



Graduation Rate Is No Guarantee of Learning

By Walt Gardner on October 31, 2011 8:45 AM |

Whenever reformers want to score points about their bleak view of the state of K-12 education, they invariably cite data showing that only 76 percent of students in public schools graduate within four years of entering the 9th grade.

Before going any further, however, I hasten to point out that four-year graduation studies are not the same thing as dropout studies. Although they are related, they have to be viewed differently. For example, students may not graduate *on time* because of illness, family problems or incarceration. Too many reformers automatically assume that academic failure is the only factor or that teachers are not doing their job. This is a common mistake.

Compounding the misunderstanding of the issue is that states report data differently. But even as states move to adopt a uniform formula developed by the U.S. Department of Education (the number of graduates in a given year divided by the number of students who enrolled four years earlier), the results may still not mean what they seem.

I say that because more high school graduates do not *necessarily* mean better preparation for college or career. New York City is a case in point. Although the graduation rate rose to 61 percent in June 2011 from 46.5 percent in June 2005, 22.6 percent of graduates needed remediation in reading, writing and math when they entered LaGuardia or other City University of New York community colleges. This compares with 15.4 percent in 2005 ("In College, Working Hard to Learn High School Material," *On Education*, *The New York Times*, Oct. 24)).

New York City is not alone. Last year, for example, California State University Northridge had to create 120 sections of remedial reading and writing at a cost of \$6,500 a section. More than a million college freshmen across the country must take remedial courses each year.

There are many reasons. Some school districts now engage in what is known as credit recovery. This policy allows students who lack sufficient credits for graduation to make them up by means other than retaking a class or attending traditional summer school. As one student put it: "Whatever they had to do to get you to graduate - if it means like a little trick to get you out, tell you to do this, do that and you're out."

Roughly one third of states help students make up missed work through online courses, according to the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University. There is nothing inherently wrong with this policy as long as it is as rigorous as traditional courses. But the problem is that there is no evidence available to allow valid inferences to be drawn about this alternative.

At Washington Irving High School in New York City, "approved cheating" was not uncommon ("High school's new rules give failing kids credits toward graduation," Oct. 9). Students who routinely cut class were given a "packet" of work or were permitted to take an online credit recovery program. These practices allowed the school to escape being closed, but they made a mockery of the \$6 million in extra funding to undergo a transformation.

In recognition of the problem, the California Senate passed SB547, which the Los Angeles Times calls "a national model for school accountability" ("California education bill gets an A," editorial, Aug. 24). The bill requires compilation of data about both test scores *and* graduation rates in evaluating schools. If the bill becomes law, then it would act as a check against inordinate emphasis on any single factor. I think that is vital in maintaining taxpayer confidence.