

# KERA UPDATE

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About The Kentucky Education Reform Act

#60

## 'Realistic' Successful Transitions to Adult Life

Since the inception of the Kentucky Education Reform Act's public school assessment program, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) has annually reported a figure called the "Successful Transition to Adult Life Rate." The rate is presented as the proportion of graduates who advance to a suitable follow-on pursuit in life.

Transition's accuracy has always been questioned. KDE's definition of "successful" is extremely broad. Schools have hazy guidance and wide latitude to interpret what successful really means. Also, there is pressure to fudge the data because the Transition Rate is a factor in the school accountability program. There is essentially no auditing process to catch these problems, either.

Never-the-less, the transition figures have impressed many independent researchers over the years, so I decided to take another look at how Transition is calculated.

Problem — the denominator in the official Transition Rate calculation is the number of graduates in the given year. This means that two groups of students are totally ignored. The first group includes the large number of students who drop out before getting a diploma. Dropouts are unlikely to become truly successful in adult life. Many dropouts wind up in the penal system, certainly not a success in anyone's book. So, a success measure that ignores dropouts is clearly flawed.

The second ignored group includes kids who are retained, or held back. Ninth grade retention in particular is up in Kentucky. These kids are not dropouts, at least not yet. But, their growing numbers indicate Kentucky's high schools are unable to overcome increasing inadequacy

in these students' earlier academic preparation. These students won't transition on time to a successful adult life, if they make it at all. And, taxpayers must pay the price of extra schooling.

A figure that measures our schools' ability to successfully move students to adulthood must consider these two student groups. And, I believe I have developed an appropriate way to do that.

This new calculation, which I call the "Realistic Successful Transition to Adult Life Rate," makes one simple change to KDE's calculation. Instead of using the number of graduates as the denominator for the ratio, I use the number of students who were in the class when it was in 9th grade. That adds back the dropouts and retained kids, students KDE completely ignores. It also honors something implied in KDE's definition of a successful transition — namely, to truly be considered successful, a student should get a diploma, and he should get it on time.

The results from my calculation are graphed below. As you can see, KDE

officially reports very high Transition Rate numbers, generally above 95 percent in recent years. Also, that rate has generally been increasing, albeit very slowly.

The Realistic Successful Transition to Adult Life Rate shows something quite different. The proportion of the 9th grade cohort that achieves success is quite small, only about 63 percent. Much worse, *the Realistic Rate has generally dropped since 1993.*

This bad news contradicts the official Transition Rate information. The Realistic Rate shows KERA isn't delivering on perhaps its strongest promise — that our schools would do a better job of preparing *all* students for life. Some of these kids will later get a GED and do OK; but, that won't be thanks to the public school system; it will be in spite of it.

So, the evidence grows: after more than a decade of trying KERA ideas, maybe it's time for Kentucky to try something else!

