

# High School Diploma and GED Attainment in Florida

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A high school diploma is an important signal of employability for those who enter the labor force without a college degree and is typically a required certification for those entering postsecondary schooling. More generally, high school graduation rates are a telling measure of a school system's ability to move students through to high school completion. In the context of No Child Left Behind, these rates have become central to state accountability systems. Yet measures of high school completion vary greatly across states, leaving policymakers uncertain about the status of this important education outcome.

Third, the estimates do not account for students who passed a General Education Development (GED) test that, for some purposes, is equivalent to a high school diploma.

Statewide longitudinal administrative data systems can estimate graduation rates more accurately because they can calculate the rate based on a true cohort of students, tracked individually over time. Such tracking can show, for example, whether students who leave the school's rolls return and whether they later attain a diploma or its equivalent. The Florida state data system is one of the few data systems that allow such tracking.

This brief calculates graduation rates for the state of Florida using longitudinal data. We describe our measurement strategies and compare them with the state's official measurement procedures. We calculate the diploma and GED attainment rates of six separate cohorts of Florida 9th graders who began high school between 1995/96 and 2000/01. We then present rates of both diploma receipt and GED receipt at four years and in later years. The results show an increasing trend in graduation rates in the state over the period studied and a substantial bump at five years, with growth flattening out after that time.

## DATA SOURCES AND DEFINITIONS

Florida's Education Data Warehouse (FL-EDW) tracks individual students beginning in the 1995/96 school year. The latest year of data currently available is from the 2004/05 school year. Thus, we can track 9th grade students in 1995/96 for 10 years and

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Most states calculate graduation rates, with some minor refinements, on crude school-level enrollment counts: typically the ratio of 12th graders to 9th graders four years earlier. These enrollment-based estimates approximate the share of a 9th grade class that makes it through to graduation. The estimates have three major limitations. First, they do not account for students who graduate but for one reason or another do not do so in four years. Second, they do not account for flows of students in or out of the system. In short, the students included in the 12th grade count are not necessarily the same students as those in the 9th grade count.

each subsequent cohort for one year less. The last 9th grade cohort for which students can be tracked for at least 5 years began high school in 2000/01.

Graduation data are recorded two ways in the FL-EDW. One source of information is withdrawal information. If a student exits the public school system, a reason for withdrawal is recorded. Withdrawals include students who transfer to nonpublic schools or to public schools in another state, various forms of high school completion (standard diploma, GED, special education diploma, etc.) and other reasons for exit, such as pregnancy, entering the military, or death. A separate file records awards students receive, including high school diplomas and GEDs. If, for example, a student gets pregnant and leaves school, but later passes a GED exam (without returning to public school), she would be identified as a GED recipient in the award file but not in the withdrawal file. For both types of data, we only count as high school diploma recipients those students who receive a standard high school diploma. Special education diplomas or certificates of completion are not counted as high school diplomas.

The base we use to calculate high-school diploma and GED rates is all 9th grade students in a given year who do not subsequently withdraw for any of the following reasons: death, exit to a home-schooling program, transfer to a public school outside Florida, transfer to a nonpublic school (within or outside Florida), and exit for unknown reasons. This base is different than the base that the State of Florida uses to calculate official graduation rates, thus the figures we report are not directly comparable with those reported in official State of Florida publications.

How we classify high school diploma recipients and GED recipients may differ from how they are reported by the State of Florida as well. Beginning in the 2001/02 school year, students who passed the GED exam and passed either the 10th grade Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) or the high school completion test (HSCT) were awarded a standard diploma, even if they did not complete the normal high school course of study. In our analysis, we count these students as GED recipients, not as standard diploma recipients.

## RESULTS

Table 1A indicates the proportions of each cohort that exit high school with a standard diploma within a given number of years. Similarly, table 1B indicates the proportion of each cohort who obtain a standard diploma either upon exiting high school or who do not exit with a high school diploma, but who are subsequently awarded one. While the rate of diploma attainment varies across a cohort, there is little within-cohort variation beyond a five-year window. The five-year graduation rates are roughly 2 percentage points above the four-year rates, but the rate changes very little beyond this additional year.

GED attainment information based on high school exit data are shown in table 2A, while table 2B includes GED attainment at high school exit as well as awards received after withdrawal from high school. The proportion of students exiting high school within four years and completing a GED is fairly low for each cohort, ranging from about 0.5 to 1 percent. These rates do not change much as the window of observation is expanded. However, when one includes GEDs earned after high school exit, the results are different. Since 1996/97, the rate of GED attainment within five years of attending 9th grade has ranged from about 3 to 3.5 percent. There is also modest, but nontrivial, expansion in the proportion of students from a cohort who receive a GED over time. Expanding the window from five years to seven years increases the proportion of GED recipients by about 0.5 to 1 percentage point, though the increase has been diminishing over time. After seven years, the increase in GED recipients is quite small.

Finally, tables 3A and 3B give combined rates of high school diploma and GED attainment. The figures in table 3A are the sum of those in tables 1A and 2A since the exit categories are mutually exclusive. In contrast, some students may receive both a GED and a standard high school diploma after exiting high school; therefore, the figures in table 3B are sometimes slightly less than the sum of the corresponding numbers in tables 1B and 2B. These combined diploma-GED figures indicate several trends in Florida. The combined diploma-GED five-year completion rate has been increasing over time, rising from 54 percent for the 1995/96 9th-grade cohort to 69 percent for the 2000/01 9th-grade cohort. For any given cohort, however, the combined diploma-GED completion rate increases significantly from the four-year to the five-year window but does not change much after the five-year window.

## SUMMARY

The clearest trend delineated by these data shows a steady increase in five-year standard diploma and GED attainment rates between 1995/96 and 2000/01. This trend is encouraging in the midst of conflicting findings at the national level. Interestingly, the gains observed by a fifth year of schooling are significant and may be attributable, in part, to the increased policy attention state accountability systems have given to graduation rates in recent years. However, little within-cohort variation in attainment exists beyond this five-year period, and diminishing returns are observed

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INTERESTINGLY, THE GAINS OBSERVED BY A FIFTH YEAR OF SCHOOLING ARE SIGNIFICANT AND MAY BE ATTRIBUTABLE PARTLY TO THE INCREASED POLICY ATTENTION STATE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS HAVE GIVEN GRADUATION RATES IN RECENT YEARS.

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in subsequent years of schooling. While these findings are encouraging to the extent that they show increased diploma and GED attainment across cohorts over time, the proliferation of longitudinal methods for calculating dropout rates will allow researchers to more accurately document trends for subgroups of students and identify whether those most vulnerable are sharing in this success. It is clear from the data that there is no across-cohort trend in GED attainment by those who leave high school and later pursue this alternative. Such variation, in the context of a clear increase in overall educational attainment, might reflect the low credential value of a GED in the labor market and begs important questions about who leaves high school, why, and how they fare in the labor force. As states continue to develop their administrative data systems, researchers can mine increasingly rich sources to answer these questions.

**Table 1A. High School Exit with Standard Diploma by 9th Grade Cohort (Percent)**

| Time from 9th grade | 9th Grade Cohort |         |         |         |           |         |
|---------------------|------------------|---------|---------|---------|-----------|---------|
|                     | 1995/96          | 1996/97 | 1997/98 | 1998/99 | 1999/2000 | 2000/01 |
| 5 years             | 51.86            | 55.92   | 60.10   | 62.02   | 65.19     | 65.98   |
| 6 years             | 52.02            | 56.17   | 60.34   | 62.29   | 65.42     |         |
| 7 years             | 52.07            | 56.22   | 60.42   | 62.34   |           |         |
| 8 years             | 52.09            | 56.25   | 60.44   |         |           |         |
| 9 years             | 52.10            | 56.25   |         |         |           |         |
| 10 years            | 52.11            |         |         |         |           |         |

**Table 1B. High School Exit with Standard Diploma or Later Receipt of Standard Diploma by 9th Grade Cohort (Percent)**

| Time from 9th grade | 9th Grade Cohort |         |         |         |           |         |
|---------------------|------------------|---------|---------|---------|-----------|---------|
|                     | 1995/96          | 1996/97 | 1997/98 | 1998/99 | 1999/2000 | 2000/01 |
| 4 years             | 50.26            | 57.06   | 59.64   | 61.85   | 64.13     | 64.78   |
| 5 years             | 52.03            | 59.82   | 61.79   | 63.98   | 66.28     | 66.60   |
| 6 years             | 52.20            | 60.08   | 62.10   | 64.29   | 66.52     |         |
| 7 years             | 52.24            | 60.16   | 62.20   | 64.36   |           |         |
| 8 years             | 52.28            | 60.20   | 62.23   |         |           |         |
| 9 years             | 52.30            | 60.22   |         |         |           |         |
| 10 years            | 52.31            |         |         |         |           |         |

**Table 2A. High School Exit with GED by 9th Grade Cohort (Percent)**

| Time from 9th grade | 9th Grade Cohort |         |         |         |           |         |
|---------------------|------------------|---------|---------|---------|-----------|---------|
|                     | 1995/96          | 1996/97 | 1997/98 | 1998/99 | 1999/2000 | 2000/01 |
| 4 years             | 0.59             | 0.54    | 0.59    | 0.68    | 0.87      | 1.03    |
| 5 years             | 0.66             | 0.62    | 0.68    | 0.82    | 0.99      | 1.21    |
| 6 years             | 0.67             | 0.63    | 0.70    | 0.84    | 1.01      |         |
| 7 years             | 0.67             | 0.64    | 0.70    | 0.84    |           |         |
| 8 years             | 0.67             | 0.64    | 0.70    |         |           |         |
| 9 years             | 0.67             | 0.64    |         |         |           |         |
| 10 years            | 0.67             |         |         |         |           |         |

**Table 2B. High School Exit with GED or Later Receipt of GED by 9th Grade Cohort (Percent)**

| Time from 9th grade | 9th Grade Cohort |         |         |         |           |         |
|---------------------|------------------|---------|---------|---------|-----------|---------|
|                     | 1995/96          | 1996/97 | 1997/98 | 1998/99 | 1999/2000 | 2000/01 |
| 4 years             | 0.59             | 1.76    | 2.45    | 2.58    | 2.52      | 2.54    |
| 5 years             | 1.67             | 2.79    | 3.51    | 3.43    | 3.19      | 2.96    |
| 6 years             | 2.25             | 3.38    | 3.99    | 3.78    | 3.40      |         |
| 7 years             | 2.65             | 3.73    | 4.26    | 3.92    |           |         |
| 8 years             | 2.92             | 3.95    | 4.40    |         |           |         |
| 9 years             | 3.11             | 4.05    |         |         |           |         |
| 10 years            | 3.22             |         |         |         |           |         |

**Table 3A. High School Exit with Either Standard Diploma or GED by 9th Grade Cohort (Percent)**

| Time from 9th grade | 9th Grade Cohort |         |         |         |           |         |
|---------------------|------------------|---------|---------|---------|-----------|---------|
|                     | 1995/96          | 1996/97 | 1997/98 | 1998/99 | 1999/2000 | 2000/01 |
| 4 years             | 50.85            | 53.80   | 58.68   | 60.73   | 64.03     | 65.23   |
| 5 years             | 52.52            | 56.54   | 60.78   | 62.83   | 66.17     | 67.19   |
| 6 years             | 52.69            | 56.80   | 61.04   | 63.12   | 66.43     |         |
| 7 years             | 52.74            | 56.86   | 61.12   | 63.18   |           |         |
| 8 years             | 52.76            | 56.89   | 61.14   |         |           |         |
| 9 years             | 52.77            | 56.90   |         |         |           |         |
| 10 years            | 52.78            |         |         |         |           |         |

**Table 3B. High School Exit or Later Receipt of Either Standard Diploma or GED by 9th Grade Cohort (Percent)**

| Time from 9th grade | 9th Grade Cohort |         |         |         |           |         |
|---------------------|------------------|---------|---------|---------|-----------|---------|
|                     | 1995/96          | 1996/97 | 1997/98 | 1998/99 | 1999/2000 | 2000/01 |
| 4 years             | 50.85            | 58.68   | 61.85   | 64.18   | 66.39     | 67.13   |
| 5 years             | 53.66            | 62.41   | 65.00   | 67.11   | 69.17     | 69.35   |
| 6 years             | 54.38            | 63.24   | 65.77   | 67.76   | 69.61     |         |
| 7 years             | 54.81            | 63.66   | 66.12   | 67.97   |           |         |
| 8 years             | 55.12            | 63.92   | 66.29   |         |           |         |
| 9 years             | 55.32            | 64.02   |         |         |           |         |
| 10 years            | 55.44            |         |         |         |           |         |

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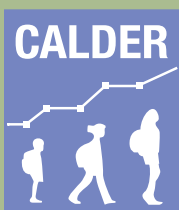
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