



## Frequently Asked Questions about Virginia High School Cohort Reports: Graduation & Dropout Rates

### What is a cohort?

A cohort is a group of students who enter the ninth grade for the first time together with the expectation of graduating within four years. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) Educational Information Management System (EIMS) tracks students in a cohort from year to year during their high school career. Students who transfer to a new high school are subtracted from the cohort of their original school and added to the cohort of the receiving school. Students who leave the commonwealth's public schools also are subtracted from the cohort.

A cohort "on-time" graduation rate is the percentage of students in a cohort who earn a diploma within four years of entering the ninth grade. In Virginia, this rate is known as the Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate. A cohort dropout rate is the percentage of students in the cohort who drop out during the same period.

### How is the Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate calculated?

The Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate is based on four years of longitudinal student-level data. Unlike estimates in the past, the Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate takes into consideration student mobility; changes in student enrollment; local promotion/retention policies and decisions; and includes adjustments for students who are allowed more time to earn a diploma while still being counted as "on-time" graduates.

Simply put, the graduation rate equals [on-time graduates in 2008] divided by [(first-time entering 9<sup>th</sup> graders in 2004) plus (transfers in) minus (transfers out)].

OR

On-Time Graduates in 2008
$\frac{\text{On-Time Graduates in 2008}}{[\# \text{ of } 1^{\text{st}} \text{ time entering } 9^{\text{th}} \text{ graders in 2004]} + (\text{Transfers In}) - (\text{Transfers out and deceased})}$

High school graduation rates are calculated and reported at the state, division and school levels.

### Who is considered a Virginia on-time graduate?

An on-time Virginia public school graduate is a student who earns one of five Board of Education-recognized diplomas — Advanced, Standard, Modified Standard, Special or General Achievement Diploma — within four years of the first time he or she entered the 9th grade.

### How does Virginia keep track of who graduates on time?

Virginia's EIMS follows students as they transfer in and/or transfer out of Virginia public schools by assigning a randomly selected number to every student. This 10-digit number, known as a "state testing identifier," stays with the student throughout his or her K-12 career. Using each student's identifier, the records of students who entered the ninth grade for the first time in 2004 were linked to their records for subsequent years to determine their status and calculate the 2008 Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate for schools, school divisions and the commonwealth. The graduating class of 2008 was the first high school cohort for which there were four years of longitudinal data.

### How are students assigned to cohorts?

Students are assigned to cohorts based on when they first enter grades 9-12 in a Virginia public school. For example, a student who entered ninth grade for the first time in 2005 is part of a cohort of students expected to graduate in the spring or summer of 2009.

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LEP students and students with disabilities, who are allowed more than the standard four years to earn a diploma while still being considered on-time graduates are assigned to cohorts based on when they graduate or otherwise complete high school.

#### **How are transfer students counted?**

- Students who transfer from one Virginia public school into another Virginia public school are removed from the cohort of the sending school and added to the cohort of the receiving school and retain their assigned state testing identifier.
- Students who transfer out of Virginia public schools — and transfer to a school in another state, a private school or home instruction — are removed from the cohort of the sending Virginia school and division.
- Students who transfer in to Virginia public schools for the first time from outside the commonwealth's public school system are assigned to a cohort based on the year and grade in which they first entered a Virginia public high school (grades 9-12).
- Students who are incarcerated will be counted as transfers as they leave and re-enter the system. Incarcerated students who re-enter Virginia public schools will be assigned to a cohort based on the year and grade at the time of return to public school.

#### **What about students who take longer than four years to graduate?**

The Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate recognizes that certain students are allowed longer than four years to graduate from high school, and that it is important to recognize the accomplishment of these students regardless of when they graduate. VDOE will adjust the cohort assignment of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students and students with disabilities based on when they graduate or complete high school.

#### **Are cohort rates disaggregated by student subgroups?**

Yes. Graduation rates are reported by the following student populations:

- All Students
- Female Students
- Male Students
- Black Students
- Hispanic Students
- White Students
- Asian Students
- American Indian
- Native Hawaiian
- Other Students
- Students with Disabilities
- Disadvantaged Students
- Limited English Proficient Students
- Migrant Students
- Homeless Students

#### **What happens to students retained in their grade?**

The student's cohort does not change if he or she is retained in grade.

#### **How are summer graduates included in the graduation rate calculations?**

Summer graduates are included as if they graduated in June of the same calendar year.

#### **What graduation rate is used as an academic indicator for calculating whether Virginia high schools make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) toward the goals of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)?**

While the Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate is reported as part of the "Virginia School Report Card" section of the VDOE Web site, an estimated graduation rate selected as part of Virginia's NCLB implementation plan continues to serve as an academic indicator for calculating AYP ratings for the 2008-09 school year.

#### **How are dropouts counted in calculating the Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate?**

Dropouts are not counted as transfers out and remain in the cohort when calculating the Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate.

#### **Who is a dropout?**

Virginia has adopted the definition established by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a dropout is an individual who:

- Was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year and was not enrolled on October 1 of the current school year, or
- Was not enrolled on October 1 of the previous school year although expected to be in membership; and
- Has not graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved educational program; and

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- Does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions:
  - Transfer to another public school district, private school, or state- or district-approved education program;
  - Temporary school-recognized absence due to suspension or illness;
  - Death.

**Is VDOE changing the way it reports dropout rates?**

Yes. The new cohort reports for the commonwealth, school divisions and schools include a cohort dropout rate reflecting the number of students who dropped out — and did not re-enroll — as their cohort moved through high school.

**How were 2008 cohort dropout rates calculated?**

Dropout rates were calculated by following individual students who first entered ninth grade during the 2004-2005 school year and identifying all students in the cohort meeting the definition of a dropout — including students who “joined” the cohort by transferring into a Virginia public high school. The total number of dropouts is then divided by the number of students in the cohort to produce a four-year cohort dropout rate.

Students on long-term medical leave, emergency family leave and students who were expelled for one-year are not counted as dropouts unless they permanently exit high school without a credential and without completing the 12th grade.

**Can the cohort dropout rate for a school or division be determined from its graduation rate?**

No. A cohort dropout rate is not the inverse of a cohort graduation rate. In addition to graduates and dropouts, a cohort includes students who completed high school with a GED, students who are on long-term medical leave, students who completed high school without earning a state-recognized credential and students who are still enrolled.

**Who are “unconfirmed” students?**

An unconfirmed student is a student whose final status cannot be determined with current state data. A student whose status is unconfirmed is not counted as a dropout until it is established that he or she is not enrolled in another public, private or home school. These students include:

- Transfer students who exit one public school and whose enrollment in a new school has not been documented;
- Transfer students who are mistakenly assigned a new state testing identifier by the receiving school;
- Transfer students who exit one public school near the end of the year and wait for the next school year to enroll in new school;
- Transfer students who exit one public school, register at new public school and then change plans before attending new school; and
- Students who transferred before 2007 during the summer to a private or out-of-state high school.

Cohorts are adjusted as school divisions document the status of formerly unconfirmed students and submit updated student records.

**If a student who attended several high schools drops out, is the student reported as dropout for every school the student attended?**

No. The student is included in the dropout rate of the school and division reporting him or her as a dropout.

**What are the benefits of calculating graduation and dropout rates based on longitudinal data?**

Cohort rates provide a more accurate picture of what happens to high school students as they move toward graduation. Schools, school divisions and the state also can use the longitudinal data used to calculate cohort graduation and dropout rates to identify students at risk of dropping out. Longitudinal data also provides schools, school divisions and the state with data to support decisions and programs to improve educational outcomes for all students.

Educators and policy makers have long recognized the need for accurate and comparable data on high school graduation and completion. In 2005, the National Governors Association (NGA) task force proposed a

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graduation-rate formula that would provide "... a measure of on-time completion, with most students, but not all, expected to finish in four years." In 2006, the Virginia General Assembly directed the Board of Education to collect, analyze, and report high school graduation data using a formula reflecting the recommendations of the NGA task force, beginning in the fall of 2008.

**Will VDOE continue to report annual dropout rates?**

Yes. VDOE will continue to report division-level and state-level annual dropout rates as part of the Superintendent's Annual Report (Table 6) reflecting the number of students in grades 7-12 who drop out during a single year.

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