

Cohort Dropout Rate: How It Helps Us Focus High School Reform

Why do we need more than one dropout rate?

Maryland began publishing the high school cohort graduation and dropout rates for the first time in 2011. Until Maryland assigned a unique student identifier to every student and tracked each one through high school, we were only able to count dropout “events.”

The numerator for the “annual event” dropout rate reflects every drop out event that occurred in grades 9, 10, 11, and 12 *in a given year*. For example, the student who dropped out of school in the fall and reenrolled for second semester but dropped out again in April of the same school year would be counted twice as a dropout that year. A student who drops out but ultimately graduates is also counted as both a dropout and a graduate. The calculation of the “annual event” dropout rate is the sum of all of the drop out “events” occurring over the four grade levels divided by the sum of the total number of students enrolled in high school. This rate is useful to monitor drop outs on a yearly basis. Maryland will continue to report this rate to provide trend data and monitor dropouts on a yearly basis.

However, a common question was also “how many students dropped out of a specific Class cumulatively, across all of their high school years?” This requires that each student counts only once in one status (graduate or dropout), which is not possible with the annual event rate. Maryland now publishes a cohort dropout rate which answers this question.

The cohort tracks the movements of individual students using a statewide individual student identifier, data are more valid and meaningful. Some students who were previously identified as dropouts are emerging in data bases for other schools and instead are actually transfers. Likewise, some students who might have been designated transfers in the past have been found to be dropouts because there is inadequate evidence of reenrollment in the same or another jurisdiction’s schools.

Lastly, because of the technical definition of the traditional dropout statistic, the annual event snapshot does not credit schools with dropout recovery efforts (i.e., identifying dropouts in the community and recruiting them back into the school and helping them make their way to graduation). The cohort dropout rate statistic remedies these issues and illuminates more clearly the fact that Maryland schools, like schools nationwide, are making healthy efforts to meet the needs of students whose high school education gets sidetracked for one reason or another.