

# KERA UPDATE

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#30

## Where'd They Go (Yet Again)???

Back in 1994 when I first began looking at Kentucky Education, one of the first things to catch my attention was the dropout rate. I learned the state changed its dropout formula not once, but twice, since KERA was enacted in 1990. As a result, there was no way to compare KERA-period dropout statistics to the time before KERA was enacted.

For the past four years, I have been developing a dropout-like calculation that gets around this problem of formula changes. After several attempts, I settled on a statistic I call "**Class Loss.**"

To compute class loss, I take the 9th grade Fall membership for each class and subtract the number of 9th graders who were retained (held back) from the previous year's 9th grade. That gives me a "first time" 9th grade membership. Then, I subtract the number of students who graduate with this class four years later. The result is the class loss, a measure of the success of public schools in holding students between 9th grade entry and on-time graduation.

Class loss numbers at the state-wide level are quite interesting. If you check the graph to the right, you will see that class loss was slowly dropping in the last part of the 1980's, and that trend continued until the 1992-93 school year. Then, class loss started increasing, at a rather rapid rate, and is now up to 26.7 percent of the first time 9th grade membership.

At the same time, the officially reported dropouts from the Kentucky Department of Education have been doing something different. They were on the rise until 1994-95, and then stayed flat in 1995-96. The just-released data for the 1996-97 school year saw officially reported

dropouts move down slightly.

Is the different trend for the official KDE dropout data and my class loss calculation proof that the Department's data is wrong, or at least not consistent with their other data? Not necessarily, although a problem with the official dropout figures is certainly a possible explanation.

A student can become a loss to his class for several reasons besides dropping out. He could transfer to private school or to homeschool. He also could transfer to any out-of-state school system. Under those conditions, he would not be a dropout, but he would become a class loss between the start of 9th grade and graduation of his class four years later.

Even if a student doesn't drop out, if he leaves Kentucky public school before graduation, that is of potential concern. After a student and his parents cast their lot with the public school system in 9th grade, it takes a rather unsatisfactory experience for them to shift to another schooling

choice. So, the rising trend in class loss could be an important danger signal.

No-one really knows where the lost students are going. The Department of Education recently told me they don't keep data on homeschooled students, so there is no documentation of that possible loss route. The Department does keep data on private school enrollment. Statewide, that shows flat private high school membership over the past few years. On paper, at least, it doesn't seem many class loss kids are taking that route. So, the mystery continues.

In any event, someone with access to the records should explore the growing class loss. As discussed in *KERA Update 29*, new data shows the group of other-than-public-school students taking the ACT is growing rapidly; but, their ACT scores are declining. Thus, the growing class loss is disturbing.

**Dropouts and Class Loss as Percent of First Time 9th Grade Membership**

