

New Orleans School Dropout Figures Questionable

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A recent report by the Louisiana State Department of Education contains student dropout data for the New Orleans public schools that is highly questionable. The Department report, ***Louisiana's Turnaround Zone: Answering the Urgency of Now***, contains dropout data trends for a combination of the New Orleans Recovery District and the Orleans Parish School Board operated schools. The Department of Education report contains a chart on page 3 titled, "*Fewer Students are Dropping Out of School.*" That chart data claims that the dropout rate for New Orleans for students in grade 9-12 has decreased from 11.4% per year in the 2004-2005 school year to 5.7% in the 2009-2010 school year.

The relatively low dropout rate of 5.7% for 2009-2010, however, is contradicted by two other sources of data also from the State Department of Education. The first is simply a reporting by the Department of the enrollment of students in the various grades for the 2010 school year. The total enrollment of students in the 9th grade for the New Orleans Recovery District was 2,093 students while the enrollment in the 12th grade was 1,063. That's a difference of close to 50% less at the 12th grade. At the same time the enrollment in 9th grade for the Orleans Parish School Board Schools was 1,228 and the enrollment for 12th grade was 1,222. These figures indicate a possible drastic loss of students from 9th grade to 12th grade primarily in the Recovery District with very little change in the Orleans Parish School Board Schools.

The public does not have access to the source documents from which the questionable 5.7% dropout rate was calculated, so there is no way to know if the drastic difference in the 12th grade enrollment is due to a net transfer of students out of the Recovery District schools or simply a strange difference in the population of older (12th grade) students compared to younger (9th grade) students in the 2010 school year, or if the reported dropout percentage is simply wrong. But there is another way of independently analyzing the possible validity of the dropout figures still using official State Department of Education statistics. That is by reviewing the cohort graduation rate for the New Orleans Recovery District as well as the Orleans Parish School Board rate.

The State Department of Education did not initially report a cohort graduation rate for the New Orleans Recovery District at the time it was reported for all other school systems in the state for the 2009-2010 school year. However, in response to a recent public records request for that information, the State Department reported that the cohort graduation rate for the New Orleans Recovery District was 47.7%. That is the second lowest graduation rate of all public school systems in the state. The cohort graduation rate for the Orleans Parish School Board schools was 89.8% and the state average was 67.4%. It is difficult to understand how a school system with a 48% cohort graduation rate could have only a 5.7% dropout rate from the 9th to the 12th grades.

The cohort graduation rate is an accepted method of measuring the percentage of 9th grade students in a particular year who receive a standard diploma 4 years later. This calculation takes into account both transfers into a school system as well as transfers out of a school system. It measures what percentage of students stayed in school and got their diploma. One can assume that the students not included in that number are either still in school, dropped out, or were allowed to exit without a diploma. As such, the cohort graduation rate is a good measure of the success of the high schools in educating students.

The dropout rate and the cohort graduation rate are two different calculations but should be closely related. So how can there be such a great disparity between the two numbers? One explanation is that the dropout numbers are determined by local school officials, not by the state.

There are great incentives for local school officials to attempt to game the system of reporting dropouts. The school performance score for public schools is partially dependent on student dropouts. The school performance score according to Louisiana Accountability Law, may determine whether a marginal school is allowed to continue operating or is forced to close or be reorganized. When a student leaves a school or simply disappears, it is up to the local school officials to attempt to contact the parents or guardians and find out why the student is no longer attending school. If the student simply refuses to attend he is classified as a dropout. If the student transferred to another school, he is counted as a transfer student and not as a dropout. Transfers are required to have supporting documentation, but only a state audit of a school's records could uncover any lack of documentation. A dropout could thereby be misclassified as a transfer. Also if a school has difficulty in contacting the parent or guardian or if documentation for an alleged transfer is delayed, the schools are allowed to use the codes "*no show*" or "*unknown*" to indicate the status of a missing student. These two codes are not required by the State Department to have supporting documentation, and a local school system could possibly avoid listing a student as a dropout by using such codes.

Members of the public have no way of knowing how many dropouts have been misclassified as transfers or have been reported as "*no shows*" or "*unknown*." Asking the State Department of Education to conduct an audit may be problematic because the Department has a conflict of interest in that it is the operator of the Recovery District. Considering the contradictory data discussed here, the public should be cautious in placing too much confidence in the Recovery District dropout numbers as an indicator of the success of the Recovery District.

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