

Public schools hiding actual dropout counts

By
Alan Bonsteel,
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The California Department of Education will shortly release its latest high school dropout rates. It will do so with as little fanfare as possible, keeping even the release date a secret, because even the people who compile these phony numbers no longer bother to defend them.

Until 1998, the CDE, in its annual dropout press release, trumpeted a dropout rate that was derived from totally unaudited reports from its districts. School district administrators reassured that nobody would double-check anything, simply assumed that students who disappeared from class without an explanation had transferred elsewhere.

To further compound the falsehood, the CDE reported a one-year rate to the press rather than a four-year rate, without bothering to label it as such. Thus, in 1998 the "official" California high school dropout rate the CDE used for bragging rights was 3.3 percent.

Our group, California Parents for Educational Choice, successfully lobbied the state Board of Education in 1998 to force the CDE to disclose high school graduation rates. These simple figures are the one single best approximation of how many students are graduating -- and their complements, the attrition rates, are the one best measure of how many students are dropping out.

It's true that a tiny number of students graduate by alternative means such as GED tests, but their numbers are small and turn out to be more than counterbalanced by, among other factors, the numbers of kids who drop out of middle school and never even start high school.

For the 1999-2003 school years, the most recent statewide dropout rate is thus a staggering 29.2 percent. While there has been some marginal improvement in graduation rates in California in recent years, the long-term trend has been worsening. The best graduation rate the state ever saw was the oldest on record, 76 percent in 1975 -- or a dropout rate of 24 percent.

The Los Angeles Unified School District weighs in with a dropout rate far higher than that of the state as a whole: a tragic 53 percent for the 1999-2003 period.

Unfortunately, however, the CDE has stayed one jump ahead of the reformers. Last year, it started to pass off a phony graduation rate in which it simply subtracted the

old, phony and unaudited dropout rate from 100 percent. Officials thus last year came up with a wildly inaccurate graduation rate of 86.9 percent.

The tragedy in communicating this low-ball number to the public is that not only does it understate the problem but future figures derived from the same methodology can be counted on to show improvements. Since the raw dropout numbers are unaudited, the districts can be counted on to fabricate ever-rosier falsifications as the years go by, as they have for decades now.

The CDE claims a new computer system will solve everything and give us extremely precise dropout numbers. It won't.

Not only is the computer reporting on hold because of the budget crisis, even when it is up and running it won't provide dropout numbers any better than what we can now calculate. It will "bar-code" and track students within the system but tell us nothing about the kids we need to know about -- those who aren't in school, whether because they dropped out, left the state or even left the country.

California's shameful dropout rate is the greatest crisis facing the state. Our budget crisis will end someday, and we'll soon fix the workers' compensation mess. A teenager who drops out today, however, is a tragedy for the state for the next half century.

Subtracting a phony number from 100 percent to get another phony number is nobody's idea of reform. The public deserves the truth.

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