

A More Accurate Measure of California's Dropout Rate

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Dropout rates are important indicators of high school performance. Yet current methods for computing dropout rates in California produce inaccurate estimates because of the way school enrollment and dropout figures are measured. This statistical brief uses a new measure of high school enrollment to compute a more accurate measure of California's dropout rate.

In order to calculate a dropout rate two numbers are needed: (1) the number of students enrolled in a school, and (2) the number of students who drop out of the school. The dropout rate is simply the number of dropouts divided by the number of students enrolled. In order for the rate to be accurate, however, dropouts must be included in the enrollment figure. Currently, that is not the case. The California Department of Education (CDE) defines enrollment as "All students who are enrolled in and attending a school or program leading to a high school diploma or its equivalent on Information Day." (Information Day is usually the first Wednesday of October). This number does not count any student who enters into the school at a later date.

Table 1

Regular and Cumulative Grade 9-12 Enrollment and Their Respective Dropout Rates, 2007-08

Type of School	Regular Enrollment	Cumulative Enrollment	Ratio	Total Adjusted Dropouts	Regular Dropout Rate(%)	Cumulative Dropout Rate (%)
HIGH SCHOOL	1,801,293	2,058,418	1.14	51,673	2.9	2.5
SPECIAL ED	11,034	14,188	1.29	645	5.8	4.6
OTHER	8,152	11,971	1.47	565	6.9	4.7
ALTERNATIVE	44,171	72,162	1.63	7,430	16.8	10.3
K-12	32,512	54,855	1.69	5,907	18.2	10.8
CONTINUATION	71,402	117,932	1.65	13,933	19.5	11.8
COMMUNITY DAY	8,725	23,015	2.64	1,965	22.5	8.5
OPPORTUNITY	3,898	7,065	1.81	943	24.2	13.4
CO COMMUNITY	17,008	41,504	2.44	5,265	31.0	12.7
CYA	1,948	4,199	2.16	606	31.1	14.4
JUVENILE HALL	11,784	56,636	4.81	9,247	78.5	16.3
Total	2,015,720	2,476,339	1.23	98,420	4.9	4.0

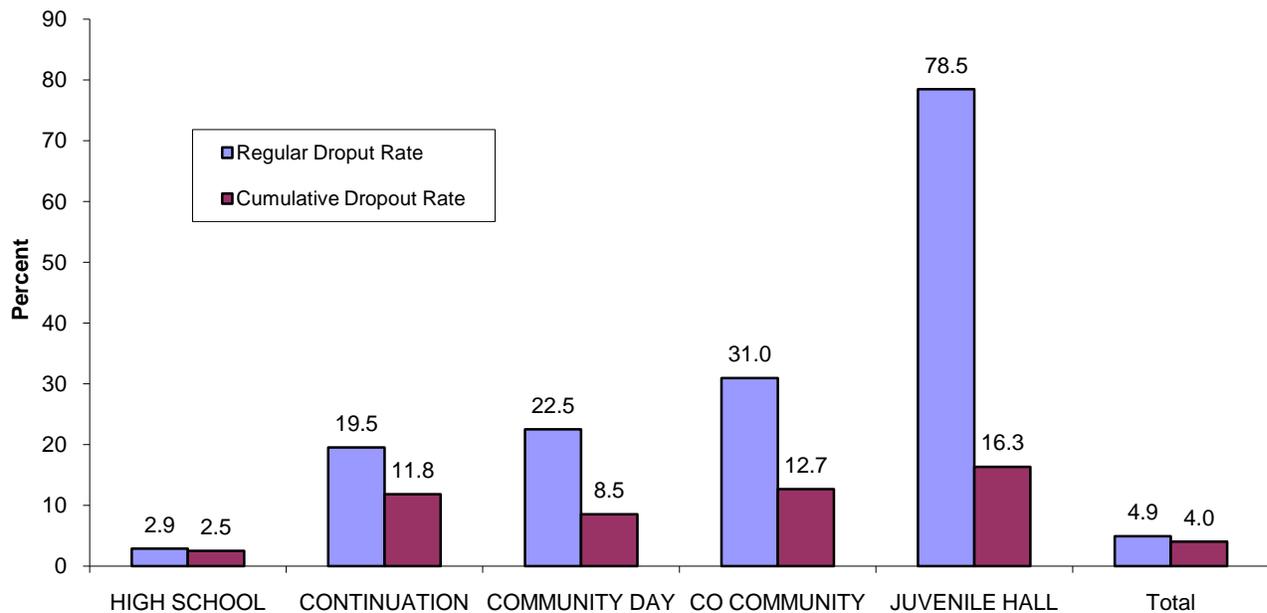
NOTE: Adjusted dropouts included reported dropouts minus reenrolled dropouts plus lost transfers. Total includes Elementary, Junior High, Middle, and State Special School figures not shown.

Starting in 2008 a new longitudinal student data system, CALPADS, was put into place that tracks the movement of students throughout the state's public school system. This allowed the CDE to measure a new type of enrollment, *cumulative enrollment*, which counts the number of students who enroll into any given school throughout the entire school year. As shown in Table 1, cumulative enrollment statewide in 2007-08 was about 23% higher than regular enrollment.

In some types of schools, especially alternative schools that experience significant enrollment gains throughout the school year, cumulative enrollment was more than double the regular enrollment measured in the fall. For example, cumulative enrollment in community day, county community, California Youth Authority (CYA), and juvenile hall schools were at least twice as large as their regular enrollments.

Cumulative enrollment can also be used to create a new and more accurate measure of school dropout rates. Whereas dropouts may not be represented in the regular enrollment figure, they should be represented in the cumulative enrollment figure. So dividing the number of dropouts by the number of students enrolled anytime during the school year—which we label as the *cumulative dropout rate*—provides a more accurate measure of a school’s dropout rate. Indeed, based on this method, no high school in California has a dropout rate above 100%, whereas a number of schools have dropout rates above 100% based on the current method. Statewide, the annual dropout rate based on cumulative enrollment was 4% in 2007-08, compared to 5% based on regular enrollment. Cumulative dropout rates for alternative schools are significantly lower than their regular dropout rates. For example, cumulative dropout rates for community day, county community, and juvenile hall schools were at least half as large as their regular dropout rates (See Figure 1).

Figure 1
Regular and Cumulative Dropout Rates by School Types, 2007-08



Regular and cumulative enrollment figures and respective dropout rates are available for all California public schools on the CDRP website at:
<http://www.cdrp.ucsb.edu/dropouts/sb13table.php>

As the CDE further develops the state’s student longitudinal data system, it will be possible to develop more useful and accurate measures of student progress and school performance. In particular, the CDE will be able to track individual students and compute dropout and graduation rates based on the progress of the same students.