

## Graduation rate encouraging, but also challenging

Written by News Desk  
Friday, 19 July 2013 15:44 -

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**By Jeff Langham, Superintendent - Elmore County Schools**

Elmore County Schools received its current graduation rate recently, finishing with 74 percent under the new age cohort rate.

As superintendent, I am simultaneously encouraged and challenged by our graduation rate numbers. I am challenged by two factors. First, our district average is slightly below the state average. This is obviously not where we want to be.

Secondly, while I am encouraged that we have two of our schools—Elmore County High and Holtville High--holding fast or showing gains this year with strong numbers (86% and 85% respectively), I am challenged by the fact that our two largest high schools are on the lower end of the spectrum with Stanhope Elmore at 71% and Wetumpka High at 69%.

Obviously, these numbers on the page do not represent the tireless efforts our teachers and administrators undertake daily to address the dropout dilemma.

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We make no excuses for these numbers. We will meet the challenge to see these numbers improve.

With that being said, it is important for our public to understand the intricacies of the cohort reporting method that is now used in the formulation of graduation rates.

The cohort rate is derived from the number of students who enrolled in a school during the ninth grade versus the number of students who graduate from the school during a four-year period.

Under the four-year cohort rate, high schools are held accountable for students who do not attain a high school diploma during that allotted time.

The graduation rates are no longer based on how many graduate, but instead are dependent on how many graduate within four years.

While the new system is arguably more accurate, it does create some unintended consequences. For example, the cohort system penalizes school systems like ours that keep a student for an extra semester to make sure he or she graduates.

Under the cohort rate, the system is also held accountable for students who miss a semester of school due to personal illness or the illness of a family member.

Let's take a closer look at Wetumpka High School and some of the influences upon its 69% graduate rate. As one of our larger schools, Wetumpka has a large number of transient students. These students, at all grade levels and usually behind in credits, come and go constantly. Many times, just when the school has established an effective plan to rescue these at-risk students, they end up leaving again before the plan can benefit them.

Additionally, a closer look at the students who are deemed as dropouts reveals that many of them are from fragile family situations. Regardless of the best efforts of the school, these

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students lack needed familial support as characterized by a lack of attendance, discipline issues, and a pervasive lack of academic motivation (failure is the norm for these students).

According to WHS Principal Cindy Veazey, "When it comes to addressing the dropout dilemma, the things we CAN change, we do. Numerous dropouts have been prevented because of our efforts. In the class of 2012-2013, approximately 32 students (that were behind in credits) graduated due to interventions we put into place. Numerous others graduated due to monitoring of classroom failures and intervening with tutoring, retesting, and standards recovery."

Unquestionably, Wetumpka High is proactive in its approach to the dropout dilemma. At the school, early prevention is in place. Failures are monitored and standards recovery, reteaching/retesting, elective pullouts are used as interventions. Credit Recovery opportunities are provided and at risk monitoring is provided. In other words, graduation plans/contracts are developed with students to provide a "way out" and hope for students failing.

These efforts are definitely on the right track. Of the 292 freshmen, 20 were retained (4 of those were repeaters). Only 3 of the 292 freshmen did not receive a math credit.

One could also see practices like these evident at our other large high school—Stanhope Elmore.

Thanks to the ongoing efforts of our schools, it is our expectation to see our dropout numbers decrease in the future as we already have initiated plans and programs like those mentioned in this article to help us meet these challenges.

It is important to note that these plans and programs also include the addition of a graduation coach to help our local campuses as well as expanding student advisory programs throughout the district. Addressing the dropout dilemma must be a team effort among our schools, our families, and our communities. As a school system, we are determined to do our part to meet the challenge to see our graduation rate improve.