some cases, the number of students transferring out is offset by those transferring in.

But in some districts, such as Pittsburgh, which has a declining enrollment, that is not the case.

The children's organization said that 46.7 percent of city high school students who started ninth grade didn't graduate in the district in 2003-04.

But the district uses a graduation rate of 74 percent for that year. That rate is based on looking at what happened to individual students.

The rate varies among city high schools, with Perry Traditional Academy and the Pittsburgh High School for the Creative and Performing Arts, having graduation rates above 95 percent.

Benso believes the group's statewide figures are closer to the mark than the individual school district ones.

While some students transfer between districts in the state, U.S. Census data show relatively few teens leaving Pennsylvania.

Correction/Clarification: (Published June 23, 2005) In this story on graduation rates in June 22, 2005 editions of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, the last name of the spokesman for the Chartiers Valley School District was misstated. His name is Charles McCartney.

(Post-Gazette education writer Eleanor Chute can be reached at echute@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1955.)

[Back](#)

Copyright ©1997-2005 PG Publishing Co., Inc. All Rights Reserved.