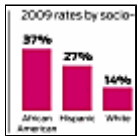


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Dropout rate for Calif. black students hits 37%

Jill Tucker, Chronicle Staff Writer

Wednesday, December 8, 2010



More than a third of California's African American public high school students dropped out before graduation day, a startling number and one that's on the rise, according to 2009 data released Tuesday.

The 37 percent African American dropout rate, up three percentage points from the prior year, was far above that of any other ethnic subgroup. Hispanic students had the second highest rate at 27 percent.

Locally, San Francisco cautiously celebrated a 9 percent overall dropout rate, a stark contrast to Oakland's 40 percent, numbers still under review for accuracy.

The statewide statistics highlight a pervasive achievement gap in test scores and graduation rates that persists despite focused efforts to boost the academic performance of black, Hispanic and low-income students, state education officials said.

Overall, 22 percent of state students dropped out of high school, according to the new data, up from 19 percent the year before.

The numbers are more than a year old. They were released several months later than usual because of problems ramping up a new system that can follow individual students' progress in California public schools, even if they move, said state schools Superintendent Jack O'Connell.

"We now have a data system that allows us to track students more accurately and have honest conversations about how to improve graduation rates and reduce dropouts among all subgroups of students," O'Connell said.

O'Connell blamed the increase on state budget cuts, which have resulted in larger class sizes, fewer art and music classes, cuts to sports, fewer counselors and less access to career/technical courses - all programs that can help keep struggling or at-risk students in school.

In addition, drastic cuts to summer school have prevented students from catching up on credits during the break, meaning they can't graduate on time and too often give up.

"Clearly the dropout rates in California are too high, unacceptable and absolutely must be

addressed," O'Connell said.

Some good news

The higher dropout rate was the bad news Tuesday, but there was also good news - the state's graduation rate is also up, O'Connell said.

While that might sound contradictory, the two statistics aren't completely interconnected, given a fluctuating third group of students, which includes those who move out of state, die, go to jail or take the GED test before graduating.

In 2009, 70.1 percent of those who started high school in the state graduated, up from 68.5 percent the year before. Hispanic students saw the biggest gain in diplomas, with 60 percent graduating, a nearly five-percentage-point increase.

While O'Connell said the state dropout and graduation numbers are reliable, localized data are still under review for accuracy at the district level, given the new system.

High oakland rate

In Oakland, for example, the dropout rate hit a whopping 40 percent in 2009, a number that has fluctuated wildly the past few years, up from 28 percent in 2008 and 36 percent in 2007.

While there is concern about the fluctuations, "these numbers are a little bit closer to what we've been hearing anecdotally," said Troy Flint, a district spokesman. "The percentage is not as important as realizing this is probably the most critical problem facing the district."

The district is focusing on internship programs and coursework that meets student interests, as well as offering the core curriculum, Flint said.

"We're trying to be more creative about making it more interesting for kids," he said.

San francisco's trend

In San Francisco, district officials were pleased with a 9 percent dropout rate, down from 18 percent the year before, and 20 percent in 2007.

Even if the exact numbers are off a bit, the trend seems clear, said Gentle Blythe, district spokeswoman.

"It shows that the work we've been doing over the last few years to decrease truancy and increase (daily) attendance has had an effect on these numbers," she said.

The district has a partnership with the district attorney's office to compel attendance, as well as online courses and limited summer school specifically for students behind in credits.

"We know that being in school on a regular basis is a precursor to school success," Blythe said. "The more school students miss, the more likely they are to drop out and become discouraged."

District rates

The following are the percentages of high school students from selected districts who dropped out before graduation in 2009.

District	Four-year dropout rate
Alameda	17 percent
Berkeley	27 percent
Oakland	40 percent
Pleasanton	4 percent
San Francisco	9 percent
San Mateo Union High	12 percent
West Contra Costa	22 percent

Online: To see all dropout and graduation rates online, go to links.sfgate.com/ZEFD.

E-mail Jill Tucker at jtucker@sfgate.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/12/08/MN0B1GN3DV.DTL>

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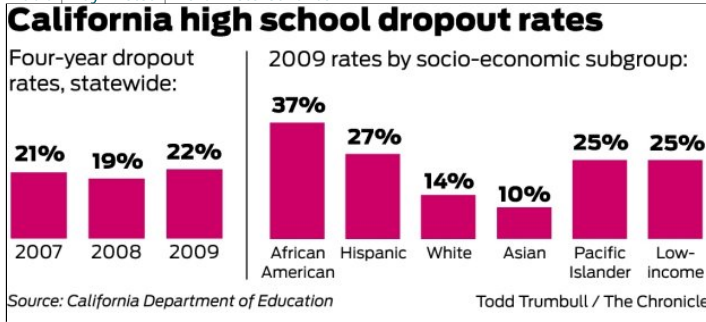
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