

September 06, 2017 | By Anthony King

High Schoolers Doing Better than Expected with New Graduation Requirement But Many Still Struggle

A new report from the San Diego Education Research Alliance ([SanDERA](#)) at UC San Diego sheds light on official graduation rates for San Diego Unified School District's 2016 graduating class, the first cohort to graduate under new "college prep" requirements.

When accounting for students who left the district or transferred to a charter school, SanDERA finds that 80.3 percent of students in the class of 2016 graduated having met the new graduation requirement, lower than the 91.2 percent official graduation rate announced by both the school district and the California Department of Education.



"The 'College Prep for All' Mandate – An Update on How San Diego's Class of 2016 Has Fared with New Graduation Requirements" report is published by SanDERA. (Image courtesy SanDERA)

"The official graduation rate does not include the one in 10 students who transferred to a charter or non-SDUSD school in 12th grade," the SanDERA report states. Because the state's definition of graduation rate excludes these students, the graduation rate is higher.

But both numbers are higher than the 72 percent of students SanDERA previously projected were likely to graduate. An [earlier report](#) ([PDF](#)) reviewed the class through August 2015 as students began their final year of high school. The current report follows that class through graduation in 2016.

San Diego is one among many school districts across the state that adopted policies to make college preparatory coursework mandatory, in what is called the "a-g" course sequence, or subject area, requirements. The a-g requirements must also be successfully completed to be eligible for admission to the state's public universities.

“Our latest report has both good news and bad news for the new college prep policy,” said Julian Betts, SanDERA executive director and professor of economics at UC San Diego. “The good news is unequivocal. While we projected only about seven out of 10 students would complete a-g coursework and graduate in 2016, it is clear eight out of 10 did so, a credit to the students and educators for hard, yet impressive, work. The bad news is that almost all of the students who left, for charter schools or otherwise, lagged far behind in a-g coursework completion.”

The SanDERA report seeks, in part, to explain differences between its August 2015 projected rates, August 2016 rates and the official graduation rate announced by the school district. SanDERA focuses on the 30 percent of students in the class of 2016 who were significantly behind in graduation requirements entering their senior year.

In this 30 percent, 10 percent completed the requirements, often through online courses approved by the district, while the remaining 20 percent did not. This is divided, the report finds, almost equally into two groups: 9.2 percent were off track to complete the a-g requirements and dropped out, left the district completely or transferred to a charter school, and 10.5 percent remained in the district but did not graduate.

The report notes that the transfer of struggling students to charter schools is a trend that began before the college prep requirements were put in place and was not likely caused by them.

“The district and students clearly deserve recognition for the considerable improvement in course completion among many of the students who were off track at the end of grade 11,” the report reads. “However, with eight out of every 10 students in our class of 2016 cohort actually earning an SDUSD diploma at the end of their senior year, the district has scope to improve further.”

The report credits some of the improvements in course completion to additional resources for summer school, detailed tracking by the district of each student’s progress and new online courses. However, recent media reports claim some students who were behind may have found shortcuts to gain points in these online courses.

To reduce public confusion and strengthen the a-g program, SanDERA makes several practical recommendations:

- In addition to the official graduation rate, the district could report the percent of students who leave the district each year as well as what percent of these were off track for on-time graduation,

- The district could develop an a-g on-track forecasting model, and
- The district could hire non-affiliated educators to observe test-taking conditions for online courses in order to ensure course integrity.

The report — “[The ‘College Prep for All’ Mandate – An Update on How San Diego’s Class of 2016 Has Fared with New Graduation Requirements](#)” (PDF) — is co-authored by Betts, with Andrew Zau, senior statistician for SanDERA, and SanDERA director Karen Volz Bachofer. It is the fourth in a series examining the college-prep course requirements in SDUSD.

A partnership between San Diego Unified School District and the UC San Diego Department of Economics within the Division of Social Sciences, SanDERA conducts rigorous research contributing to the development of education policy, and informs, supports and sustains high-quality educational opportunities for all students.

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