

HAWAII'S DROPOUT/FAILURE RATES

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[Last Spring Hawaii received accolades for ranking eighth in the nation for the wellbeing of its children. The rank was earned in part by placing us second only to Connecticut as to dropout rates. Our reported 4% dropout rate ~~would have been~~ ^{T 119 000 is} impressive, indeed, given that national dropout figures average somewhere between 17 and 30%. The truth of the matter in Hawaii, however, is something ~~quite other than that:~~ ^{rather diff:} the 4% figure is the dropout rate for *the senior year* in high school. That is, 4% of the senior class drops out after starting, but failing to complete, the 12th grade. They leave school between August and May of ~~that~~ ^{strictly} final year.

Actually, 4% is a rather hefty rate for seniors. In many places those youngsters with the perseverance to stick it out until the senior year *finish* high school. So 4% may be, comparatively speaking, a fairly high dropout rate for seniors.

But far more significantly, schools elsewhere compute dropout rates quite differently. One way is to take a single year's set of figures across all grade levels -- and then multiply the result by four, to arrive at an estimated rate for the four years youngsters are expected to remain in high school. That is, a dropout rate of 10% for a single year means a rate of 40% for a high school cohort, 9th through 12th grade. Perhaps the most typical procedure is to look at the total number of youngsters entering the 9th grade (sometimes, for ^{even} more accurate figures, the number completing 8th grade the previous Spring) and then to look again at that same class or cohort four years later to see how many graduate. The decrease in size between 9th and 12th grade indicates the dropout plus failure rate.

This is only a rough indicator, of course, because to be entirely

accurate one would have to follow each student individually, ascertaining whether he or she had military parents who were transferred or whether he or she had enrolled in a private school instead. [(Incidentally, local private school enrollment figures do not increase very noticeably during the high school years, so the probability is that few of the departing youngsters are headed for private schools. We also, with the nine schools we selected, attempted to steer clear of those enrolling large numbers of youngsters from military families.) Otherwise, we sought six schools from relatively low income areas and three from comparatively high income areas.) Nevertheless, despite limitations, the totals alone can tell us something -- and particularly in the absence of access to the detailed data, they seem important to the people of Hawaii. Dropout rates are very important. They are crucial in projecting the life prospects of individuals and groups; in assessing the success or failure of a school; in determining the genuineness of a district's concern with equity; and in predicting the calibre of a state's workforce and its future needs for social services (welfare, jails, etc.).

Here is what the figures look like -- a far cry from 4%! Read the table below in this way: in September 1994, 12,275 students in Hawaii entered the 9th grade in public schools. By the Fall of 1995, there were 11,311 of them left to enter the 10th grade. By September of 1996 there were 11,112 left of the class, now Juniors. And by September of 1997, 9033 remained to enter their senior year. This means 26% had failed or dropped out and 74% remained as graduation prospects. Note also that in Hawaii these ^{counts} ~~tallies~~ are always ^{taken} ~~made~~ in September. So if one subtracts the 4% who, according to the DOE, drop out between September and ^{May} ~~June~~, we are left with a four-year successful completion total of 8672 students, or 71% of those who began 9th grade four years earlier -- and a combined

four-year dropout/failure rate of 29%. (All the figures cited in this report are DOE figures -- except those we have computed using DOE figures.)

Table 1. → Computed this way -- as the rest of the nation is more inclined to do it -- Hawaii's high school dropout rate is not 4% but 29%: of every 100 of Hawaii's youngsters who begin 9th grade, four years later 71 remain to graduate.

These are overall statewide figures, or averages. In the special needs schools where Hawaiian, Samoan, and poor youngsters predominate, the dropout/failure rates are much higher. For instance, see these figures from Nanakuli and Waianae High Schools on Oahu, and from Waiakea on the Big Island, in Hawaii's most socio-economically disadvantaged area.

change for an offer school At Waiakea, in Fall, 1994, 616 9th-graders entered high school. By the next year -- their sophomore year, 1995 -- there were 528; by the following year, 491 11th-graders remained, and by September, 1997 there were 435 entering the 12th grade. That means 71% of the entering 9th-grade class were left -- and by school's end, according to DOE estimates there should be 418 left to graduate or 68% of those who entered 9th-grade four years earlier.

At Nanakuli there were 180 entering 9th graders in September 1994. By 10th grade only 149 were left. By 11th, 136. And by 12th, 103. This means 77 had left or failed -- 43% -- leaving only 57% to graduate. And again, if 4% drop out during senior year, that means four fewer youngsters -- leaving a graduation rate of ⁵⁵52%, and a dropout rate of ⁵48%.

31, 40, 40, 40 Waianae figures are ~~about the same~~, with almost half the students failing to graduate. In Fall of 1997 there were 302 seniors. In 1994 there had been 550 9th graders. So 55% began their senior year and an estimated 53% of the original class would complete it. Prospects for the

314 or 47% not graduating are extremely slim.

There are at least two other things our figures show, *clearly.*

First, when we look at the other end of the socio-economic spectrum, at Kaiser and Kalani High Schools for example, the differences ^{in grad rates} are not as great as such demographics usually predict. Usually, socio-economic status is highly correlated with school success, with more affluent schools enjoying higher graduation rates, and schools attended by disadvantaged youngsters displaying higher dropout rates. Kaiser began in 1994 with a 9th grade class of 280. ^{By} ~~in~~ 1997 it had dwindled to a senior class of 196. So 30% were gone and another 8 youngsters (or 4%) will predictably leave before graduation -- totalling a ³³~~31~~% school dropout/failure rate. At Kalani High School, on the other hand, figures are much more encouraging. The 9th grade class in 1993 had 205 youngsters. The 12th grade class in 1997 had 191. ^{Sept} That's a dropout rate of only ^{84% and 84%} 8%, ^{95% 89%} with an estimated 91% successfully completing the year. [9]

9 schools? The bad news, however, is that if one looks at the nine cohorts we have examined -- the statewide figures, and the figures for the four classes in each of the nine schools -- it appears that ^{Hawaii's} the dropout/failure rates are climbing, and accordingly the percentages successfully completing high school are not improving but have been falling rather consistently over the past decade.

Table II → A far cry from what the cheery 4% officially reported would have us assume! It appears that a detailed look at Hawaii's public school dropout rate is very much in order. To the extent that this report is successful, it will inform the people of Hawaii -- and especially those charged with making education policy -- of how ^{substantial} extensive the school dropout problem is here. Rather than a modest, prize-winning 4% rate, Hawaii's dropout rates may ^{even} exceed national averages. To the extent that it is successful,

the report will also convey a realization that the percentage of those failing to successfully complete high school has been increasing fairly steadily over the past decade. This is a tragedy for the individuals involved, as it dooms them permanently to economic marginality: they will be eligible only for the least attractive, lowest paying jobs, and they will be first-fired in times of economic difficulty. But it is also a problem for the rest of us -- for Hawaii as a whole -- not only because an under-educated population cannot staff the high tech industry that so many see as the State's best economic solution; but also because an under-educated population is ^{far} more costly to the State in terms of social services required, ^{even while it's} ~~and~~ ^{contribute its share of} less able to ^{provide} tax support.

Finally, insofar as it is successful, this report will lead to an insistence on the presentation and regular distribution of information on the dropout situation that is more informative, more meaningful, more useful to policymakers than a single figure -- 4% -- misleadingly based solely on the senior year, when most of a school's dropouts have already left!

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- 1 * Gary Orfield + Carole Ashkenazi, 1 Class Door.
- 2 Richard Fossey + Jim Garvin, "Cook + Books on
 Drop Rates," Ed Wk, 2/22/95, p. 48