

EDUCATION WEEK

COMMENTARY

Public School Officials Are Artificially Inflating Graduation Rates. I've Seen It Myself

Fraudulent graduation practice give the false sense of progress

By Bernard Gassaway

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In the age of accountability ushered in by the No Child Left Behind law in 2002 and continued under 2015's Every Student Succeeds Act, many school officials are using fraudulent methods to inflate graduation rates.

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As a direct result of a public thirst for schools to show progress, boards of education pressure superintendents, superintendents squeeze principals, principals ride teachers, and teachers stress students. The ultimate measure of progress for schools nationwide is high school graduation rates.

Public school officials use a variety of schemes to give the appearance of progress.

Credit recovery is one strategy that school officials use to allow students to quickly make up for classes they have failed, without receiving formal instruction. Credit recovery is a national practice, though it may be called something else. In fact, "credit recovery" is a broad term that encompasses multiple strategies, some more effective than others. Blended learning, virtual learning, after-school programs, summer school, weekend school, and night school are all credit-recovery strategies.

I experienced the worst of this practice when I became principal of New York City's Boys and Girls High School in 2009. One student was told by his teacher to complete about five handouts to make up for a summer school art course. Instead of attending class, that student was allowed to participate in a basketball tournament in Las Vegas. (I denied the student credit and eliminated this abusive practice.)



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Also, students with disabilities often have a lower threshold for meeting graduation requirements. Some school officials resort to reclassifying struggling students to increase their graduation rates. By reclassifying general education students, they become eligible for a lower graduation threshold. In the case of New York state, students with individualized education plans are currently required to pass a single English- and a single math-exit exam to meet graduation requirements, rather than the five such exams that are required for general education students.

In my experience, school officials entice parents to become complicit, as officials encourage them to request for their children a plan under **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973**, which includes a more expansive definition of disability than is protected under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. That 504 plan allows certain general education students to receive some of the same accommodations that students with IEPs receive: extended time; having the exam read to them; and, in select cases, even a lower score threshold to pass exit exams.

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Lastly, when education officials cannot use any of the aforementioned tactics to get struggling students through high school, they transfer or push out students who are off-track for graduation—dropping the dead weight that is dragging down graduation statistics. Pushing students out is the most efficient way to increase a school's graduation rate. Principals transfer overage and undercredited students to alternative schools.

That, too, is an abusive practice I've observed firsthand. Here's how it works: Principals and guidance counselors tell students they must leave the school if they want to graduate. Students are persuaded to transfer to alternative schools under the guise that it is easier for them to earn credits and graduate. In some cases, those same school personnel even inform students that they are not allowed to return, thus rendering these schools no longer accountable for the students' performance indicators.

In New York, state education officials reported an increase in the 2015 high school graduation rate to 78 percent, a slight rise from the previous year's. In 2016, that number increased to 79.4 percent, coinciding with the introduction of the New York state regents' new graduation requirements. The state's standardized high school exam offers new graduation standards for students with disabilities by reducing the number of exit examinations from five to two. Once standards have been lowered and the rigor associated with the new requirements lessened, these seemingly better graduation numbers are no longer valid measures of students' achievement.

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It is time for state education officials to act morally and provide specific guidance to local school districts to stop these known abusive and fraudulent practices, which ultimately harm the very children whom schools are supposed to serve.

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