



## Cohort Graduation and Dropout Rates Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. How is the 2008 cohort four-year graduation rate calculated?

The 2008 cohort four-year graduation rate is calculated by tracking individual students who first enrolled in ninth grade during the 2004-2005 school year (assigned to the 2008 cohort) and graduated four years later with a regular diploma. It accounts for students who transfer in and out of the district, who leave school permanently, who leave school during one school year and return in another, or who are retained in a grade but stay in school and graduate later than their original classmates.

### 2. How is the 2008 cohort four-year dropout rate calculated?

There is no national standard for calculating cohort four-year dropout rates. Michigan has chosen to maintain consistency by using the graduation cohort methodology recommended by the National Governors Association (NGA) and in compliance with the United States Department of Education (USED) guidance to calculate this rate as well.

The 2008 cohort four-year dropout rate is calculated by tracking individual students who first enrolled in ninth grade during the 2004-2005 school year (assigned to the 2008 cohort) and left high school permanently at any time during the four-year period prior to completion or whose whereabouts are unknown.

### 3. Why do a school's graduation and dropout rates not add up to 100 percent?

A dropout rate is not equivalent to subtracting the graduation rate from 100 percent because that method counts students who are "other completers" or "off-track continuing" as dropouts, which they are not. Other completers are students who earned a General Educational Development (GED), certificate, or reached the special education maximum age. Students in the off-track continuing category are those who did not complete high school in four years and are still continuing in school.

### 4. Why do some building rates not sum up to the district rates, or district rates not sum up to the state rates?

There are two calculation rules that may result in building rates not summing to district rates, and district rates not summing to state rates:

1. Court-Ordered Facilities: Buildings in which students who have been ordered by the court to attend are not included in the district's rate, only the building rate. This method prevents a district from being held accountable for the performance of students who would normally not be present in the district, while still allowing for accountability for the building that provides the public education.
2. "Count Dates": Michigan collects data on students twice a year on "count dates" (one day in September and one in February) for the purposes of calculating state school aid payments and required state and federal reporting. Students attending on count day are reported as continuing in the district during a fall or spring submission. Accommodations are made for students who do attend school but were absent on count day (e.g., if children have an excused absence on count day, they must return within 30 school days,

if an unexcused absence occurs, students must return in 10 school days, etc.). In order to ensure that the graduation rate calculation aligns with the Michigan Department of Education's (MDE) full academic year requirement outlined in the Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook, students must be in attendance in a building for at least two count dates (consecutive or not) to be included in that building's calculation. Students must be in attendance at a district for at least one count date to be included in a district's calculations. Students who are claimed in a district, but were not present for any count days are only included in the state rate.

**5. How are dropout rates calculated for buildings from which students do not graduate?**

Some schools in Michigan offer 9th, 9th–10th, and 9th–11th-grade campuses, from which students do not graduate, and thus, do not have a cohort for a complete four years. The cohort total for the buildings that do not graduate students is determined by the number of students who were reported in attendance at the building for two or more count days who may have transferred out of the building but did not transfer out of the district by the time they were last reported. The number of dropouts reported from that building is divided by the number of students who attended the building for two or more count days at any point during the four years (potential dropouts) during the same time period. This total was only computed for buildings for which no graduates were reported.

**6. Which students are not counted in the graduation and dropout rates (exempt)?**

The students categorized as "exempt" are students who transferred out of the public school system (out of state, to non-public school, or home-school) or are deceased.

**7. What if a school mistakenly reported a student in the wrong category?**

The Graduation/Dropout Review and Comment Application (GAD) provides district staff members an opportunity to review and request changes to graduation and dropout information on individual students. During the spring of 2009, districts' authorized users accessed the GAD to view their cohort members and requested: 1) changes to their exit statuses; 2) accountability re-points (changes which district or building is accountable for the student); 3) cohort year changes; and 4) linking of multiple students' Unique Identification Codes (UICs) where multiple codes existed for a single student. Intermediate school district auditors, Michigan Department of Education and Center for Educational Performance and Information staff members approved or denied these requested changes based on evidence provided by districts.

**8. How do you know districts are not inflating their data to report more positive numbers?**

Each public school student in Michigan is assigned a Unique Identification Code (UIC), which is used by districts when submitting data to the Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). Grade-to-grade progression, exit statuses, and transfers into and out of districts are tracked using the UIC. If a district were to report a student as transferred out to another district, the other district should report that student with the same UIC in its subsequent submission. If that UIC is not reported by the new district, the record is a missing expected record and becomes a "dropout" record for the original district.

The data used to calculate the graduation rates are audited. After the exit status data (which determines the current status of a student) comes to CEPI, it is loaded into the Graduation/Dropout Review and Comment Application (GAD) and made available for review by authorized individuals in a district. After they review the data, it goes through an auditing process that is completed by intermediate school district (ISD) auditors, as identified in the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) audit manual. After the audit is completed, any final

requests for changes to student records are reviewed and approved or denied by an ISD auditor based on evidence provided to support the request. For example, if a school asked to change a student reported previously as a dropout to a transfer out of state, the school had to provide evidence of that student's enrollment in the new district. Without sufficient evidence, a school's request for a student change was not approved.

### **9. Why does the graduation rate only count students who graduate in four years?**

In 2001, Congress adopted the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act*, which requires states to use a graduation rate that counts only graduates who receive a regular diploma in four years or less as successful graduates. For the 2007 cohort, 2008 marks the first time a new cohort five-year graduation rate is available for those students who required additional time to complete. If these students did graduate from high school with a regular diploma, these students are considered graduates in the five-year rate.

### **10. If a student drops out of high school, is every high school that student attended held accountable?**

No. Accountability is assigned to only one school or district, determined from several factors. For example, the entity that reported the terminating exit status of the student is held accountable. If multiple entities report a student in a collection, the entity reporting the greater proportion of full-time equivalency (FTE) membership is accountable. Additionally, if accountability still cannot be determined from multiple records, the entity that last had accountability retains accountability. Information providing a complete description of the factors considered when assigning accountability is available on CEPI's Web site at [www.michigan.gov/cepi](http://www.michigan.gov/cepi).

### **11. What are the cohort five-year graduation and dropout rates?**

2008 marks the first year that five-year graduation and dropout rates are calculated for students in the 2007 cohort. The graduation rate includes the students who were categorized as "off-track continuing" at the end of four years and graduated in the fifth year with a regular high school diploma. The new five-year graduation rate is calculated in the same manner as the four-year rate, with the addition of students who graduated in the fifth year (Off-track graduated) in the numerator. "On-track graduated" and "Off-track graduated" are counted as the numerator and divided by the total count of all categories (on-track graduated, off-track graduated, off-track continuing, other completer, and dropout). Transfers-in and out during that fifth year are accounted for as well.

The new cohort five-year dropout rate is calculated in the same manner as the four-year rate, with the addition of students who dropped out of high school in their fifth year. Transfers-in and out during that fifth year are accounted for as well. Remember, the 2007 cohort five-year rates count all students in the 2007 cohort at the end of five years; these rates are not just counting those students in the 2007 cohort who finished in the fifth year.

### **12. Why are the four-year and five-year rates different?**

A building or district's cohort five-year graduation and dropout rates could be greater than, less than, or equal to the cohort four-year rates. There are four reasons for this variance: 1) extension requests that were granted for the 2007 cohort have been reversed based on new federal guidance placing 2008 cohort students back into the 2007 cohort, 2) total number of count dates in attendance, 3) the numerator changes, and 4) the denominator changes.

1. In the 2007 Graduation/Dropout Review and Comment Application (GAD), extensions for special circumstances could be requested that removed students from their cohort and placed them into the next cohort. This functionality in GAD was disabled and reversed for 2007 cohort students. These students are now added back into the 2007 cohort, which increases the denominator and these students' final disposition (either off-track graduate or dropout) is reflected in the numerator.
2. The total number of count dates a student is in attendance also impacts the difference between the four-year and five-year rates. Students who, in their fifth year, now meet the minimum number of count dates in attendance will be included in that district's and/or building's rates. For example, if a 2007 cohort student was at a building for one count date in the 2006-2007 school year, that student was counted in the district rate only. If, in the student's fifth year, that off-track student attended for another count date in the same building, that student is now reflected in the denominator of the building's five-year rates.
3. Students who have since received their standard diploma are now included in the numerator as five-year graduates. Likewise, students who have dropped out in the fifth year are included in the numerator for the five-year dropout rate.
4. According to the federal regulations released in 2008, states cannot freeze cohorts. Once a cohort has graduated, the cohort total (the denominator used in the graduation and dropout rates) cannot be "locked" at that total. The cohort total must remain "open" to allow accountability to be placed with the correct entity for students who attend high school beyond the fourth year.

**13. How is the cohort four-year graduation methodology different than what the state used previously?**

Prior to the 2007 cohort, which was the first time Michigan moved to the cohort methodology, graduation rates were determined by using an "estimated" rate derived by multiplying the four graduating class retention rates together in a single year. Class retention rates were determined by taking one graduation class (grade) at a time and dividing the fall enrollment by the previous fall's enrollment. This average rate was then multiplied by 100 to get the graduation rate percentage. Basically, this formula utilized one year of data to derive a four-year estimated rate.

The cohort four-year formula (described in FAQ question #1) provides a more accurate rate to assist schools and districts in targeting education policies to assist greater numbers of students to succeed in school and earn a diploma. In addition, this calculation aligns with the guidelines provided by the National Governors Association (NGA) Graduation Counts Compact, the United States Department of Education (USED) regulations, and complies with the requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*.

**14. How is the cohort four-year dropout methodology different than what the state used previously?**

Prior to the 2007 cohort, which was the first time Michigan moved to the cohort methodology, dropout rates were the percentage of unaccounted-for students at the secondary level for a school year. It was derived by subtracting the secondary school's/facility's total retention rate (described in FAQ #13) from 100 percent. Class retention rates were determined by taking one graduation class (grade) at a time and dividing the fall enrollment by the previous fall's enrollment.

## **15. Why did Michigan change the graduation and dropout rate formulas?**

In 2001, Congress adopted the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act*, which requires states to use a graduation rate that tracks only "on-time" graduates who receive regular diplomas. To help states meet this goal, the National Governors Association (NGA) convened a task force to help states develop a way to measure high school graduation rates. All 50 governors committed to adopting this methodology to track graduation rates in their states. In 2008, the United States Department of Education (USED) released guidance on using a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate.

Although neither NCLB, the NGA, nor USED requires a change in the dropout rate calculation, Michigan created a dropout rate for consistency with the use of the cohort four-year graduation rate. Like the cohort four-year graduation rate, this formula provides a more accurate rate to assist schools, districts, and intermediate school districts in targeting education policies to help students succeed in school and earn a diploma.

## **16. Why are some dropout rates higher than what has been previously reported?**

By using a cohort four-year dropout rate, we are totaling dropout events that occur over a four-year period, rather than just a one-year period, as the previous rate reported. In addition, by tracking individual students as they progress through high school, we are better able to determine exactly what happened to each student. The cohort methodology rates do not necessarily mean that a school has experienced an increase in dropouts when compared to older rates, only that the rate depicts a more accurate measure over a longer timeframe than was previously reported.

## **17. Why are some graduation rates for the 2007 and 2008 cohort lower than what has been previously reported?**

The use of a more accurate formula results in some schools and districts in Michigan seeing a change in their graduation rates. This does not necessarily mean that more or fewer students were graduating from high school, only that the rates depict a more accurate picture than what was previously reported. A number of changes in the cohort formula could have impacted a building or district's rate:

1. the cohort four-year graduation rate counts only students who completed a regular diploma in four years as on-time graduates
2. alternative high schools are included in the district calculation
3. both the graduation and dropout rates more accurately account for transfers-in and transfers-out of the district

## **18. How are students with disabilities counted in the cohort four-year graduation formula?**

Many students with disabilities receiving special education services graduate with the rest of their cohort in four years, with the help of support services provided by the district. If the student does not graduate in the four-year period, the student is categorized as "off-track."

## **19. Will the graduation rates be available by subgroups?**

Yes, CEPI publishes graduation rates by subgroup, including race/ethnicity, gender, students with disabilities, migrant, economically disadvantaged and limited-English proficiency. In

addition, rates are available for race/ethnicity by gender. This information is available on CEPI's Web site at [www.michigan.gov/cepi](http://www.michigan.gov/cepi).

**20. Requests could be made in GAD to give students in the 2007 cohort a one-year extension. Why is this option not available for students in the 2008 cohort? Is this the same as a cohort year change request in GAD?**

In the 2007 Graduation/Dropout Review and Comment Application (GAD), extensions removed students from their cohort and placed them into the next cohort. For example, students in the 2007 cohort receiving this one-year extension were moved into the 2008 cohort and are not reflected in the 2007 cohort status categories. These extensions were allowed on a case-by-case basis. However, the fifth-year extension request is no longer available. According to federal regulations released in 2008, once a student has been placed into a cohort, the student cannot be moved from that cohort. Therefore, this functionality in GAD was disabled and reversed for 2007 cohort students. Students who received this one-year extension last year will be reflected in the 2007 cohort five-year rates.

A cohort year change request should not be mistaken as an extension request. A cohort year change request is to be used if the system incorrectly placed a student into the cohort (e.g., data was submitted with the wrong UIC, district mistakenly reported a kindergarten student as a ninth-grader, etc.).

**21. It appears CEPI is using smaller cohort enrollment numbers than the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for 2003-04 9th-grade 2007 cohort enrollment. Why is this the case?**

There are a few factors that contribute to a difference in the populations that make up the two numbers. The factor with the greatest impact is that the 9th-grade headcount/enrollment total is the number of 9th-graders reported to CEPI in fall 2003. This is what NCES is using. However, the first-time 9th-graders in the fall 2003 total reported in the 2007 Cohort Graduation Rate Report excludes 9th-grade students who were also reported by districts as 9th-graders previously (during the 2002-2003 school year). Those who were retained in 9th-grade were excluded, as they would have been already assigned to a previous cohort the first time they were reported as a 9th-grader.

Another factor that results in a lower number of first-time 9th-graders under the cohort methodology is related to an ongoing data quality improvement process. Since the 2003-2004 headcount totals were generated, the process has allowed multiple Unique Identification Codes (UICs) for a single student to be linked. This process resulted in a lower total number of active identifiers when the cohort totals were produced.

Another factor could be the cohort assignment methodology. This methodology uses an age-to-grade conversion to place ungraded students into a cohort based on their age, whereas the headcount files used by NCES report those students in an ungraded setting. When developing the cohort method, it was determined that the state would convert records for ungraded students into "grades" based upon the age of the student. This way, every student gets assigned to an appropriate cohort.

Because of these different populations, you will rarely find an exact match between the 9th-grade headcount total and the first-time 9th-grade cohort total reported for any entity.

**22. Why does a middle school or elementary school building appear in the graduation and dropout report?**

If a middle school or elementary school appears in the graduation and dropout report, this entity reported a cohort student in the 9th-grade or higher after they had been assigned to a cohort. If the school does not graduate students and educates 12th-graders, then this school will not receive a graduation rate, but rather, a dropout rate. The denominator of this calculation is the number of cohort students who were reported as attending this school for two or more count days, and the numerator is the number of students who dropped out while attending this school.

**23. Why are some national statistics reporting different rates for Michigan than what Michigan is reporting for itself?**

There are different calculations that may result in discrepancies between reported statistics:

- 1) This is the result of using a one-year incident/event rate verses a cohort four-year rate. CEPI calculates both depending on reporting needs. These two calculations are very different numbers and measure very different things. The cohort four-year rate is calculated at the end of four years, whereas the event rate counts an event (e.g., dropouts) each year. If a student, for example, drops out of high school and returns, and then does this again during the four-year period, this student would not be counted as a dropout at the end of four years in the cohort rate (If he/she were to drop out again, he/she would be counted as a single dropout over the four-year period. If he/she returns and completes high school, he/she would never be counted as a dropout). In the event rate, however, this student would be counted twice; once for each time this student dropped out.
- 2) *Diplomas Count* uses the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) method to calculate the percent of public high school students who graduate on time with a diploma. The CPI method multiplies grade promotion ratios together to produce the graduation rate. This process does not take into account the mobility of families and the ultimate success of students who often attend other districts to complete their studies. This situation is common in large urban districts. The cohort process uses exact tracking of students to ensure better accuracy in the rates.

**24. Why does the 2008 cohort subgroup report show cells with less than 5 percent listed as "< 5%" and those with more than 95 percent listed as "> 95%"?**

According to federal regulations released in 2008 on Information and De-Identified Records (§§ 99.3 and 99.31(b)), "States must adopt a strategy for dealing with a situation in which all students in a particular subgroup scored at the same achievement level. One solution, referred to as 'masking' the data, is to use the notation of > 95% when all students in a subgroup score at the same achievement level."