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## 1 in 4 Students Drop Out of Calif. Public High Schools

Nearly one in four public high school students in California dropped out in the 2006-07 school year, according to figures released Wednesday by the state Department of Education.

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LOS ANGELES – Nearly one in four public high school students in California dropped out in the 2006-07 school year, according to figures released Wednesday by the state Department of Education.

According to the data, compiled by a new statewide tracking system, 67.6 percent of public school students in California graduated in the 2006-07 school year, the adjusted four-year derived dropout rate is 24.2 percent, and 8.2 percent completed or withdrew from school and are considered neither dropouts nor graduates, such as students who transferred to a private school, left the state, or earned a General Education Degree (GED).

Although the dropout rates are lower than some independent estimates, they are considerably higher than previously acknowledged.

"Twenty-four percent of students dropping out is not good news," commented Jack O'Connell, state superintendent of public instruction, who presented the new data.

"In fact, any student dropping out is one too many and the data reveal a disturbingly high dropout rate for Latinos and African-Americans," he said in a released statement to the press.

Using an older, discredited method, the state's estimate of dropouts for the previous school year was at 13.9 percent. And even using the old system of measurement, the number of dropouts has grown by 83 percent over the past five years, according to Russell Rumberger, a professor of education at UC Santa Barbara who directs the California Dropout Research Project. Furthermore, the number of high school graduates has gone up only 9 percent.

"So that's sobering, it's really sobering," he told the Los Angeles Times.

Using its new "Statewide Student Identifier System," the state Education Department says it can now calculate dropouts far more accurately as every student is given a unique, anonymous ID number. With that, schools for the first time can track the whereabouts of missing students, and learn whether students are truly AWOL – like the 53,600 students who claimed they were transferring to a new school but never actually showed up – or whether they are somewhere legitimate.

The new data revealed high dropout rates for minority students: around 42 percent of black students (19,440 students), 31 percent of Native Americans (1,440 students), 30 percent of Hispanics (69,035 students), and 28 percent of Pacific Islanders (964 students). White students had a 15 percent dropout rate (26,165 students), while Asians had a 10 percent rate (4,462 students).

School districts have until the end of August to correct data, so figures could change.

However, as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger pointed out to reporters in Sacramento, it's not just numbers that are important.

"It's good information," he said, but "what we need to find out is 'What is the reason for the dropouts?'"

"Is it parenting, a lack of parenting? Is it that we don't have enough after-school programs to help the kids with their homework and with schoolwork? Is it that the teaching that is going on is too boring?" the governor posed.

"We've got to find out what the reason is and then we can work on that to eliminate those problems."

The new system – which will cost \$33 million over the next three years, in addition to the millions

spent for the initial development – promises to eventually provide a far better way to understand where students go, and why.

For now, because the numbers are the first using the new computerized tracking system and no real comparison exists with the previous year, state and school district officials have acknowledged that the data are currently limited in usefulness. They can tell only part of the story.

Still, it's a start.

"The dropout rate is everyone's business and having accurate data is an important first step," commented Eva Vargas, a concerned grandparent and a member of the PICO affiliate San Diego Organizing Project. PICO is a national network of faith-based community organizations working to create innovative solutions facing urban, suburban, and rural communities.

"As people of faith, we believe we have an individual and a collective responsibility to be part of the solution to addressing the dropout issue," Vargas said in state education department's press release. "This isn't just a crisis for our schools or for our students and their families. It's a crisis that affects each of us and that each of us has to help solve."

According to the new data, the dropout crisis not only afflicts large urban districts like Oakland and Los Angeles but touches every corner of the state.

More detailed information about California schools and districts is currently available at the California Department of Education (<http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>)

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