

snapshot

September 2013

GRADUATION RATES FOR EAST PALO ALTO STUDENTS IN THE SEQUOIA UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

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High school graduation is a key indicator that school districts and policymakers use to measure school performance. There are different ways to calculate graduation rates,¹ and their accuracy can be compromised by lack of available data when students transfer schools or districts. Community partners in East Palo Alto (EPA) asked the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University to examine graduation rates for all EPA public school students, a rate that has been previously difficult to ascertain. Ravenswood City Elementary School District, which serves EPA, is one of eight districts that feed into the Sequoia Union High School District (SUHSD). Many EPA students attend schools outside of Ravenswood, including charter schools, private schools, and other school districts through a voluntary desegregation transfer program. Because data on these students are not available, this analysis assists EPA community partners by focusing only on students who matriculated from Ravenswood to SUHSD.

Measuring the Graduation Rate

In this analysis, we defined graduation as completing a high school diploma or a GED from SUHSD within five years of entering 9th grade.² We divided reasons for school withdrawal into three categories: graduation, dropping out, or transferring out of the district. We then examined these outcomes for Ravenswood students who entered SUHSD in 9th grade in 2006-07 and 2007-08 through the next five years. As Exhibit 1 shows, more than 50% of students in these cohorts graduated within five years from a SUHSD school and about 10% dropped out. Most of the remainder (30% to 37%) transferred out of the district. A very small percent of students remained enrolled after five years or did not have data available on their reason for withdrawal.

Exhibit 1: Five-Year Outcomes for Ravenswood Students Entering SUHSD in 2006 & 2007

Cohort	Graduated	Dropped out	Left SUHSD	Enrolled after 5th year	Unknown	Total
2006-07 9th Grade	51%	11%	37%	0%	0%	271
2007-08 9th Grade	57%	10%	30%	1%	3%	333

Pathways to Graduation

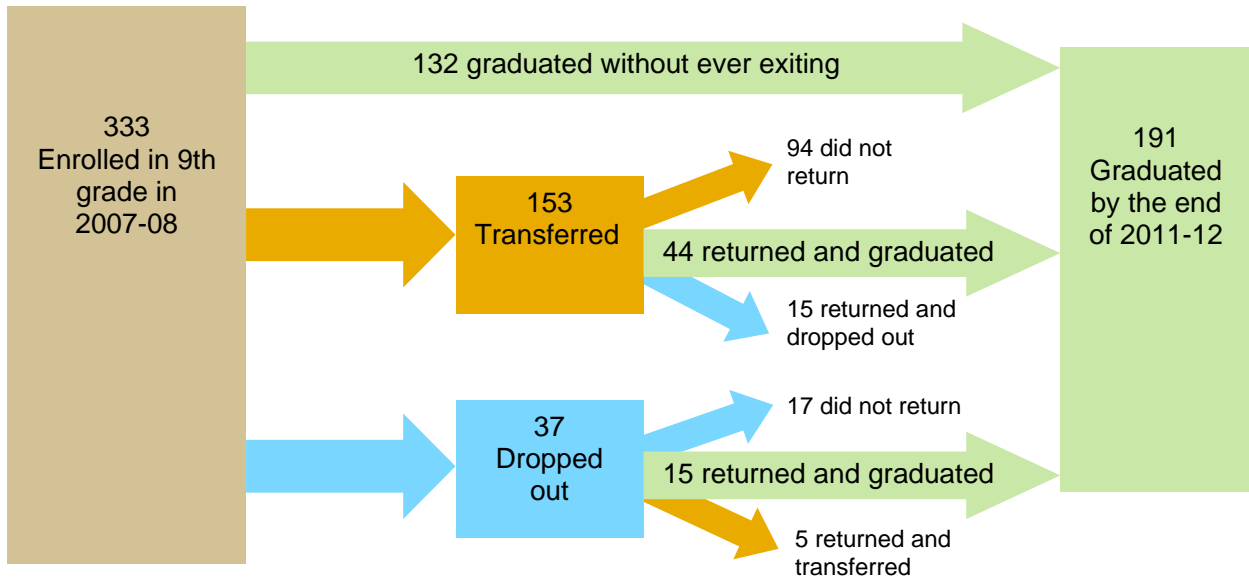
Students in this analysis did not have a single pathway from 9th grade to completion—many students dropped out or transferred and then returned to the district. Exhibit 2 shows the pathways to completion for the cohort who matriculated from Ravenswood and started 9th grade in SUHSD during 2007-08 as an example. Among the 191 students from this cohort who graduated, most (132 out of 191, or 69% of graduates) successfully completed each year and

¹ See the Gardner Center Policy Fact Sheet *Are Graduation and Dropout Rates Accurate Measures of School Success?* at http://jgc.stanford.edu/resources/policy_fact_sheets/PFS_Grad_rates.pdf

² The California Department of Education does not typically include GED completion in its graduation rate calculations.

graduated without ever leaving the district. However, many students left and later returned to the district, some multiple times. In total, 59 of the 191 students (31%) who went on to graduate had transferred or dropped out at least once before returning to SUHSD. Not shown in the exhibit, of the 191 students who graduated, 167 (84%) did so in four years, 20 (10%) graduated in five years, and four (2%) graduated in three years.

Exhibit 2: Graduation Pathways for Ravenswood Students Entering SUHSD in 2007-08



Note: There were 9 students whose status was unknown and 2 students who were still enrolled in the district after their fifth year.

Conclusions and Implications

Accurate graduation and dropout data are critical to inform policymakers' and advocates' strategies to help youth succeed in school. Although this analysis of graduation rates was specific to one community, it highlights broader challenges and opportunities in using graduation data. For example, the lack of data on students enrolled in charter or private schools and the high number of students who left the district and returned show the need for enhanced data systems that go beyond district boundaries. This could be accomplished through data sharing initiatives amongst educational providers within a community or through improvements in statewide student databases like the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). In addition to the analyses presented in this snapshot, there are many more questions that would be valuable to explore with enhanced data. For example, linking data from alternative schools could illuminate students' experiences when they leave the district and identify factors that predict their successful return. Also, examining students' academic histories could help school leaders identify students who are at risk of not graduating as they enter high school, and qualitative data could provide important information about the reasons why students drop out or persist to graduation. Answering these questions could guide support strategies geared toward improving graduation rates, including supports that follow students like those in our analysis who leave and re-enter districts in the hopes of helping them transition successfully and graduate.