

## **The Daily Sentinel, Grand Junction**

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### **Western Slope graduation rates below state average**

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By Ron Bain

Most Western Slope school districts are below the statistical state average for the percentage of students who graduate with a high school diploma and, according to a new study, that is costing the western Colorado economy millions of dollars annually.

In Mesa County, the economy suffers by a potential \$2 million per year attributable to non-graduates, according to the study. In Montrose and Delta counties, the study's estimate is that close to a third of a million dollars is lost in unearned wages and unpaid taxes annually because of dropouts.

The average graduation rate in the state, according to statistics provided by the Colorado Department of Education, was 83.6 percent in 2003.

Ski resort towns, like Telluride and Aspen, beat the average in 2003 with graduation rates above 90 percent: Telluride School District R-1 had a 97.4 percent graduation rate and Aspen School District 1 had a 91.4 percent graduation rate. Ouray County School District R-1 also exceeded 90 percent, with a 93.8 percent graduation rate.

One rural Western Slope district, like many of its Eastern Plains counterparts, had a perfect score with its small senior class size: Dolores County School District RE-2 was at 100 percent in 2003.

But the worst performance in the state came from two Western Slope districts: Lake County School District R-1 only graduated 52.7 percent of its seniors in 2003 and Montezuma-Cortez School District RE-1 graduated 65.3 percent, according to the state Department of Education.

Mesa, Montrose and Delta counties' school districts were all slightly below average in 2003: Mesa County School District 51 graduated 80.2 percent in 2003; Montrose County School District RE-1J graduated 80.8 percent; and, Delta County Joint School District 50 was closest to the average with an 83.4 percent graduation rate. Gunnison Watershed School District RE-1J was slightly above average with an 84.8-percent graduation rate.

According to the Colorado Children's Campaign and its new study entitled "The High Cost of Not Graduating High School," each non-graduate is an approximate \$7,200 drain on their local economies who uses more social services and pays fewer taxes than the average high school graduate.

## Graduate Guesswork

Calculating graduation rates is becoming a more accurate science in Colorado, according to Jan Rose Petro, director of data and research for the Colorado Department of Education. Before 2002, she said, there was no statewide system for tracking individual students as they progressed through grade levels, relocated, transferred to alternative schools or home schooling, or just plain dropped out.

Jared Polis, an at-large member of the Colorado Board of Education, said, “We’re trying to come up with more accurate measurements for graduation and dropout rates. There’s going to be a more uniform statewide way that we look at the data. It was Senate Bill 91 and we’re doing the rules on it right now. I think there’ll be more reliable data in the future.”

The Western Slope has much better graduation rates than the Denver metropolitan area, Polis said.

“We started assigning state-assigned student IDs in 2002,” Petro said. “We moved from aggregate numbers where there were 10 kids in a cell, but we didn’t know who the 10 kids were. For the end of year process, we just collected our first year of data.”

In five years, the more accurate data collection will be reflected in graduation rates, she said.

In general, she said, the more accurate calculations will cause graduation rates to decrease. Polis said the Denver schools’ reported graduation rates were currently inflated and would fall significantly.

“As we witnessed with just one year of data, our grad rates did go down,” Petro said, “and we expect that to continue as we get more and more individual data.”

The Colorado Children’s Campaign used raw, uninterpreted data from the Colorado Department of Education, simply comparing the number of ninth grade students in 1999 to the number of graduates in 2003 for each school, to calculate its own graduation rates.

Those calculations were generally lower than the graduation rates reported by the state Department of Education.

There’s a “disconnect” between the enrollment numbers and graduation statistics school districts report to the state, said Van Schoales, executive vice president of the Colorado Children’s Campaign.

“The default description for a student if they don’t graduate is a ‘transfer’ student,” Schoales said. “There are different definitions of ‘graduate,’ ‘transfer’ and ‘dropout.’ Things are probably worse than what we and others are reporting.”

More people are moving into Colorado than are leaving but every school district in Colorado shows a decline in student numbers, Schoales said.

According to Mesa County School District 51 Communications Coordinator Jeff Kirtland, the dropout rate nationwide is about 30 percent.

“I think it’s universal throughout secondary education in this whole country,” he said. “There is a decline in students as they go through high school.”

Programs are in place to keep kids from dropping out in the Mesa County District 51, Kirtland said, such as work/study and young mothers’ programs.

“What we have in place are many different alternative programs to help capture the interest, capture the attention of students that don’t necessarily fit into that traditional track of education,” he said.

Students who take general education diplomas are considered “completers,” but not high school graduates, Petro said.

Some have psychological problems that make traditional schooling difficult, Kirtland said.

“Providing opportunities for all students to be successful or for children to be brought back into the system is a high priority for us,” Kirtland said. “It’s in line with what our mission is.

“To write off any member of society would be detrimental to the economical, the social, to the fabric of every part of society,” he said.

The Delta County school district attempts to track students who leave the district to ensure they continue their schooling, Superintendent Mike McMillan said, and the new state law will standardize graduation reporting to the state.

## **Dropout Costs**

But the oversimplified Colorado Children’s Campaign study draws dramatic attention to the economic costs of non-graduates, who work low-paying jobs and draw heavily on the social safety net.

“I think it’s factual” but uninterpreted data, Kirtland said. “It’s really a business model.”

“Having a high school diploma increases a person’s likely earnings over their lifetime several fold, and it’s extremely important for maintaining economic competitiveness particularly in rural areas, where they frequently experience a drain of folks that have successfully completed high school,” Polis said.

In Delta County, nongraduates often end up working as seasonal farm workers or laborers without health care or other benefits, Superintendent Mike McMillan said.

“They call upon the different sorts of county support systems to a much greater extent than those that do graduate,” McMillan said. “The average nongraduate makes about \$10,800. The graduate doubles that amount. If you look at the annual loss of income, it’s doubled.”

Colorado is ranked 30th nationwide in graduation rates, and that’s costing the state an estimated \$3.4 billion per year in lost income and additional expenditures, according to the Colorado Children’s Campaign study.

“Over the course of a lifetime, the loss in earning potential between a high school dropout and a student who goes on to finish college is \$1.1 million,” the study states.

“ ‘Investing in public education is investing in the future,’ is not an empty phrase,” said Linda Gann, communications coordinator for Montrose County School District RE-1J. “Successful students make successful citizens.”

Individuals who do not complete high school are also far more likely than graduates to wind up in prison, placing a huge burden on our corrections system, according to the study.

“Nationally, 68 percent of inmates do not have a high school diploma,” the study states. “A significant portion of Colorado’s \$470 million dollar corrections budget is likely to be spent adjudicating and incarcerating our dropouts.”

### **Schools ‘Not Working’**

“High schools are not working for a number of years now. In many high schools, there’s not much of an opportunity to intervene” when a student shows consistently failing grades, Schoales said. “Often a school will say, ‘That’s the student’s or family’s responsibility. We’ve notified them that they’ve got failing grades.’ High schools usually don’t have a way of noticing that or doing very much about that.”

Students’ income levels are apparently not a factor, according to Schoales.

“There are schools that have very high graduation rates but in fact serve very low-income kids,” he said. “The ways they do that is through personalizing education and having very strong connections with kids. Oftentimes kids that are on the brink of dropping out or have dropped out or have fallen behind say school is boring and uninteresting and irrelevant to them. Most kids do say that.”

“We need to do a better job in western Colorado and statewide,” Polis said.

The basic format of high school hasn’t changed in decades, Schoales said.

“High schools are pretty lethargic, fixed institutions that aren’t able to flex around some of those students’ needs,” he said.

Schools are not designed for 21st century students’ needs, according to Kirtland.

“The system’s that’s in place is the system that’s been in place for ages, since the Industrial Revolution,” Kirtland said. “It’s not necessarily an informational model. It’s designed to sort and select students, as opposed to providing opportunities for every student to be successful,” he said.

“Educators in our district are trying to move the system to more of a not necessarily based on seat time, based on numbers of years that they’ve progressed, but really trying to measure ‘Did the students learn?’ ” Kirtland said.

Strong connections with caring adults who hold kids responsible seem to be the best dropout prevention, Schoales said.

“That’s part of our new mission statement for the school district: ‘Caring, Challenging, Learning, Every Student, Every Day,’” McMillan said.

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