



Graduation Rate and Virtual Schools

Connections Academy is committed to the students that we serve. We value any data that can help us improve, but we also know that the conversation around “graduation rate” is one that needs to be expanded. We welcome the opportunity to take part in these discussions to accurately reflect the important role that virtual schools play in student success.

4 Year Cohort Model

Assessing graduation rate for students who attend virtual school is complicated by a number of factors. It is important to note that a virtual school attracts students from across the state versus a local school which brings together a like-population. It's important to understand that the Oregon Department of Education places the highest emphasis on graduation rate over all other categories which can mask the true success

Grad Rate*	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
ORCA	49.0%	54.4%	59.63%

of ORCA. For example, ORCA outperformed the state in Language Arts and Science (exceeded state in Levels 3 & 4) and made significant progress on improving its graduation rate from 2012-13 to 2014-15.

Mobility and Graduation Rate

Virtual schools have a high mobility rate due to the various factors that a student chooses to enroll in a virtual school. Many students chose ORCA to solve a problem for a particular period of time such as bullying, medical issues, family situation, pregnancy, or other crisis situation. The success that ORCA achieves during that time is not reflected in future graduation success if students transfer to a new school once their crisis situation is gone. In addition, mobility can also be a challenge for state data systems to accurately reflect a mobile student population. Finally, many students come to a virtual school academically behind. It takes time for these students to catch up and they may need more than four years to graduate. Oregon does not include extended year graduation success into the cohort rate. Oregon 2013-14 Cohort (started 9th grade in 2010-11 and expected to graduate in 2013-14):

- **24%** of students enrolled were behind in credits;
- **74%** of students withdrew between 2010-11 to 2013-14 prior to graduation
- **90%** of full academic year 12th graders graduated in 2015 (enrolled by October 1st and continuously enrolled until graduation or end of the school year including summer)
- **86%** of students graduated who enrolled on cohort and stayed through the end of the Senior year regardless of grade level in the 2013 and 2014 graduation cohorts. (409/473)
- **88%** of students graduated who entered in 9th grade and stayed all 4 years in the 2013/14 cohorts. (135/154)

* Graduation Rate for Oregon in 2014-15 was 72%

Factors to Consider in Graduation Rate Calculations

1. It is important to consider *progress towards graduation* as a metric either in a separate accountability framework for virtual schools or include in all school calculation. For example,
 - Arizona has created a separate accountability framework for virtual schools which includes a Persistence factor (progress towards graduation) and a 5, 6, and 7 year graduation rate calculation.
2. Every Students Succeed Act (ESSA) has created additional flexibility for states that was not available under ESEA to use in calculating graduation rates:
 - Include 5 and 6 Year Graduation Rates
 - States now have the ability to include “*at the state’s discretion, the extended-year adjusted cohort graduation rate.*” The “extended rate” allows states to use 5 YR and even 6YR rates.
 - School of Record
 - Many times a virtual school is the school of last resort before dropping out. ESSA allows a state to determine who is accountable for that drop out and at what time it occurs. A student who transfers to a new school but doesn’t stay enrolled at the new school *for at least half of the school year* and has exited without a diploma must be counted for purposes of graduation cohort calculations for the school that they either were “enrolled for the greatest proportion of school days while enrolled in grades 9 through 12; or in which the student was most recently enrolled (prior to the transfer).” Oregon may want to consider requiring students to be enrolled for at least the length of the Full Academic Year definition before including them in the graduation cohort calculations of the new school.
 - Define Full Academic Year (FAY)
 - As was the case with NCLB, ESSA allows states to define a Full Academic Year (FAY). Students who have not attended the same school for the period defined by FAY should not be included in a school’s results. Due to the high transfer rates of students in and out of virtual schools, Oregon should consider including the *highest possible number of attendance days* for its FAY definition. Indiana, for example, requires students to be enrolled for at least 162/180 or 90% of the school year to be included in the results. As noted above, under ESSA, the definition of FAY can also be applied to the inclusion in the graduation cohort calculation.