



# High school dropout and graduation rates in the Central Region

RESEARCH IN BRIEF

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A recent REL Central study presents comprehensive and detailed information on grade 7-12 dropout rates and on high school graduation rates in the Central Region.

The stakes attached to dropout and high school graduation have increased since passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, which requires schools to track and report student on-time graduation as a component of adequate yearly progress. In a recent survey, principals and curriculum coordinators in the Central Region (Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming) identified improving high school students' outcomes as a critical issue (Gallup Organization, 2007<sup>1</sup>). In the same survey, middle school educators gave improving middle school student outcomes the highest rating ("very high priority").

Individuals without a high school diploma have lower incomes and higher rates of unemployment and are more likely to be incarcerated than individuals with a high school diploma or its equivalent, such as a General Education Development certificate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003<sup>2</sup>; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007<sup>3</sup>; Harlow, 2003<sup>4</sup>). In 2006, the median income of men ages 25 and older working full time was \$22,710 for those with less than a grade 9 education, \$27,650

for those with some high school education, and \$37,030 for those who had completed high school (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). In addition, only 59 percent of individuals ages 25–64 who had not completed high school were employed in the U.S. labor force, whereas 73 percent of individuals with a high school diploma or equivalent were (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).

National reports of dropout and high school completion rates do not provide rates at state levels disaggregated by gender, race/ethnicity, locale, or grade, and few data are available on dropout rates among grades 7–9 students in the Central Region.

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

To fill the gap in the literature and address the priority in the region for improving middle school and high school outcomes, analyses of dropout and high school graduation rates in 2001–2002, the most recent data available at the time of the study, were conducted for the Central Region as a whole and for each of its states.

<sup>1</sup>Gallup Organization. (2007). *Narrative report of the 2007 principal and curriculum coordinator study*. Omaha, NE: Author.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Census Bureau. (2003, December). *The foreign-born population: 2000* (Census 2000 Brief). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>3</sup>U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). Table 368. Labor force participation rates and employment population ratios of persons 16 years old and over, by highest level of education, age, gender, and race/ethnicity: 2006. In *Digest of education statistics*. Retrieved May 2, 2008, from [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07\\_368.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07_368.asp)

<sup>4</sup>Harlow, C. W. (2003, January). *Education and correctional populations* (Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

The goal of this study was to answer the following research questions:

**What were the dropout rates in 2001-02 for grades 7-12 and the high school graduation rates:**

- For the Central Region as a whole?
- For each of the seven states in the region (Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming)?
- For subgroups (gender, race/ethnicity, locale, and grade) within the region and in each of its states?

Dropout rates tell educators how many students left school in a single year. These rates are particularly useful for estimating the percentage of students leaving school in specific grades and for identifying grade levels in which dropping out is a greater risk. Graduation rates provide information about the percentage of students who complete high school on time and with a regular diploma and help educators understand progress toward an important indicator of adequate yearly progress under NCLB.

To create the clearest possible picture of dropout in the Central Region, the study included public school dropout data for grades 7-9, which are not typically included in dropout analyses. This study calculated event dropout rates in October 2001 and averaged freshman graduation rates for the class of 2002 using data from the Common Core of Data (CCD) from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for all Central Region states.

Moreover, Colorado is excluded from the CCD because Colorado's definition of a dropout is inconsistent with that of the NCES. Colorado enrollment and dropout data were obtained directly from the Colorado Department of Education.

The event dropout rates for Colorado were calculated using the same method as that used for the other

**Event dropout rate.** The event dropout rate is an estimate of the percentage of public high school students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent

**Averaged freshman graduation rate.** The averaged freshman graduation rate is an estimate of the proportion of public high school freshmen who graduate from high school on time, with a regular high school diploma

Central Region states. Colorado's graduation rates, however, which were also obtained directly from the Colorado Department of Education, were calculated using a different measure than that used for the other Central Region states and are not included in the averaged freshman graduation rates for the Central Region as a whole.

## STUDY FINDINGS

In the Central Region states, dropout rates for public school students in grades 7-12 ranged from 1.4 percent to 4.0 percent (see Table 1). Within the region as a whole and its individual states, dropout rates were 0.3-0.9 percentage points higher for male students than for female students. Dropout rates varied greatly across ethnic groups, particularly when such rates are compared across states.

Dropout tended to be higher in urban areas and lower in rural locales. In grades 7 and 8, dropout rates were typically less than 0.5 percent, both in the region as a whole and in its individual states. Dropout rates were higher in grades 9-12, ranging from 1.1 percent to 7.5 percent, and generally increased by grade level, with some exceptions.

On-time graduation rates (defined as earning a regular diploma in four years) ranged from approximately 76 percent to almost 85 percent in the Central Region states (See Figure 1). Graduation rates also varied markedly across ethnic groups in each state. For students in large urban areas, graduation rates were approximately 72 percent in Colorado and Nebraska and 58 percent in Kansas and Missouri. Graduation rates for students from rural areas ranged from 74 percent to more than 92 percent across states in the region.

## CONCLUSION

Further research could examine dropout trends in the region to shed more light on whether rates are increasing or decreasing among different student subgroups or in different locales. Research might also explore the role of exit exams in dropout, including the raising or lowering of performance standards on the exams.

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**Table 1**

Central Region and state event dropout rates by grade for public school students in grades 7-12, October 2001 (percent)

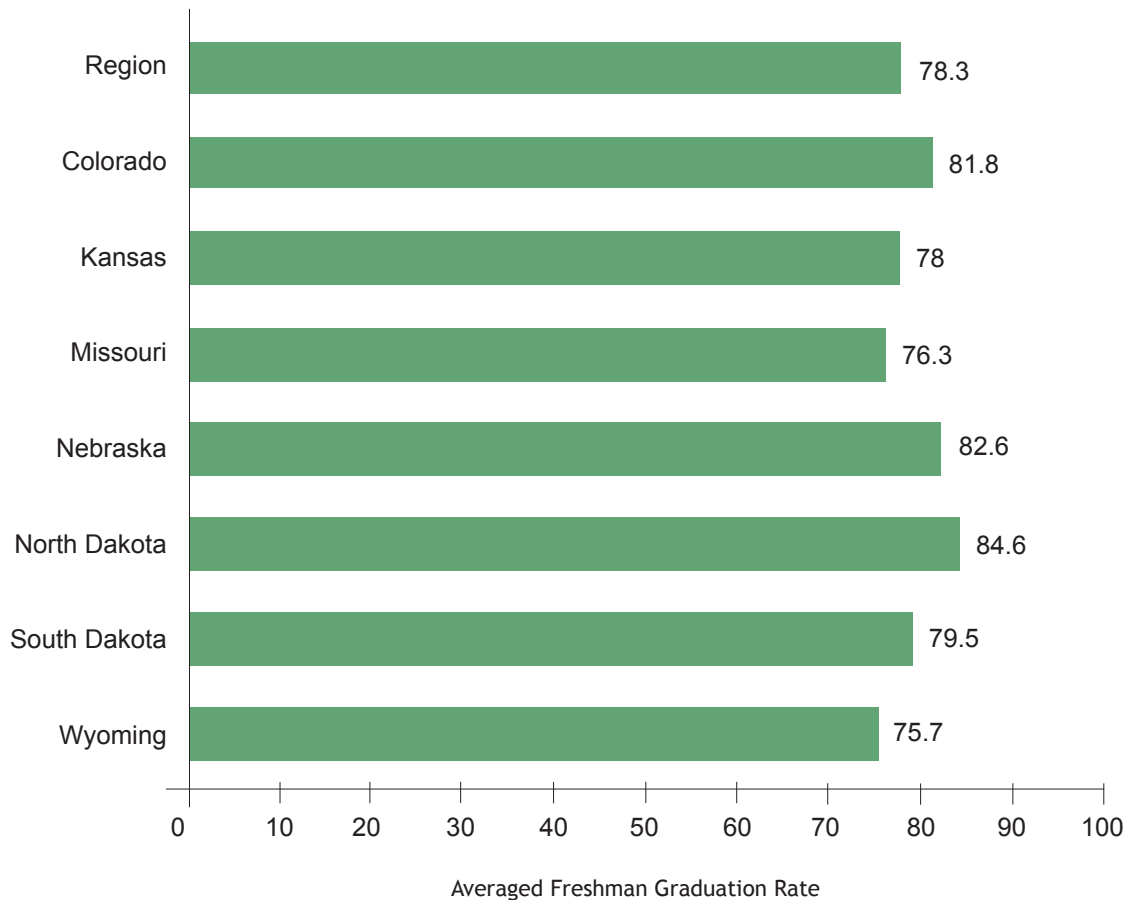
Region and State	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
Central Region	0.3	0.4	2.6	3.7	4.4	4.2
Colorado	0.4	0.4	3.2	4.2	4.8	3.8
Kansas	0.1	0.1	1.4	2.9	3.7	4.6
Missouri	0.2	0.4	2.5	3.8	4.5	4.1
Nebraska	0.4	0.5	3.6	3.8	4.7	4.7
North Dakota	<0.1	<0.1	1.1	2.1	2.2	2.6
South Dakota	0.3	0.3	2.0	2.7	3.0	3.7
Wyoming	0.4	0.4	2.5	6.1	7.5	7.3

*Note: The event dropout rate estimates the percentage of public school students in grades 7-12 who left school between October of one school year and October of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent.*

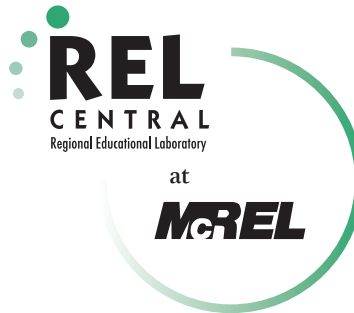
*Source: Authors' analysis based on data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics and the Colorado Department of Education.*

**Figure 1**

Averaged Freshman Graduation Rates: School Year 2001-2002



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