



# SNAPSHOT

## GRADUATION AND DROPOUT RATES IN TENNESSEE

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The Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) has released a report on the federal and state criteria for calculating high school graduation rates and dropout rates in Tennessee. The report also includes information regarding any flexibility federal law lends to states regarding the calculation of graduation rates and dropout rates as well as whether the criteria for determining dropouts have a disproportionate impact on urban schools and districts and those which serve large special populations (e.g., students with disabilities, English learners, etc.). The report was prepared in response to a legislative request.

### Federal requirements

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 requires states to use a specific formula for calculating graduation rates: **the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR)**. The ACGR compares the number of 12th grade students who graduate with a regular diploma with the number of students enrolled in 9th grade four years earlier, referred to as a cohort. Students who exit a district for reasons such as transferring to another school district, withdrawing to home school, or moving to another country are removed from the cohort and do not negatively impact the district's ACGR.

In the 2021-22 school year, the Tennessee **ACGR** was **89.8 percent**.

Federal law does not, however, require states and districts to track and report dropout rates, though dropout data is collected from states by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE). Nearly half of all states, including Tennessee, voluntarily report dropout rates on the education report cards required by ESSA. Tennessee uses a **cohort dropout rate formula** based on the same 9th grade cohort used for calculating the ACGR. The formula divides the total number of dropouts (based on high school completion and withdrawal criteria) by the total number of students in the cohort to determine the dropout rate.

In the 2021-22 school year, the Tennessee **cohort dropout rate** was **8.6 percent**.

### State requirements

The report also details the four phases of the graduation cohort process administered by the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) each year. TDOE specifies the requirements and deadlines for each phase in its Graduation Cohort Protocol. Because the reporting and appeals process spills into the subsequent school year, dropout rates lag one year on the Tennessee report cards (i.e., 2022-23 dropout rates will be included on the 2023-24 report card).

Tennessee uses a system of completion and withdrawal codes for districts to use in the state Education Information System (EIS) when tracking the graduation or dropout status of each student in a cohort. Districts and schools are required to code each student accurately and provide written verification to confirm when students are eligible to be removed from a cohort (e.g., written proof from another district showing that a transferring student has enrolled in their district).

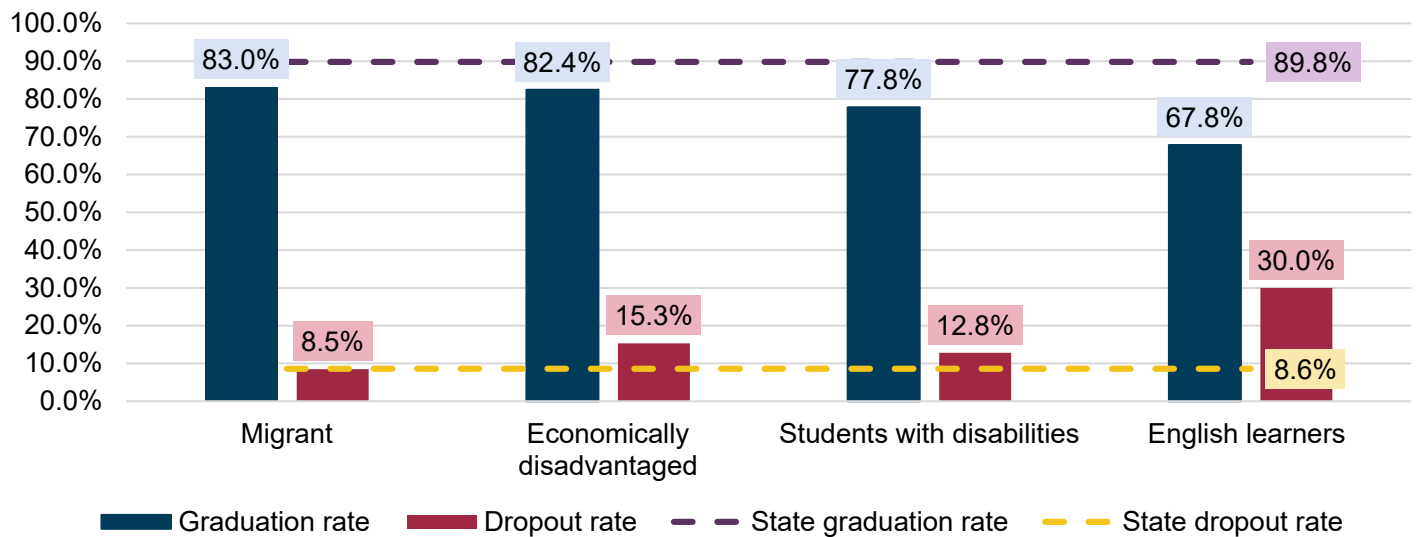
Federal graduation rate requirements do not allow states to make exceptions in any circumstances, including those over which districts or schools have no control. For example, incarcerated students held on criminal charges can be transferred out of a cohort only after adjudication of delinquency, and following adjudication, they may be transferred out of a cohort only if they are placed in a facility in which they can earn a regular or alternate high

school diploma. Incarcerated students who do not fit the criteria for transferring from a cohort can negatively affect district and school graduation and dropout rates. Typically, a small number of Tennessee high school students per year fall into this and other circumstances that districts and schools cannot control.

### English learners and other student subgroups drop out at higher rates and graduate at lower rates than their peers

Certain student subgroups are more likely to drop out and not graduate from high school because of multiple factors. In 2021-22, English learners in Tennessee had an ACGR of 67.8 percent, 22 percentage points below the state rate of 89.8 percent. Other student subgroups, including students with disabilities, were also below the state rate.

English learners also had the highest dropout rate in the state in 2021-22, with a rate of 30 percent. The dropout rate for economically disadvantaged students was 15.3 percent that year, while students with disabilities had a 12.8 percent dropout rate. At 8.5 percent, migrant students were slightly below the state dropout rate.



### Policy consideration

***TDOE could publish an extended-year graduation rate in addition to its four-year graduation rate.***

Under ESSA, states have the option to publish an extended-year graduation rate in addition to the required four-year graduation rate. Over half of all states report a five-, six-, or seven-year graduation rate to highlight the students who needed extra time to meet graduation requirements. While not required for federal accountability purposes, extended-year graduation rates show educators, parents, and policymakers which student subgroups' graduation rates rise at the five-year mark and beyond. Additionally, extended-year graduation rates may help educators identify areas of support for those student groups to more fully develop college- and career-ready language and academic skills.

To read the full report, visit the Comptroller's OREA website at [tncot.cc/orea](https://tncot.cc/orea).