

High School Graduation Rates Inflated

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AUGUSTA: While Maine has long boasted about its high-school graduation rate, it appears the numbers are being overstated by 10 percentage points or more — part of a national problem some suspected but talked little about.

The state Department of Education website lists the 2005 graduation rate at 87 percent, when in all likelihood it is closer to 76 percent, according to Education Commissioner Susan Gendron. A study by the national Education Week magazine had it at 74 percent.

Policy makers often refer to Maine's above-average high school graduation rate while lamenting its below-average percentage of graduates going onto college — around 54 percent.

"For the last year and a half, I have not said that," Gendron said. "I've been very up-front about the fact that our graduation rates are not as high as reported."

Gendron last year sat on a National Governors Association task force that called for a national standard to measure graduation rates, since states now do it differently.

The report found: "The quality of state high-school graduation and dropout data is such that most states cannot accurately account for their students as they progress through school."

At the same time, the task force reported, "high-school dropouts are 15 percent less likely to be employed and earn almost 30 percent less than their diploma or GED-holding peers. They are more likely to rely on public assistance and to end up in prison."

In Maine's case, youth who dropped out in the summer as they progressed from ninth- to 12th-grade were not taken into account. Too often it was assumed they had transferred to another school district and there was no good way to track students who moved.

There are 32 other states that use a formula similar to Maine's, while 10 others use a stricter standard that will be adopted here. The rest use other measurements.

While Maine still appears to be ahead of the national average for graduation rates (70 percent), it is closer to the middle of the pack than the top. Comparable ratings won't really be available for four years, since 45 states just agreed to all count the same way. Maine also will start using unique student identifiers for all its kids, starting with next year's freshman high-school class, so the state can track them if they transfer from one school to another.

The standard formula will look at the number of graduates as a percentage of those who entered ninth grade four years earlier, taking into account students who transfer in or out of the system.

The new counting method will change the perception locally of just how many students are graduating in four years.

Under the old formula, graduation rates by county for 2005 were 82 percent for Androscoggin; 93 percent for Aroostook; 88.7 percent for Cumberland; 88.4 percent for Franklin; 76.5 percent for Hancock; 92 percent for Kennebec; 89 percent for Knox; 87 percent for Lincoln; 84.5 percent for Oxford; 86.6 percent for Penobscot; 76.8 percent for Piscataquis; 86.4 percent for Sagadahoc; 85 percent for Somerset; 83 percent for Waldo; 87.8 percent for Washington; and 88.5 percent for York.

Senate Majority Leader Michael Brennan, D-Cumberland County, who served for eight years on the Legislature's Education Committee and was its chairman for part of that time, said questions about the accuracy of the state's graduation rate had come up several times before, going back to the King administration.

"We recognized there were some problems of how we reported the graduation rate," he said, but because there was no national standard, Maine and many other states kept counting the way they always had.

"In the late 1990s, we were listed as having the highest rate in the country, with a 94 percent graduation rate," he said — making the drop-off to the low number of students going onto higher education more pronounced.

"The second part of that equation is still true," he said, but a more accurate high-school graduation rate "may give us a greater understanding of why" college enrollment is so low.

Sen. Carol Weston, R-Waldo County, and the assistant minority leader, served with Brennan on the Education Committee. She believes the state intentionally shut its eyes to the problem. "We have refused to actually find the answer because we didn't want to know," she said. "Any parent knows how many students were with their kids and knows there's a lot who aren't there anymore."

Craig Larrabee is president of Jobs for Maine Graduates, which works with students at risk of dropping out of high school because of poverty, learning problems or no adult support.

He called last year's National Governors Association report a wake-up call. "I do think that some people were unaware," he said, "... [including] school leadership at the local level. I don't know if they truly understand that they do have a dropout problem."

Jobs for Maine Graduates works with 2,500 students in alternative learning programs statewide — in 16 middle schools, 34 high schools and two prison sites — and boasts a graduation rate of 96 percent. The program's goal is to get students out of high school and into work or continuing education.

Without that extra push, young people can end up in yet another disadvantaged category, "idle youth." Larrabee said 18 percent of the state's 18- to 24-year olds were not working or in school in 2004.

"That's one in five not being a productive citizen, not paying taxes or getting an education," he said. "We have to look at the impact of losing these kids and what will it mean to our economy."