



RESEARCH BRIEF

Definitions and Measurements for Dropout Statistics

District Leadership Forum

Brian Schueler

Research Associate

Olivia Rios

Research Manager

Daniel Gordon

Senior Research Manager

LEGAL CAVEAT

EAB is a division of The Advisory Board Company ("EAB"). EAB has made efforts to verify the accuracy of the information it provides to members. This report relies on data obtained from many sources, however, and EAB cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information provided or any analysis based thereon. In addition, neither EAB nor any of its affiliates (each, an "EAB Organization") is in the business of giving legal, medical, accounting, or other professional advice, and its reports should not be construed as professional advice. In particular, members should not rely on any legal commentary in this report as a basis for action, or assume that any tactics described herein would be permitted by applicable law or appropriate for a given member's situation. Members are advised to consult with appropriate professionals concerning legal, medical, tax, or accounting issues, before implementing any of these tactics. No EAB Organization or any of its respective officers, directors, employees, or agents shall be liable for any claims, liabilities, or expenses relating to (a) any errors or omissions in this report, whether caused by any EAB organization, or any of their respective employees or agents, or sources or other third parties, (b) any recommendation or graded ranking by any EAB Organization, or (c) failure of member and its employees and agents to abide by the terms set forth herein.

EAB, Education Advisory Board, The Advisory Board Company, Royall, and Royall & Company are registered trademarks of The Advisory Board Company in the United States and other countries. Members are not permitted to use these trademarks, or any other trademark, product name, service name, trade name, and logo of any EAB Organization without prior written consent of EAB. Other trademarks, product names, service names, trade names, and logos used within these pages are the property of their respective holders. Use of other company trademarks, product names, service names, trade names, and logos or images of the same does not necessarily constitute (a) an endorsement by such company of an EAB Organization and its products and services, or (b) an endorsement of the company or its products or services by an EAB Organization. No EAB Organization is affiliated with any such company.

IMPORTANT: Please read the following.

EAB has prepared this report for the exclusive use of its members. Each member acknowledges and agrees that this report and the information contained herein (collectively, the "Report") are confidential and proprietary to EAB. By accepting delivery of this Report, each member agrees to abide by the terms as stated herein, including the following:

1. All right, title, and interest in and to this Report is owned by an EAB Organization. Except as stated herein, no right, license, permission, or interest of any kind in this Report is intended to be given, transferred to, or acquired by a member. Each member is authorized to use this Report only to the extent expressly authorized herein.
2. Each member shall not sell, license, republish, or post online or otherwise this Report, in part or in whole. Each member shall not disseminate or permit the use of, and shall take reasonable precautions to prevent such dissemination or use of, this Report by (a) any of its employees and agents (except as stated below), or (b) any third party.
3. Each member may make this Report available solely to those of its employees and agents who (a) are registered for the workshop or membership program of which this Report is a part, (b) require access to this Report in order to learn from the information described herein, and (c) agree not to disclose this Report to other employees or agents or any third party. Each member shall use, and shall ensure that its employees and agents use, this Report for its internal use only. Each member may make a limited number of copies, solely as adequate for use by its employees and agents in accordance with the terms herein.
4. Each member shall not remove from this Report any confidential markings, copyright notices, and/or other similar indicia herein.
5. Each member is responsible for any breach of its obligations as stated herein by any of its employees or agents.
6. If a member is unwilling to abide by any of the foregoing obligations, then such member shall promptly return this Report and all copies thereof to EAB.

Table of Contents

1) Executive Overview	4
Key Observations	4
2) Defining Dropout Definitions and Rate Measurements.....	5
Dropout Definitions.....	5
Longitudinal Dropout Rates.....	8
Annual Dropout Rates	9
Multifaceted Approaches.....	11
3) Tracking and Analyzing Dropout Data	14
Dropout Data Quality	14
Locating Missing Students.....	17
Reporting Data.....	18
4) Research Methodology.....	20
Project Challenge	20
Project Sources	21
Research Parameters	22
Appendix A. Example Withdrawal Manual.....	23

1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

District administrators at all but one profiled school district identify students as dropouts based upon definitions established by state leaders. State education agencies define dropout definitions for **District A**, **District C**, and **District E**. **District B** follows laws in the Texas Education Code that direct school districts to identify and calculate statistics for dropouts according to federal guidelines. Contacts at **District D** report that their district does not have an official definition of a dropout. However, administrators at **District D** do provide student data to their state education agency to compute dropout statistics for federal reports.

Profiled districts use annual and/or longitudinal dropout rates, or alternatively use adjusted cohort graduation rates (ACGR) as measurements of a district's accountability for student persistence. High annual dropout rates result in penalties on district accountability report cards for **District A** and other Wisconsin school districts overseen by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. State leaders track both longitudinal and annual dropout rates on **District B's** performance reports, but primarily use longitudinal rates when assessing district performance. **District C**, **District D**, and **District E** measure dropout rates, but calculate district performance on student persistence with ACGR measurements.

Pair annual dropout measures with longitudinal dropout rates to describe dropout trends most accurately. Contacts at **District B** note that annual dropout rates overstate the number of students who dropout in districts that reenroll students who have previously dropped out. Administrators at **District E** recommend using longitudinal measurements to better represent student outcomes, but acknowledge that these rates take more time to measure. By pairing both of these measurements, administrators may quickly identify fluctuations in dropout rates while retaining a fuller understanding of dropout trends in their districts. Utilizing annual and longitudinal dropout rates in conjunction with ACGR measurements provides a more complete description of school performance than any one of the measures used independently.

Administrators at profiled districts track dropouts with defined withdrawal codes in district-wide student information systems (SIS). School-level staff responsible for attendance at **District C** tag students who withdraw from, or otherwise leave school in the district SIS with codes corresponding to the student's reason for leaving (e.g., transfer, dropout, serious illness). Administrators use these codes to compute dropout rates and develop data for state compliance and accountability. At **District A**, the district's SIS automatically uploads student data and status codes to a statewide SIS, which facilitates dropout tracking and rate measurement. Coding systems vary across contacted districts.

Accountability offices at Districts A and E provide school and district leaders with data dashboards. Automated data dashboards at **District A** update daily based on student information that staff input into the district's SIS. These daily dashboards include attendance and dropout data, and allow leaders to respond to issues in a timely manner. Accountability staff at **District E** also publish district and school scorecards that quantify school and district performance against standards set by district leaders for public transparency.

2) Defining Dropout Definitions and Rate Measurements

Dropout Definitions

State Legislatures or Education Agencies Provide Formal Definitions of Dropouts

All but one profiled school district use dropout definitions set by state agencies or policymakers. **District A** calculates dropouts based on definitions defined by Wisconsin state law.¹ Texas Education Code requires administrators at **District B** to compute dropout rates according to standards used by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).² In Missouri and Pennsylvania, state education agencies define dropouts differently than the NCES. Definitions published by both states offer fewer exceptions than do NCES guidelines. Contacts at **District D** report that district officials do not have an official definition of a dropout.

State definitions and reporting standards vary widely. These differences complicate data reporting to the NCES, because many states must convert state dropout rates to NCES compliant figures. Between 1995 and 2011, 28 state education agencies (out of 50 states and the District of Columbia) failed to report dropout data for one or more years. The NCES may reject state data when submitted data does not follow NCES guidelines, or is incomplete (i.e., data missing records for more than 20 percent of students).

Examples of National and State Level Dropout Definitions



National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)³

"Dropouts include students who were enrolled at some time during the school year and were expected to be enrolled in grades 9–12 in the following school year but were not enrolled by October 1 of the following school year. Students who have graduated, transferred to another school, died, moved to another country, or who are out of school due to illness are not considered dropouts."



Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction⁴

"DROPOUT (grades 7-12): A student who (1) either exited during the school term or who exited prior to start of that school term but completed the previous school term and (2) who did not re-enroll by the 3rd Friday of September of the following school term. Exceptions apply. A student was not a dropout for the reported school term if he/she completed high school or met any of the following exclusionary conditions: transfer to another public/private school or state-/district-approved educational program, temporary absence due to suspension/expulsion or school-recognized illness, or death."



Pennsylvania Department of Education⁵

"Dropout: A students who, for any other reason other than death, leaves school before graduation without transferring to another school/institution."

1) Wisconsin State Statute §118.153 (1) (b). Accessed August 17, 2017. [http://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/document/statutes/118.153\(1\)\(b\)](http://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/document/statutes/118.153(1)(b))

2) Texas Education Code §39.053 (c)(4)(a)(i). Accessed August 17, 2017. http://www.statutes.legis.state.tx.us/Docs/ED/htm/ED_39.htm#39.053

3) "Public High School Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates: School Years 2010-2011 and 2011-2012", Appendix B: Detailed Methodology for Calculation of Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates" NCES. Accessed August 17, 2017. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014391/appendix_b.asp

4) "WISEdash Glossary" Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Accessed August 17, 2017. <https://dpi.wi.gov/wisedash/help/glossary>

5) "Dropout Data and Statistics" Pennsylvania Department of Education. Accessed August 17, 2017. <http://www.education.pa.gov/Data-and-Statistics/Pages/Dropouts.aspx#tab-1>

Profiled Districts Use Annual Dropout Rates, Longitudinal Dropout Rates, and/or Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates

Administrators at **District A** calculate annual dropout rates. Failure to achieve an annual dropout rate of less than six percent penalizes the district's accountability score as calculated by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. **District B** also uses annual dropout rates, but administrators and state leaders place greater emphasis on longitudinal dropout rates and adjusted cohort graduation rates (ACGR) when evaluating district performance.

At other profiled districts, dropout rates serve a smaller role in accountability tracking. While federal law requires all US schools to calculate and use ACGR to measure school performance, schools face no federal mandate regarding the use of dropout rates for school accountability purposes. **District C** tracks annual dropout rates and **District D** calculates longitudinal dropout rates, but both primarily use ACGR to measure the performance of their schools and district as a whole. Contacts at **District E** report that their district administrators do not use dropout rates and instead focus on ACGR to evaluate student persistence and school performance.

The NCES also tabulates status dropout rates based on data collected from population surveys. Because these population metrics do not identify dropouts by school, they are less useful for school and district administrators.

Dropout Rates Published by Profiled Districts in 2017

 Annual Dropout Rate	 Longitudinal Dropout Rate	 Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate
Advantage:	Advantage:	Advantage:
Provides actionable data earlier to administrators	Accurately measures the number of students who drop out	Most accurately describes school performance and success
Total Dropouts:	Total Dropouts:	Total Graduates:
Students enrolled at some time during current school year (e.g., 2016-17) and not enrolled in grades 9-12 by the approaching fall enrollment deadline (e.g., October 2017)	The number of students in a cohort who dropout and remain out of school by the end of a specific period (e.g., 2013 to 2017).	The number of students in a cohort who graduate by the end of a specific period (e.g., 2013 to 2017).
Total Enrollment:	Total Students:	Total Students:
All students enrolled in grades 9-12 at some time during the previous school year (e.g., 2016-2017), excluding defined exceptions (e.g., students who graduate, transfer, die).	The students in one cohort (e.g., students entering high school in 2013), excluding defined exceptions (e.g. students who graduate, transfer, die).	The students in one cohort (e.g., students entering high school in 2013), excluding defined exceptions (e.g. students who graduate, transfer, die).
Formula:	Formula:	Formula:
$\frac{\text{Total Dropouts Grades 9-12 AY 2016-17}}{\text{Total Enrollment Grades 9-12 Start of AY 2016-17}}$	$\frac{\text{Total Dropouts Class of 2017 Measured in 2017}}{\text{Total Students Class of 2017 Enrolled in 2013}}$	$\frac{\text{Total Graduates Class of 2017 Measured in 2017}}{\text{Total Students Class of 2017 Enrolled in 2013}}$

Annual, Longitudinal, and Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate Usage at Profiled School Districts

District	Annual Dropout Rate	4-Year Longitudinal Dropout Rate	ACGR
District A	✓	✗	✓
District B	✓	✓	✓
District C	✓	✗	✓
District D	✗	✓	✓
District E	✓	✗	✓
 Rate is calculated and used to grade school and district performance  Rate is calculated for informational purposes, but not used to grade school and district performance  Rate is not calculated or not publically available			

Many State Education Agencies Use Measurements that Differ from Federally Reported Annual Dropout Rates

The NCES tracks annual dropout rates through their Common Core Data program. In the most recent year with data available (2011-2012), 48 state education agencies in the United States submitted data aligned with the NCES's definition of annual dropout rates.⁶ Utah and Alabama did not report data during this year. Most state education agencies across the US collect data to calculate annual dropout rates for the NCES from districts. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction submitted data to the NCES for 2011-2012. Despite Wisconsin also using annual rates for district accountability purposes, their state measurements differed from those reported by the NCES by 35 percent. The NCES reported a 1.9 percent annual dropout rate for the state of Wisconsin compared to 1.4 percent reported by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.^{6, 7}

Part of the reason these rates differ may be because they measure different groups of students. For example, rates at **District A** include students from grades 7-12. The NCES's annual dropout rate counts students in grades 9-12.

6) "Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 1972-2012" NCES. Accessed August 23, 2017.

<https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2015015>

7) "Wisconsin Information System for Education Data Dashboard" Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Accessed August 25, 2017.

<http://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/portalHome.jsp>

Longitudinal Dropout Rates

Use Longitudinal Dropout Rates to Measure the Number of Students Who Dropout

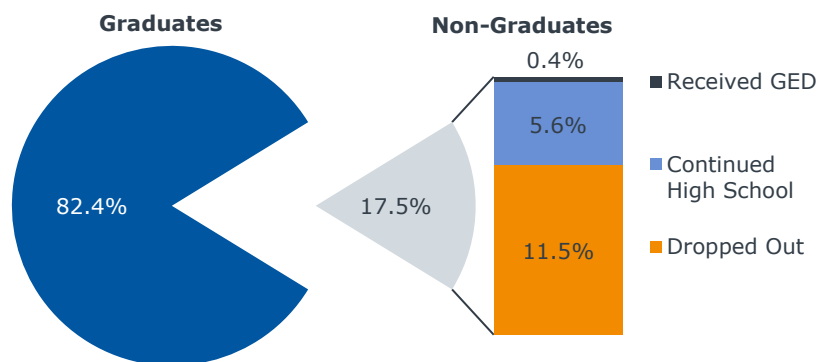
Longitudinal dropout rates measure the number of students within a specific cohort who dropout, as opposed to annual rates which count the number of dropout events in a given year. The rate divides the number of students in a cohort who dropout and remain out of school at the end of a specific period (e.g., four years) by the total number of students in that cohort.

Contacts at **District E** recommend using longitudinal dropout rates to avoid double counting students that drop out, reenroll, and dropout again. These rates also avoid incorrectly counting students as dropouts who dropout once, reenroll, and ultimately graduate. By tracking a cohort of students from freshman enrollment through graduation, a longitudinal dropout rate more accurately describes student outcomes. Because this method results in a fixed number of students for baseline enrollment, longitudinal dropout rates count a student who drops out multiple times only once, at the end of a four-year period. When using a longitudinal dropout rate developed alongside ACGR measurements, contacts at **District E** note that the computation of these rates requires administrators to distinguish between non-graduates who continue school and non-graduates who have dropped out. This distinction is unnecessary when computing annual dropout rates. **District B's** calculations provide an example of this distinction.

Five and Six Year Dropout Rates

District B measures longitudinal dropout rates for four, five, and six years. These extended measurements allow administrators to identify outcomes for students who continue school beyond four years.

District B's Four Year Longitudinal Dropout and Graduation Rates 2015-2016⁸



Longitudinal dropout and graduation rates for **District B** use existing information from student information systems (SIS) to distinguish non-graduates who continue school or earn a GED from those who have dropped out. This level of detail helps administrators better track student outcomes. At **District D**, administrators use different terminology for their longitudinal dropout rate. The district's four-year ACGR groups students who did not graduate after four years into three categories. These include students who remain enrolled in school, students seeking other credentials (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Certificates or State Diplomas), and students who are 'currently educationally disengaged' (i.e., students who did not graduate, are not currently enrolled, and did not receive an IDEA

8) "2015-2016 Texas Academic Performance Reports" Texas Education Agency. Accessed August 17, 2017. <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/2016/index.html>

Certificate or State Diploma). For practical purposes, no difference exists between students at **District D** who are 'currently educationally disengaged' and students at **District B** who have 'dropped out'.

Annual Dropout Rates

Annual Dropout Rates Count Students Who Reenroll and Dropout Again Multiple Times

Annual dropout rates may inadvertently penalize school districts that attempt to reenroll dropout students. A report prepared for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) by the Regional Educational Laboratory at WestEd found that reenrolled dropouts face a high likelihood of dropping out a second time.⁹ If a student's second dropout event occurs in the next academic year or later, annual dropout rates will count that student as a dropout multiple times over multiple years, even if the student graduates.

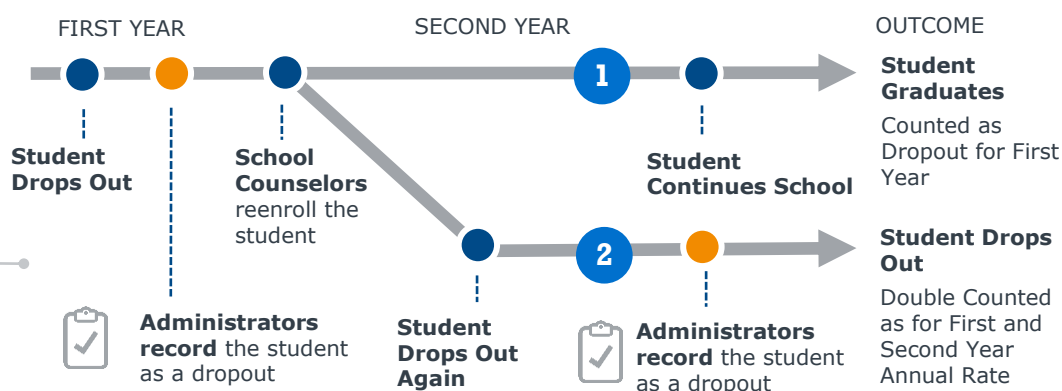
The IES report determined that from 2001 to 2006 at San Bernardino City Unified School District, 31 percent of all dropouts eventually reenrolled in district high schools. Of those reenrolled, 54.2 percent dropped out again, while 18.4 percent eventually graduated. 15.5 percent reenrolled multiple times.

Annual Dropout Rates May Discourage Schools from Reenrolling Dropouts

In the study for IES, San Bernardino City Unified School District leaders acknowledged a perverse incentive not to reenroll dropouts because the likely outcomes for returning dropouts are poor attendance and additional dropout events. At the time of the study, dropout rates negatively affected the school district's rating in the California Department of Education's Academic Performance Index.

When dropouts reenroll, annual dropout measures systemically exaggerate dropout rates. In both scenarios, the annual rate for the first year records a dropout event, even though the student returns.

Annual Dropout Rates Misstate Outcomes for Reenrolled Students



Scenario	Annual - First Year	Annual - Second Year	Longitudinal - Year Four
1	10 percent (1/10)	0 percent (0/10)	0 percent (0/10)
2	10 percent (1/10)	10 percent (1/10)	10 percent (1/10)

These example rates assume that the student belongs to a cohort of 10 students, and that no other students attend the high school. This is implausible, but more clearly demonstrates the impact of dropout reenrollments on annual dropout rates.

9) "Reenrollment of High School Dropouts in a Large, Urban School District" Regional Educational Laboratory at WestEd. Accessed August 18, 2017. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/pdf/REL_2008056.pdf

Annual Dropout Rates Impose Artificial Deadlines for Reenrollment

Contacts at **District B** note that administrators must record all students not enrolled by the last Friday of September as dropouts for annual rates. Schools in the district begin classes in mid-August, offering only seven weeks for staff to identify the students who do not return from summer vacation, locate their whereabouts, and reenroll them in school or verify their enrollment elsewhere. Successful reenrollments occurring after this deadline will not improve annual dropout rate calculations.

Staff at **District A** have an even shorter period to identify, locate, and reenroll non-returning students in the fall. In 2017, the district will begin classes on September 5th. Wisconsin state administrators collect student data for dropout calculations on the third Friday in September, which falls on the 15th in 2017. As a result, staff will have only nine days to locate these students and reenroll them in time for inclusion in official accountability statistics.

Avoid Annual Dropout Rates for Benchmarking and Comparisons across State Lines¹⁰

The NCES notes in their 2014 report on dropout and graduation rates that state and local education agencies collect and manage student data differently. Furthermore, while some education agencies take great care to verify the accuracy of their data, others are less diligent. It is likely that the quality and accuracy of dropout data varies from state to state, and even in some cases district to district.

District leaders and state administrators should avoid using annual dropout rates to compare one district or school to another unless they can verify that each district accurately collects and manages dropout data with similar methodologies.

Use Annual Dropout Rates to Better Identify Short-Term Fluctuations in Student Persistence

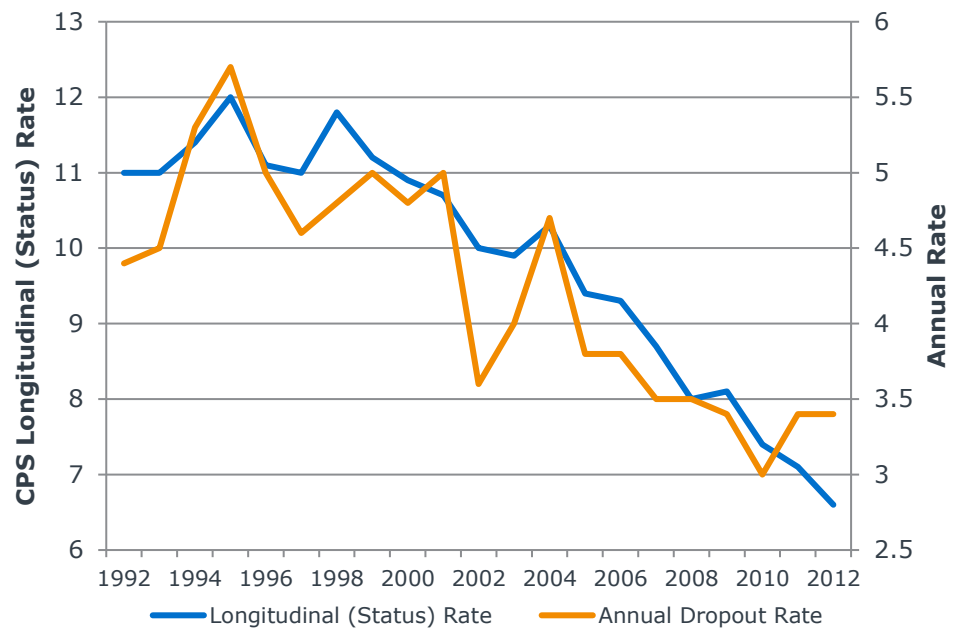
The graph below displays both an annual and longitudinal dropout rate. Both rates illustrate the same long-term downward trend in dropout rates for the United States. However, annual dropout rates display more volatility than the longitudinal rates.¹¹

At a school or district level, the increased volatility of annual dropout rates allows administrators to identify potentially worrisome developments in dropout rates earlier. Four-year longitudinal rates take longer to compute, and reflect student progress across multiple years. Because these rates measure change over multiple years, they are less effective for isolating and measuring how short-term changes affect students. Annual rates by their nature isolate changes from year to year and offer greater clarity on short-term fluctuations.

10) "Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 1972-2012" NCES. Accessed August 23, 2017. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2015015>

11) "Public High School Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates: School Years 2010-2011 and 2011-2012" Appendix B: Detailed Methodology for Calculation of Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates" NCES. Accessed August 17, 2017. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014391/appendix_b.asp

NCES National Annual and Longitudinal Dropout Rates¹²



It is important to note, however, that annual dropout rates capture only dropout events that occur during one academic year. This contributes to the measure's volatility, and reduces its effectiveness as a predictor of long-term trends. Between 1992 and 2004, annual rates appear to indicate a steady or even increasing national dropout rates. Less volatile longitudinal rates describe declining dropout rates.

Multifaceted Approaches

Use Both Annual and Longitudinal Dropout Rates for Responsive and Outcomes-Focused Metrics

Administrators at **District B** use both annual and longitudinal dropout rates to measure dropouts. Data from annual dropout rates allows administrators to crosscheck longitudinal dropout rates. These annual rates also enable administrators to quickly identify and address issues that impact student persistence before an affected cohort reaches their expected graduation date. Districts that use only longitudinal dropout rates may fail to recognize a dropout problem until years later. By the time district staff identify and intervene in a struggling school, many more students may have dropped out than would have with prompt intervention.

Longitudinal dropout rates based on ACGR data more accurately measure student outcomes than annual rates. District leaders use these longitudinal dropout rates to measure the number of students who dropout and identify long-term trends. Unlike annual dropout rates, which overstate dropout figures when students reenroll, the application of longitudinal dropout rates incentivizes schools to reenroll students who have previously dropped out.

Both annual rates and longitudinal rates offer unique insights and advantages to districts and schools. Used together, both rates provide a more complete description of dropout realities.

¹²) "Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 1972-2012" NCES. Accessed August 23, 2017. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2015015>

Best Uses of Annual versus Longitudinal Dropout Rates

	Annual Rates	Longitudinal Rates
Reflect Student Outcomes	✗	✓
Short Term Assessment	✓	✗
Identify Long-term Trends	✗	✓
Incentivize Dropout Reenrollment	✗	✓
Identify When Dropout Events Occurred	✓	✗
School Accountability	✗	✗

State Education Agencies Do Not Use Dropout Rates When Calculating Accountability Scores for Most Profiled Districts

State agencies overseeing most profiled districts do not use dropout rates as part of an accountability formula, but do provide the data for context. **District A** is the only profiled district where state administrators include annual dropout rates in district accountability scores calculations. The formula requires districts to hold annual dropout rates below six percent or face a five-point penalty (out of 100 total points). Contacts at **District B** note that the Texas Education Agency publishes their district's annual and longitudinal dropout rates as part of the Texas Academic Performance Reports. Texas state accountability scores and performance standard assessments rely on ACGR data, but do use dropout rates if graduation rate is not available. Typically, the report includes annual and longitudinal dropout rates as part of statistic for contextual and informational purposes only.

State education agencies report annual dropout data for **District C** and **District E** on their websites, but do not include these rates as part of state accountability assessments. **District D** does not publish a dropout rate, but include statistics on non-graduating students who are educationally disengaged as part of their ACGR measurements.

Use Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates for Accountability Purposes

ACGR does not measure dropouts, but instead measures students who graduate after four (or more) years. Because the goal of almost all high schools is to graduate students, the ACGR, which directly measures graduation rates, provides a more effective accountability measurement. ACGR also benefits from a standardized calculation methodology.

District C, District D, and District E place greater emphasis on ACGR than dropout statistics in school and district accountability measurements. Administrators at **District E** explain that their district concentrates on graduation rates because of their emphasis on serving both traditional students, and students not well served by traditional education formats (e.g., students with children, working students). They note that classifying a student as a dropout implies that a student's relationship with school has ended. The district offers 25 separate alternative education programs for students who cannot continue education in traditional settings, have dropped out previously, or are at risk of dropping out.

Advantages of the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) as a Measure of School and District Accountability



Federal Law Defines a Standard ACGR Methodology for all US Schools

ACGR-based statistics on dropouts and graduation rates are more reliable than annual dropout rates. Under federal law, states must calculate a four year adjusted cohort graduation rate for each public school in the state using a formula defined in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (34 CFR 200.34). Because of this, ACGR data should be more reliable for comparing districts and schools against each other.



Easier to Define a Graduate than a Dropout

The ACGR counts graduates, a subset of a student cohort that is more easily countable and easily verified than dropouts. ACGR guidelines set by federal law narrowly define who qualifies as a graduate and few exceptions apply. Many reasons exist as to why a student can be classified as a dropout and many exceptions apply. This increases complexity and creates more opportunities for data errors. In **District D**, students expelled from school count as dropouts, but in **District A**, expelled students do not count as dropouts. ACGR treats both students the same (as non-graduates).



Longitudinal Measurements Allow More Time for Data Verification

Administrators at **District A** and **District B** have only a short period to identify and locate students who do not return to school as part of annual dropout rates. With ACGR, the period to locate and identify students who do not return to school (and potentially reenroll these students) is years rather than weeks. Longitudinal dropout rates also benefit from this advantage.

3) Tracking and Analyzing Dropout Data

Dropout Data Quality

Use Well-Defined Coding to Classify Students Who Leave School

All profiled districts use standardized codes to classify students who leave schools in their district. These codes determine if administrators should report a student as a dropout for statistical purposes, and help staff track and identify students in need of assistance. These codes also ensure that district staff retain the proper documentation and follow the necessary procedures to comply with legal requirements.

School-level staff responsible for attendance at **District C** input student data in a district-wide SIS with standardized codes to ensure data quality. The codes identify the reason for a student's withdrawal, (e.g., transfer, death, dropout, unknown reason). These codes allow administrators to quickly organize data on dropouts and easily calculate dropout rates.

Administrators and attendance staff at **District D** use 32 different withdrawal codes defined by the state education agency to indicate the reason for and destination of students leaving a district school.

Examples of Withdrawal Codes

Codes classify student withdrawals based on the variety of reasons and situations surrounding a withdrawal event. These codes help administrators and school-level staff identify required documentation and coordinate follow-up.



Transfer to Other Educational Institution

- Transfer to another school within the same district
- Transfer to another school district in the state
- Transfer to a public school outside of the state
- Transfer to a private school in the state
- Transfer to a private school outside of the state



Other Transfers

- Transfer to home schooling
- Transfer to a school outside of the United States
- Transfer to a correctional facility



Withdrawal for Other Reasons

- Illness or disability
- Death or permanently incapacitated
- Incomplete immunizations



Withdrawals Resulting in Dropout Status¹³

- Involuntary transfer / expulsion
- Adult (18+) Student enrolling in an adult education/ training program
- Non-attendance of a student 17 or younger
- Discontinued Schooling – (students 18+)

¹³ Because state and national definitions of dropouts vary these withdrawals may not result in dropout status for all school districts.

Examples of Required Withdrawal Documentation

Some district regulations require that attendance staff receive one or more of the following documents for confirmation prior to processing the withdrawal. If schools do not retain proper withdrawal documentation, staff must instead classify those students as dropouts.



Transfer to Other Educational Institution

- Confirmation of enrollment in a receiving school
- Confirmation of enrollment in a vocational program or other educational institution
- Notice of intent to home school



Student Illness, Incapacitation, or Death

- A copy of a student's obituary, memorial service program, or a letter from the deceased student's parents
- A doctor's note explaining a student's illness or incapacitation
- Record of a notification sent to a student's parents that their student was withdrawn due to incomplete immunizations



Involuntary Transfer, Expulsion, or Student Incarceration

- A copy of a court order
- A confirmation from a receiving correctional institution or juvenile detention facility



Student Dropout or Non-Attendance

- Evidence that the school's truancy protocol was followed
- Proof of due diligence to contact truant/missing students (e.g., documented phone calls, home visits, notification letters to parents)

Use Student Information Systems to Classify and Track Students

School-level staff responsible for attendance at **District C** input student data into a district-wide SIS. This system manages student data for the whole district, and allows central administrators to access and analyze up-to-date student data within their district. State-level data is less accessible. District administrators in Missouri cannot access state enrollment information until months after enrollment deadlines. As a result, district staff at **District C** rely on data from their own SIS to coordinate all dropout prevention and recovery efforts.

All profiled districts submit data from their district SIS's to state agencies, but the level of integration between district and state systems varies. Central administrators at profiled districts in Texas, Missouri, and Pennsylvania aggregate student information from across their districts using SIS systems. Administrators then must manually submit data files to their respective state education agencies at specified times throughout the year, typically on a quarterly basis. Conversely, at **District A**, attendance and enrollment data automatically uploads to statewide SIS's daily.

The Texas Education Agency offers school districts the option to submit data through their State SIS, or through legacy manual data submissions.

Develop User-Friendly Enrollment and Withdrawal Manuals for Attendance Staff

To ensure that school-level staff implement standard procedures for coding and tracking students, administrators at **District D** developed an enrollment and withdrawal policy guide. The guide describes each enrollment and withdrawal code in non-technical language and identifies the steps and documentation required to enroll or withdraw a student under each code. **Appendix A** provides an example of a district's withdrawal policy guide.

Audit Withdrawal Codes Annually to Identify and Fix Coding Errors

Administrators at **District D** audit inputted withdrawal codes every year to ensure accuracy. In February and March, staff from the district performance and assessment office meet with school officials to review a random selection of withdrawal code entries. The administrators audit all schools in the district, but prioritize high schools. The groups audit 40 to 50 percent of all withdrawal codes entered for high school students.

Contacts report that these audits frequently identify errors and mistakenly applied codes. When audits identify an incorrect code, central administrators work with school and district staff to correct the data in the district's SIS. Administrators later follow up with school officials to confirm the correction of these errors.

Based on the audit results, central staff update training programs and documents for school-level attendance staff. When administrators in the accountability office deem it necessary, district staff can require additional training for school staff experiencing a high prevalence of data entry errors.

Adjust Training and Guidance Documents Based on Lessons from Withdrawal Code Audits



AUDIT

Administrators at **District D** meet with school-level staff responsible for assigning withdrawal codes each year in February and March to review a randomly selected sample of withdrawal codes to ensure data accuracy.



FIX

District personnel follow-up with schools to ensure that staff have fixed previously identified errors and adjusted student records accordingly.



UPDATE

Staff from the district offices for accountability and attendance monitoring revise training materials and withdrawal code guidebooks with guidance on how to avoid common errors identified in the annual code audits.

Hire Dedicated Staff to Identify and Track Dropouts

Identifying and tracking dropouts at profiled districts requires the coordination of staff at multiple levels of the organization. At **District C**, dropout engagement and prevention offices are separate from research, evaluation, and assessment. Each office has its own director and staff. At **District D**, ACGR specialists oversee a cluster of high schools and hold responsibility for both dropout engagement and accountability statistics.

Access to updated state-level SIS data provides tangible benefits to staff at **District A** who investigate dropouts. With this access, staff can distinguish students who have dropped out from students who have enrolled in other Wisconsin schools, but failed to notify their previous institutions. This knowledge helps administrators target outreach to at-risk students more efficiently.

Staff Responsible for Dropout Tracking and Prevention at Profiled Districts



Central District Staff

The Office of Research, Assessment, and Accountability at **District C** employs one director and three additional staff to evaluate district schools. This office compiles and cleans data on dropouts, and submits reports to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The district also employs a central coordinator of dropout prevention, who oversees several dropout prevention specialists assigned to high-risk high schools.



School Attendance Staff

At **District A**, school secretaries record student attendance, process student withdrawals, and coordinate enrollment logistics. Some high schools in **District D** employ a registrar, whose primary responsibilities are enrollment, withdrawals, attendance monitoring, and record keeping.



Attendance Investigators

District A tasks school social workers with the responsibility of locating and connecting with students who have not returned to school. In highly mobile areas, this outreach may involve significant investigative effort. At **District B** and **District D**, some high schools employ dedicated investigative staff to assume these responsibilities.

Invite Staff from the Central Administration to Facilitate Dropout Reenrollment

Administrators at **District B** invite staff from the central administration to join dropout recovery teams at high schools during the first six weeks of the school year.

These teams include two to three staff from the central administration, the principal or associate principal, attendance auditor, and school counselor at a high school. The team targets students who school officials expected to return to school in the fall, but did not return. Teams meet weekly to identify missing students and coordinate outreach.

School officials connect with students and identify their unmet needs or the reason a student did not return to school. These staff work to identify programs or resources available in the district that can help address the needs for each individual students. These include programs that allow students to work while staying in school, weekend remediation programs, or other specialized services. School counselors, attendance auditors, associate principals, and other staff trained to work with students communicate options to these students and their families.

Central administration staff volunteer from many different offices and departments, often without prior experience working with dropouts. Contacts at **District B** report that many administrators volunteer for the program. Participants find the program rewarding, and observe that their efforts help prevent students from fully dropping out.

Dropout Recovery Team Composition



Principal or Associate Principal



Attendance Auditor



School Counselor



Central Administration Staff

Reporting Data

Frequently Provide School and District Leaders with Data Dashboards

School principals and district leaders at **District A** regularly receive data dashboards that include information on student attendance, truant students, and dropouts. The district's accountability office employs a dedicated employee responsible for updating the district's dashboards compiled from the district SIS's data. These regular reports help school leaders quickly address school performance and student persistence issues, and help target reenrollment resources at students in a timely manner.

In addition to informing decision-makers, providing school and district leaders with data dashboards supports data quality efforts. Because district leaders have constant access to metrics like dropout statistics, awareness of and attention to trends and patterns remain strong. Greater knowledge of the data trends empowers school leaders to identify and verify unexpected and potentially incorrect figures. Additionally, staff who track and record student information may take greater care when inputting student data because they know school leaders actively pay attention to the results.

Highlight School and District Performance to Parents and Government Officials with School and District Scorecards

Administrators at the **District E** communicate performance statistics to parents and the community with customized school and district scorecards. District leaders design these scorecards to align with the district's own strategic plan and focus areas (e.g., test score improvement, college readiness, student engagement). The scorecard that the **District E** publishes provides information on school climate, average student achievement against state standards, average student test score improvement, and college and career readiness. The dashboard measures progress in these areas with metrics that include average examination scores, student attendance, retention rates, 4-year ACGR, and student performance on college readiness examinations. The district does not publish dropout data on its district or school scorecards.



District Websites Link to State Accountability Scorecards

Leaders at all other profiled districts do not develop unique scorecards, but instead publish scorecards defined by state education agencies, and measured against state accountability frameworks. [District A](#) links to their district's state scorecard on their website. The scorecards rank each district out of 100 points, and score districts based upon four priority areas.

- Student Achievement, measured by average English and math test scores
- Student Growth, measured by the improvement of English and math Test scores
- Closing Gaps, measured by the achievement gap for underrepresented students in English and math tests and in graduation rates.
- On-Track and Postsecondary Readiness, measured with graduation and attendance rates, and achievement scores in both third and eighth grades.

The scorecard also penalizes districts that fail to meet student engagement goals by five points for each of the following goal areas.

- Test participation rates greater than or equal to 95 percent
- Absenteeism rates less than 13 percent
- Dropout rates of less than six percent

4) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member district approached the Forum with the following questions:

- How does the contact district define a dropout student for statistical and reporting purposes?
- Do contact districts use a standardized date or time period when calculating dropout data? If so, what dates/time periods are used?
- What formulas are used to calculate dropout rates at contact districts?
- What advantages and limitation do contact districts identify in their statistical methodology?
- Are there staff dedicated to tracking, assessing, and addressing dropouts?
- Who do these staff report to, and what are their responsibilities?
- How does the contact district track and classify students who are not attending school?
- How do contact districts track and classify students who attend school only sporadically?
- When compiling dropout data, do contact districts distinguish between frequently absent students and students who have completely dropped out of school?
- What policies and procedures do contact districts use to ensure schools are accurately recording daily attendance?
- How do contact districts code and report the reasons for a student exiting a school?
- What documentation are contact districts and their respective schools required to keep on file as proof of the reason for the student exiting the school?
- How do contact districts communicate data about dropouts to external stakeholders?
- What format(s) do contact districts use to communicate these findings?
- What are the benefits of these formats? What are the limitations?
- Do districts and/or states audit schools for proper student exit documentation and processes?

Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB’s internal and online research libraries (eab.com)
- The Institute of Education Sciences – National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance
 - Re-enrollment of high school dropouts in a large, urban school district - [REL 2008-No.056](#)
- The National Center for Education Statistics
 - Public High School Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates: School Years 2010–11 and 2011–12 - [NCES 2014-391](#)
 - Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 1972–2012 - [NCES 2015-015](#)
- Wisconsin State Statute [§118.153 \(1\) \(b\)](#)
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
 - [WISEdash Glossary](#)
 - [About Wisconsin Accountability](#)
- Texas Education Code [§39.053 \(c\)\(4\)\(a\)\(i\)](#)
- Texas Education Agency
 - Texas Academic Performance Reports [2015-2016](#)
- Pennsylvania Department of Education
 - [Dropout Data and Statistics](#)

Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed administrators involved in offices tasked with compiling accountability statistics at profiled school districts.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

District	State
District A	Wisconsin
District B	Texas
District C	Missouri
District D	(withheld by request)
District E	Pennsylvania

Appendix A. Example Withdrawal Manual

This following document is an example of a page in a withdrawal manual provided to attendance staff. The example page addresses student withdrawal codes due to truancy.

Students withdrawing due to truancy (For compulsory age students ONLY: Not applicable for PK3 or PK4 students)

Withdrawal Codes and Types							Special Considerations
District SIS Code	Withdrawal Reason	Explanation	Definition	Mapping to Department of Education Codes	Dropout (Yes/No)	Remain on School Roster (Yes/No)	
N-1	Non-Attendance	Absent for 20+ consecutive days	A registered student who is absent for 20 or more consecutive days, and is under the age of 18	10-457-B	Yes	No	Use Code D-2 instead for students over 18
General Education Required Withdrawal Documentation				Special Education Student Required Withdrawal Documentation			
1. Proof of adherence to truancy protocol				1. Registrar must confer with local educational agency representative prior to withdrawal 2. Adherence to truancy protocol 3. Prior written notice			

Withdrawal Steps

1. Print Withdrawal Form and fill out withdrawal reason in section A and section B
2. Adhere with Truancy Protocol and document all outreach efforts. Confer with Attendance Counselor or Attendance Designee to collect the completed Truancy Court Referral packet, which should include all letters to parent, meeting notes, court referral, and other relevant documents, to keep in Student Folder. Students should not be withdrawn without a copy of documentation from the Attendance Counselor/Designee.
3. If student has an IEP: confer with LEA Rep and collect a copy of the Prior Written Notice to keep in Student Folder
4. Withdraw student in District SIS