
Arizona Capital Times, Phoenix, AZ

Arizona's Dropouts Lost in the Calculation Shuffle

October 17, 2003

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This document is available on the Education Policy Studies Laboratory website at http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps1/EPRU/point_of_view_essays/EPRU-0310-42-POV.doc

Research indicates that students who don't graduate from high school are more likely to be unemployed, earn less money when they work, and use state and private welfare programs to survive.

To complicate matters, Arizona's methods of calculating dropout rates are confusing and misleading. Now, Arizona uses two different methods to calculate dropout rates. Both methods are similar to, but not the same as, methods used by the U.S. Department of Education. It is critical because without a similar definition, Arizona is not able to compare its rates to the national average and to that of other states.

The best option for Arizona, presented in a report recently released by the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University, is to adopt a new system.

In addition to incomparable data, Arizona has a number of factors that complicate the calculation and interpretation of its dropout information. These complicating factors cause Arizona's dropout statistics to be unreliable and less useful.

The Arizona Department of Education publishes its dropout data in two annual reports, neither of which uses the new "status unknown" category in the same way. In its annual Dropout Rate Study, status unknown students are counted as dropouts; in the annual Graduation Rate Study, they are not. In addition, Arizona school districts inconsistently use the status unknown category. In the Graduation Rate Study 2001, one school district didn't use it at all.

Arizona has no system to monitor schools for proper category usage or data collection. The lack of consistent information prevents an accurate assessment of Arizona's dropout problem. To add more confusion to the mix, Arizona includes charter

and alternative schools in its dropout rate calculations.

Besides these technical factors, Arizona has a large and growing Latino population. This complicates the assessment of Arizona's dropout problem in three ways: Latinos have the highest dropout rate of any ethnic group; schools will have an increasingly larger percentage of Latino students; and many immigrants are foreign dropouts, and when they come to Arizona they are counted as dropouts here under some federal dropout calculation methods.

Arizona could improve its current methods, but the best option is to adopt a new system.

A LISCA method, or longitudinal individual student cohort analysis, would allow Arizona to follow a portion of each class of ninth graders through high school. This method would use the same reporting period and dropout definitions that the U.S. Department of Education uses, thus making Arizona's dropout data comparable to federal reports.

Additionally, the Arizona Department of Education's Student Accountability Information System (SAIS) can and should be used to provide enrollment and graduation data and an accurate dropout rate calculation.

Together, these methods will accurately show the number of Arizona dropouts and why they leave school. This method appears to be more accurate, consistent and reliable than the current method.

I believe that these methods would cost less since the LISCA approach would use the current Student Accountability Information System (SAIS) to collect dropout information. Now, SAIS is used to support Arizona's school finance system, however, it could be modified to collect dropout and data. As a result, dropout information could be collected from a system already in place. The survey data would consist of a "representative sample" of students from a specific group instead of all students. Consequently, less cost would be involved since the data size would be smaller and easier to manage over time.

Only by obtaining accurate information can Arizona determine the magnitude of the dropout problem and create solutions.