

## Michigan's New 4-year Cohort Graduation Rate Calculation – Sample Letter

Dear Staff:

Late this summer the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) will release redefined graduation rates for every public school in the state. Instead of the past practice of utilizing an average retention rate, a new formula will be applied beginning with the class of 2007. The new rate will be calculated by tracking individual students who first enrolled in ninth grade in fall 2003, and graduated four years later with a regular diploma. Continuing students, who were not reported as diploma recipients, will be recorded for accountability purposes as “off-track.” (The recent practice of assigning Unique Identification Codes (UICs) to each student in Michigan has made the use of this new formula possible.) The only students exempted from the “four-year cohort” are those that are enrolled in home school, private school, moved out of state, or deceased. Some students, on a case-by-case basis, may obtain a one-year extension to the four-year requirement. These include students enrolled in middle colleges, English language learners, students with disabilities, and medically fragile students.

So why is MDE making this change? The new formula allows MDE to calculate and disaggregate data required to meet No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reporting requirements. The federal government requires states to report their graduation rates every year for all high school students disaggregated by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, limited English proficiency, gender, and migrant status. Recommended by the National Governor’s Association, the new formula has been adopted by all 50 states and is scheduled to take effect in at least 39 states by 2010.

The use of the new formula will mean decreases in the graduation rates for most schools in Michigan. It will mean that some schools will not meet the current NCLB target graduation rate of 80%. This will result in media attention and questions from those who live and work in our communities. This is an outstanding opportunity to engage others in conversations about educating children without becoming defensive. We can explain that some students take more time to graduate for a number of reasons. Some just need a slower pace of learning in order to master the content. Others are recovering from some academic setbacks or poor life choices. Others are bouncing back from long-term illnesses or frequent family moves.

Many who learn about lower graduation rates will assume that more students are dropping out. It will be important to note that the new lower graduation rate **does not** mean that more students are dropping out. In the past, districts were allowed to count every student who earned a diploma, no matter how long it took them to finish. Using the new graduation rate formula, on-time graduates, those who need more time, and those who transfer out must all be counted before determining that the remaining students have dropped out. With that said, even one drop-out is one too many. If you talk to those who are alarmed by lower graduation rates, now is the time to ask them to get involved and be part of the solution. Suggest they help students by serving as a mentor, becoming more involved as a parent or community volunteer, helping engage parents, or assisting in other ways. Share specific programs or people they can contact to get started. The news of lower graduation rates can be a catalyst for motivating others to take action.