

# Maine High School Graduation Rates

Maine has moved to a new federally-required method for calculating the graduation rate known as the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, or ACGR, starting with the 2008-09 graduation rate. The purpose of the federal requirement is to use the same method across states and to provide more consistency in reporting and comparisons across states.

## Calculating the federal ACGR graduation rate

The basics of the new calculation method are fairly straightforward: of the students who enter 9th grade in a given year (the “cohort”), what percentage of them received a diploma in four years or less? The formula accounts for students who transfer in and out, die, or emigrate over four years. For 2008-09 graduation data, Maine will report whole group data only; the following year Maine will report graduation data for subgroups such as low-income students, special education students, and other groups.

$$\left( \frac{\text{On-time graduates by year } x}{[(\text{first time 9}^{\text{th}} \text{ graders in year } x-4) + (\text{Transfers-In}) - (\text{Transfers-Out})]} \right) \times 100$$

## How the new method differs from the old

The most significant differences from Maine’s previous calculation method are:

- The new formula only counts students who graduate within four years of entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
- The new formula focuses on a single “cohort” of students – the group of students who entered 9th grade at the same time. The old formula was based on all students who graduated in a particular year, regardless of when they started high school. Thus a student graduating five or six years after entering high school was counted as a graduate in the year he/she graduated, not necessarily for his/her class. As a result, the graduation rate for 2008-09 cannot be compared to the 2007-08 rate, as they were calculated differently.

## Comparing the 2008-09 rate to the 2007-08 rate

The reported graduation rate for most high schools and for the State overall is lower using the ACGR method (2008-09) than it was using the previous calculation method (2007-08 and before). The primary reason is that now students who graduate in more than four years will not be counted in this rate whereas previously they were counted.

Statewide, the reported graduation rate for 2008-09 is 80.4% - down from 83.5% reported in 2007-08 using the previous method. This does not mean the graduation rate is dropping. Rather it is a reflection of the changes in the way we now calculate the rate.

### **Limitations of the new method**

While it is a valuable tool to allow comparisons among states and schools, the new federal ACGR method does not fully capture the graduation picture for individual schools or the State. It does not reflect school and student successes in graduating in five or six years, with an alternative diploma, or with a GED, for example.

The Maine Legislature passed a law in early 2010, sponsored by Sen. Justin Alford, D-Portland, requiring that all high schools graduate at least 90 percent of their students by 2016. Among other provisions, the law called for a group of educators and others to develop a plan for expanding the graduation rate formula to reflect those students who achieve Maine's *Learning Results* standards through multiple pathways and over more than the four year time frame – students who are not captured in the four-year ACGR rate. This already-convened group is considering, among other issues, whether or not to count alternative diplomas, GEDs, students who graduate in five or six years, and what to do when a student has been expelled and returns to school.

***Even after completing this work, Maine will still be required to report the universal ACGR rate to the U.S. Department of Education for accountability purposes, regardless of what expanded formula Maine might use for its own purposes.***

### **Transition and training**

The U.S. Department of Education does not require using the new method until the 2010-11 federal accountability reporting (which will include 2009-10 graduation data). Maine chose to transition to the new method one year early for several reasons.

Maine now has four years of good quality data and we can produce an accurate rate. In addition, Maine Department of Education staff spent hundreds of hours with school personnel reviewing data, helping them to accurately record every student. This experience, coupled with extensive training for school personnel over the coming year will ensure that graduation rates for schools are accurately reflected in future reporting to the federal government.

### **Graduation rate and federal accountability**

The federal government requires states to report annually on how well schools are meeting targets in reading and mathematics, as well as on graduation rates. If a school fails to meet targets in any area, including the 80 percent graduation rate target, it is considered as “not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)”. Schools that do “not make AYP” are subject to corrective action and, if they are Title I schools, receive support from the Maine Department of Education in improving student achievement.

Note that there is a waiver provision that will allow schools that dip below the 80 percent graduation rate for 2008-09 only to still show “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) in federal reporting if their graduation rate under the old method would put them over 80 percent.

**For more information** on high school graduation rates and to view the data, go to:  
[www.maine.gov/education/gradrates](http://www.maine.gov/education/gradrates)

## **Questions and Answers**

### **What is the dropout rate?**

A "dropout" is any student who has withdrawn for any reason except death, or been expelled from school before graduation or completion of a program of studies and who has not enrolled in another educational institution or program. [20-A MRSA Sec. 5102]

The dropout rate is the percentage of students in ALL high school grades who stop attending school in a specific year. Thus the dropout rate includes freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors. It is not class-specific.

### **Is the dropout rate the inverse of the graduation rate?**

No. The ACGR graduation rate is calculated for one cohort – the group of students who enter 9<sup>th</sup> grade at the same time, regardless of when/if they graduate. The dropout rate includes students in any class that drop out in a single year. If you add the graduation rate plus the dropout rate it will not equal 100 percent.

### **Isn't every student counted either as a graduate or a dropout?**

No. A student who takes time off and then graduates after five years of high school is not counted in the four-year ACGR graduation rate and is not a dropout. A student could also attend high school for five or six years – until they are too old to attend – and never graduate; this student would not be counted as a graduate or a dropout.

### **So how does the dropout rate relate to the graduation rate?**

Obviously there are connections, but they are calculated separately and for different purposes.

### **What happened to the National Governor's Association (NGA) rate?**

There was movement by many states, including Maine, to a graduation rate developed by the National Governor's Association. However, the U.S. Department of Education determined in late 2008 that all states must use the ACGR method which is similar, but not identical to, the NGA rate.