

COURSE CREDITS TOWARD GRADUATION

SNAPSHOT OF THE 2009–2010 SCHOOL YEAR

Purpose. Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) staff investigated high school students’ course credit obtainment toward graduation to (a) describe characteristics of students who were *on track* and *off track* for high school graduation and (b) inform staff about patterns of credit obtainment and student dropout. The 2009–2010 school year was used to include the most recent data available for students who dropped out of school prior to graduation.

On track to graduate. To graduate high school, students must pass the exit level (11th-grade) Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and earn a minimum number of course credits in a variety of content areas, according to their graduation plan. The three basic plans are *minimum*, *recommended*, and *distinguished* (Austin Independent School District [AISD], 2009; see technical note [1]). The minimum plan requires 22 credits and all of the required English, mathematics (math), science, and social studies courses, based on the year of high school entry. For the recommended and distinguished plans, students who entered 9th grade in Fall 2007 were required to have 26 credits, including four in math and four in science. Students entering 9th grade prior to Fall 2007 were required to have 24 credits, including three in math and three in science. The distinguished plan also required 3 years of a language other than English and other advanced measures.

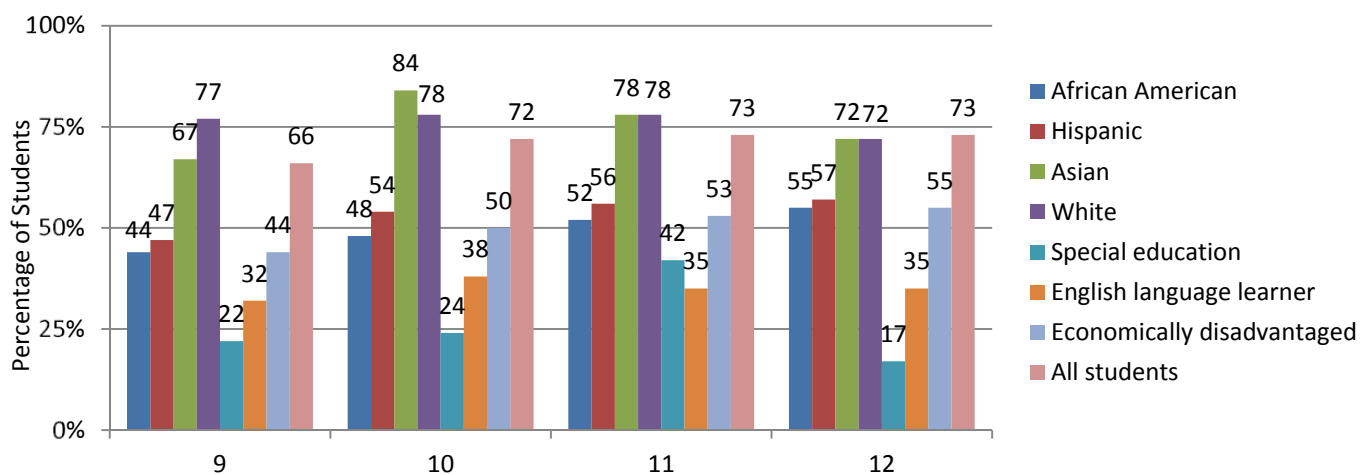


Goal 3: All students will graduate ready for college, career, and life in a globally competitive economy.

AISD Strategic Plan, 2010–2015

Students were considered on track to graduate if they had earned enough credits by the end of the 2009–2010 school year to complete high school within 4 years. Figure 1 provides the percentage of students districtwide who were on track to graduate, correlated with students’ demographics and grade level (regardless of high school entry year).

Figure 1. High School Students on Track to Graduate, by Grade and Student Demographics, 2009–2010



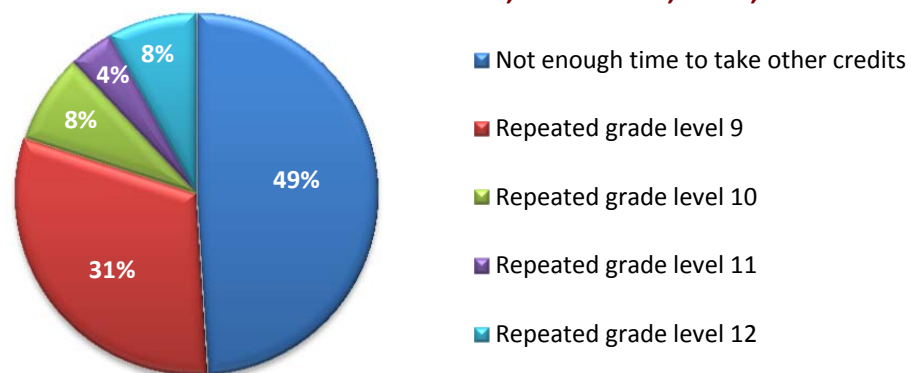
Source. AISD student records, 2009–2010

Note. See technical note (2).

Compared with other grade levels, 9th grade had the lowest percentage of students who were on track to graduate, suggesting a large number of students were struggling to earn credits as they first entered high school (see also Figure 2). Among those most likely not on track to graduate in 4 years were English language learners (ELLs) and students in special education. Fewer African American and Hispanic students than students of other racial and ethnic origins were on track to graduate within 4 years.

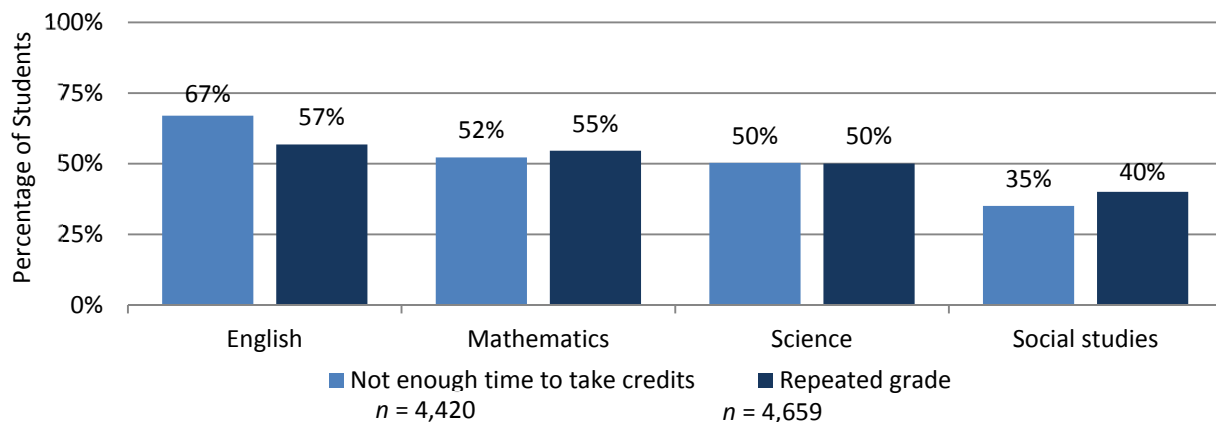
Reasons students were off track. Of the 40% ($n = 9,079$) of students who were not on track to graduate at the end of 2009–2010, 51% had repeated a grade level in a prior year (i.e., they were off track to graduate at the beginning of 2009–2010). The remaining 49% had not repeated a grade level, but did not have enough time to complete the required credits within 4 years (Figure 2). This finding suggests nearly half of off-track students may need some type of extended learning program (e.g., a summer or night credit recovery program) to graduate within 4 years.

Figure 2. Reasons Students Were Not On Track to Graduate, 2009–2010, $N = 9,079$



Source. AISD student records

Figure 3. Off-Track Students Missing Course Credits, by Content Area and Reason Students Were Off Track for Graduation, 2009–2010



Source. AISD student records

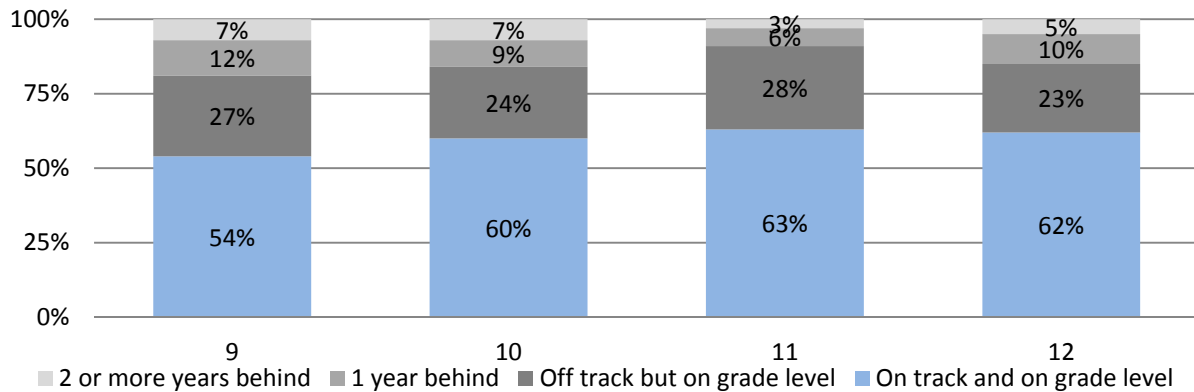
Note. Missing course credits were determined by students’ current grade level, their graduation plan, and sufficient time to complete course credits in grade levels remaining.

English was the core course required by most students who were off track to graduate within 4 years (Figure 3; see technical note [3] for areas by demographics). More than half of off-track students were missing science or math credits. Although 60% of off-track students were missing credits in two or more core content areas (i.e., English, science, math, or social studies), approximately one quarter (26%) were missing credits in other areas. Seven percent ($n = 917$) of students on track to graduate required

additional math credits, 5% ($n = 710$) required additional science credits, and 2% ($n = 222$) needed additional social studies credits.

Ninth-grade retention. In 2009–2010, nearly one in five 9th-grade students had first entered high school in a previous cohort school year (Figure 5). By the end of 2009–2010, the first-time 9th-grade cohort (i.e., Class of 2013, assuming 4 years of high school; not shown) had 65% of students on-track to a 4-year graduation. Moreover, students who dropped out of school were likely to have repeated a grade level (75%); 9th grade was the level most repeated by students who dropped out (Figure 6). The data suggest the transition to 9th grade may be an area of focus to improve the 4-year graduation rate and reduce the dropout rate.

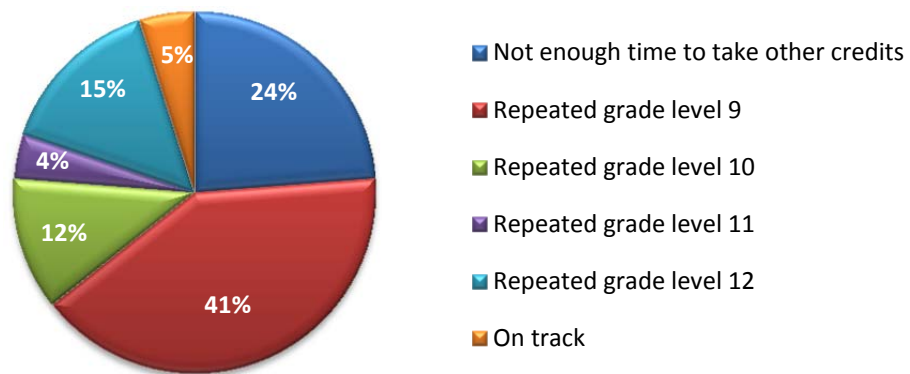
Figure 5. Composition of Grade Levels, by Progress Toward Graduation, 2009–2010



Source. AISD student records

Note. The bars represent all high school students in their current grade level, and not by 9th-grade entry year cohorts, as used by Texas Education Agency (TEA) to calculate graduation rates.

Figure 6. Reasons Student Who Dropped Out of School in 2009–2010 Were Off Track to Graduate (N = 983)



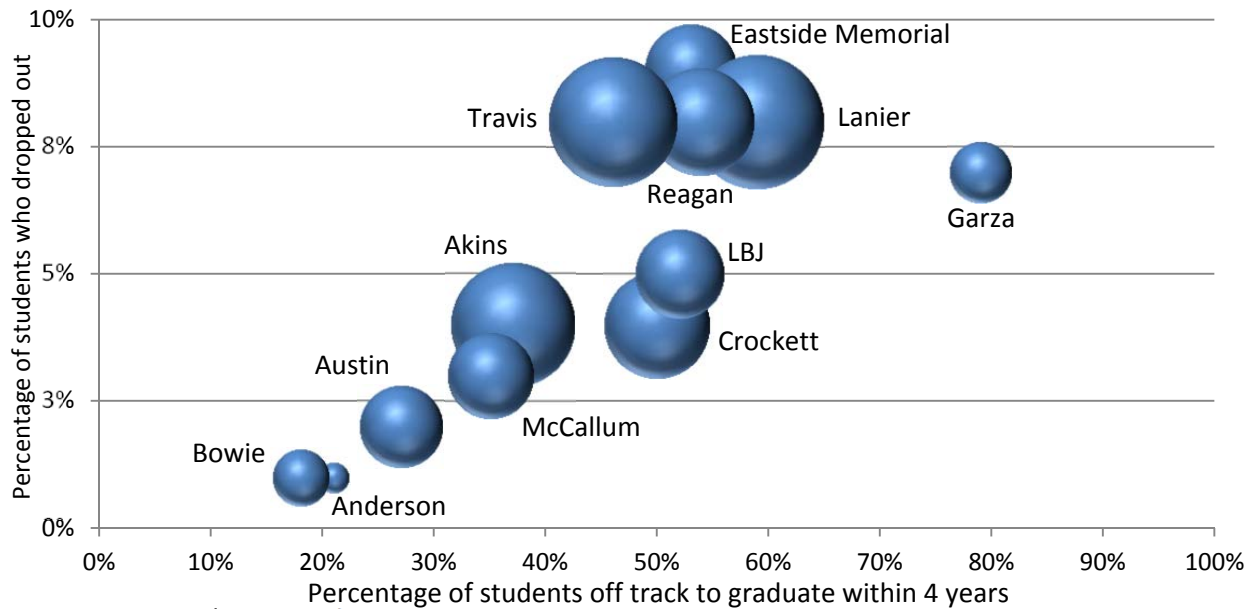
Source. AISD student records

Note. Data were missing for six students. The total number of students who dropped out of high school in 2009–2010 was 989.

Off-track students and high school dropout rates. Previous studies have shown that students who had a course failure in a core content area or earned fewer than five course credits in a year were likely to drop out of school (see Brunner, 2010a). In 2009–2010, high school campuses with a greater percentage of students off track to graduate also had a higher percentage of students who dropped out

of school (Figure 7). Fifteen percent of students who dropped out were on the minimum plan; 84% were on the recommended plan; and 1% were on other graduation plans (i.e., individual education plan [IEP] or distinguished). A little more than half of the students who dropped out ($n = 517$; 53%) were under the 4 X 4 Plan (i.e., entered in Fall 2007 or later and require four credits each of science and math).

Figure 7. High School Campuses, by Percentage of Students Who Were Off Track for Graduation and Percentage of Students Who Dropped Out, 2009–2010



Source. AISD student records

Note. The bubble size represents the number of students who dropped out of school in 2009–2010. See technical note (4) for students’ graduation status, by grade level.

High school students who dropped out of school, age, and credits toward graduation. In June 2010, the Everyone Graduates Center (EGS) published a study about the characteristics of students who dropped out of AISD schools in the 2008–2009 school year. The study was designed to help administrators plan for an alternative dropout prevention/credit recovery program and to provide multiple pathways to high school graduation. The study included a table that showed the number of credits students required for graduation and their age at the start of the fall year in which they left school. EGS used all credits earned by the student and the minimum graduation plan to determine how many credits were required by the student for graduation. DRE staff replicated the EGS study with data for the 2009–2010 students who dropped out of school, using only credits earned that counted toward graduation and the students’ last graduation plan. Using credits toward graduation and students’ actual graduation plan, the data did not show a balanced distribution of students for the programs EGS recommended. According to the EGS matrix, two out of three high school students who dropped out were “too old” for regular school or “catch up” programs (Table T-6; summary tables for students who were current ELLs, ever ELLs, or received special education services are in the technical notes [T-7, T-8, T-9].) Thirty-eight percent of high school students who dropped out had fewer than 20 credits toward graduation (i.e., would be designated as a 9th grader). Of all AISD students who dropped out in 2009–2010, 34% were in 9th grade; 20% were in 10th grade; 16% were in 11th grade; 27% were in 12th grade, and 3% were in middle school. One in 10 students who dropped out of school had completed all required course credits for his or her plan.

Conclusion. To improve 4-year graduation rates and student dropout rates, focus may be placed on preparing students for the rigor of 9th-grade English, math, and science courses. However, when DRE staff looked at 8th-grade and 9th-grade predictors of dropout for the 2008–2009 cohort, the risk of dropout increased for the 9th-grade cohort, suggesting that some students may first enter AISD at 9th grade (see Brunner, 2010a, 2010b). Credit recovery programs may help some off-track students who need a few credits; however, some students at risk of dropping out of school were at least one to two grade levels behind their 9th-grade entry cohort (Figure 5).

Although 11% of 2009–2010 students who dropped out had all their required credits toward graduation and may have needed another option to help pass TAKS, it is unclear how the 15% grade requirement based on State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) will affect at-risk students’ credit obtainment toward graduation requirements.¹

For future research, DRE staff suggest a study to link earlier grade-level progress measures to 9th-grade success (i.e., passing core content classes, TAKS, and/or End-of-Course [EOC] exams).

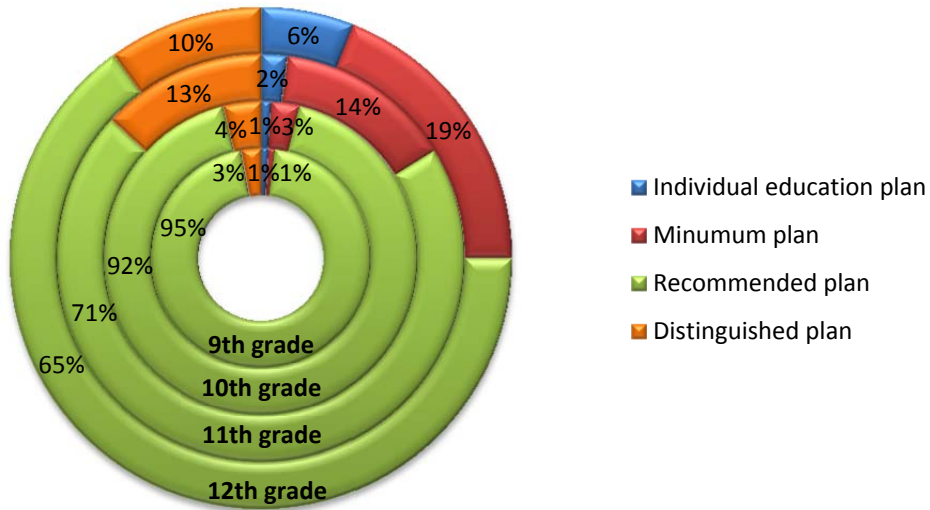
References

Brunner, J. (2010a). *Eighth-grade predictors of dropout research brief*. (Report No. 08.102 RB). Austin, TX: Austin Independent School District.

Brunner, J. (2010b). *Ninth-grade predictors of dropout research brief*. (Report No. 08.104 RB). Austin, TX: Austin Independent School District.

Technical Notes

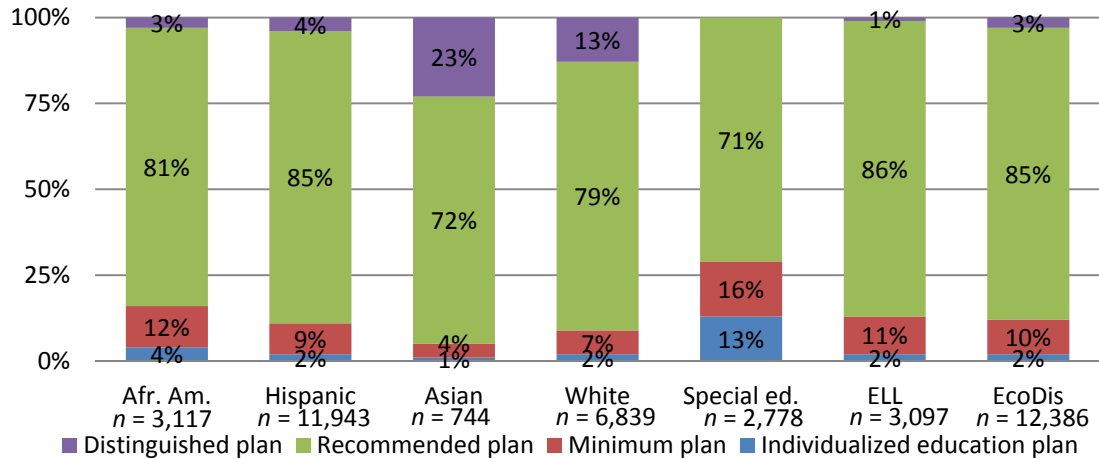
(1) Figure T-1. Graduate Plans, by Grade Level, 2009–2010



Source. AISD student records

¹ The 15% grade requirement can be deferred for the 2011–2012 year. See letter from Texas Commissioner of Education: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index4.aspx?id=2147505601>

Figure T-2. Graduate Plans, by Student Demographics, 2009–2010



Source. AISD student records

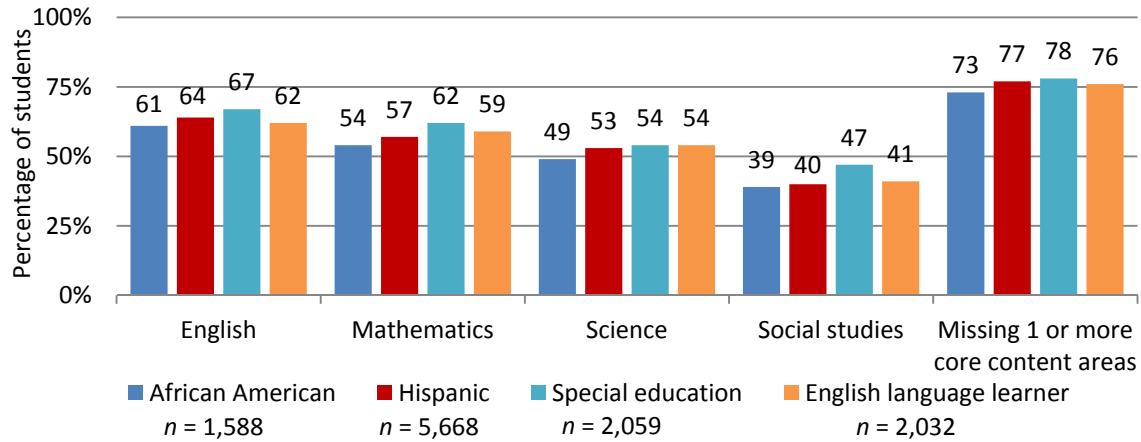
Note. Afr. Am. is an abbreviation for African American, ELL is an abbreviation for English language learner, and EcoDis is an abbreviation for economically disadvantaged.

(2) Table T-3. High School Students On Track to Graduate, by Student Demographics and Grade Level, 2009–2010

Characteristic	On track to graduate by end of the school year in 2009–2010											
	9th			10th			11th			12th		
	Total	On track	%	Total	On track	%	Total	On track	%	Total	On track	%
All students	7,088	4,697	66	5,545	3,979	72	5,059	3,718	73	5,040	3,701	73
Ethnicity/race												
African American	940	409	44	767	368	48	700	362	52	710	390	55
Asian	241	161	67	190	160	84	168	131	78	145	105	72
Hispanic	4,082	1,913	47	2,887	1,556	54	2,476	1,379	56	2,498	1,427	57
White	1,797	1,389	77	1,687	1,322	78	1,687	1,316	78	1,668	1,204	72
Special education	1,075	241	22	691	168	24	554	231	42	458	79	17
English language learners	1,317	425	32	671	253	38	509	180	35	600	207	35
Economic disadvantaged	4,420	1,947	44	3,032	1,523	50	2,569	1,359	53	2,365	1,312	55

Source. AISD student records

(3) Figure T-4. Off-Track Students Missing Course Credits, by Content Area and Student Characteristics, 2009–2010



Source. AISD student records

(4) Table T-5. Student Graduation Status, by Grade Level, 2009–2010

Grade	Student graduation status						Total
	Dropped out		Off track		On track		
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	
9	346	5	2,877	41	3,865	54	7,088
10	203	4	1,939	35	3,403	61	5,545
11	160	3	1,697	34	3,202	63	5,059
12	274	5	1,630	32	3,136	62	5,040
Total	983	4	8,143	36	13,606	60	22,732

Source. AISD student records

Note. Course credit data for six students who dropped out were missing.

(5) Table T-6. Distribution of 2009–2010 Dropouts, by Age and Number of Credits Short of Student’s Graduation Plan

Age	1 or less credits short	1+ to 3 credits short	3+ to 5 credits short	5+ to 10 credits short	10+ to 15 credits short	15+ to 20 credits short	More than 20 credits short	Total	Percentage of students	Educational program to create	Number of students	Percentage of students
14 or under	*	*	*	*	*	9	21	30	3%	Young enough for regular school Return to Regular School for Diploma	131	13%
15	*	*	*	*	11	19	86	120	12%			
16	*	*	*	11	21	56	161	250	25%	Young enough for regular school Catch Up Program & Return to High School for Diploma	184	19%
17	9	7	10	30	31	45	71	203	21%			
18	58	18	21	40	38	34	23	232	24%	Too old for traditional system, get diploma through new schools Older Student Campus for HS Diploma	211	21%
19	29	17	13	20	14	12	7	112	11%			
20 Or Over	12	5	*	8	*	*	*	36	4%	Too Old to get diploma, develop expanded GED programs Program for Community College Readiness + GED	457	46%
Total	108	47	49	112	118	177	372	983	This graphic organizer was developed by Steve Dobo, Colorado Youth for a Change			
%	11%	5%	5%	11%	12%	18%	38%	100%				

*Indicates redacted data to cell containing fewer than 5 students. Age and credit data were available for 983 out of the 989 total dropouts in grades 9 through 12 in 2009–2010. The educational programs were based on the recommendation by the Everybody Graduates Center and are subject to differences in opinion.

Table T-7. English Language Learner Dropouts, by Age and Number of Credits Short of Student’s Graduation Plan, 2009 – 2010

Age	1 or less credits short	1+ to 3 credits short	3+ to 5 credits short	5+ to 10 credits short	10+ to 15 credits short	15+ to 20 credits short	More than 20 credits short	Total	Percentage of students	Educational program to create	Number of students	Percentage of students
14 or under	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	7	4%	Young enough for regular school Return to Regular School for Diploma	32	13%
15	*	*	*	*	5	6	18	29	12%			
16	*	*	*	5	*	14	40	63	25%	Young enough for regular school Catch Up Program & Return to High School for Diploma	40	16%
17	*	*	*	*	7	15	18	50	20%			
18	11	6	*	6	7	10	9	53	21%	Too old for traditional system, get diploma through new schools Older Student Campus for HS Diploma	55	22%
19	13	7	*	6	*	*	*	37	15%			
20 Or Over	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	12	5%	Too Old to get diploma, develop expanded GED programs Program for Community College Readiness + GED	124	49%
Total	28	17	11	25	28	52	90	251	This graphic organizer was developed by Steve Dobo, Colorado Youth for a Change			
%	11%	7%	4%	10%	11%	21%	36%	100%				

*Indicates redacted data to cell containing fewer than five students. Age and credit data were available for 983 out of the 989 total dropouts in grades 9 through 12 in 2009–2010. The educational programs were based on the recommendation by the Everybody Graduates Center and are subject to differences in opinion.

Table T-8. Ever English Language Learner Dropouts, by Age and Number of Credits Short of Student’s Graduation Plan, 2009 – 2010

Age	1 or less credits short	1+ to 3 credits short	3+ to 5 credits short	5+ to 10 credits short	10+ to 15 credits short	15+ to 20 credits short	More than 20 credits short	Total	Percentage of students	Educational program to create	Number of students	Percentage of students
14 or under	*	*	*	*	*	6	8	14	4%	Young enough for regular school Return to Regular School for Diploma	55	15%
15	*	*	*	*	5	9	26	41	12%			
16	*	*	*	6	5	17	52	80	22%	Young enough for regular school Catch Up Program & Return to High School for Diploma	58	16%
17	*	*	*	5	8	16	24	61	17%			
18	24	10	6	12	9	14	10	85	24%	Too old for traditional system, get diploma through new schools Older Student Campus for HS Diploma	84	24%
19	21	10	5	9	*	*	*	54	15%			
20 Or Over	7	*	*	5	*	*	*	21	6%	Too Old to get diploma, develop expanded GED programs Program for Community College Readiness + GED	157	44%
Total	56	24	17	37	32	65	123	356	This graphic organizer was developed by Steve Dobo, Colorado Youth for a Change			
%	16%	7%	5%	10%	9%	18%	35%	100%				

*Indicates redacted data to cell containing fewer than five students. Age and credit data were available for 983 out of the 989 total dropouts in grades 9 through 12 in 2009–2010. The educational programs were based on the recommendation by the Everybody Graduates Center and are subject to differences in opinion.

Table T-9. Students in Special Education Who Dropped Out, by Age and Number of Credits Short of Student’s Graduation Plan, 2009 – 2010

Age	1 or less credits short	1+ to 3 credits short	3+ to 5 credits short	5+ to 10 credits short	10+ to 15 credits short	15+ to 20 credits short	More than 20 credits short	Total	Percentage of students	Educational program to create	Number of students	Percentage of students
14 or under	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	<1%	Young enough for regular school Return to Regular School for Diploma	5	2%
15	*	*	*	*	*	*	26	30	14%			
16	*	*	*	*	*	13	46	61	28%	Young enough for regular school Catch Up Program & Return to High School for Diploma	39	18%
17	*	*	*	5	9	12	30	60	28%			
18	*	*	*	7	12	6	10	37	17%	Too old for traditional system, get diploma through new schools Older Student Campus for HS Diploma	33	15%
19	*	*	*	5	*	*	5	22	10%			
20 Or Over	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	6	3%	Too Old to get diploma, develop expanded GED programs Program for Community College Readiness + GED	141	65%
Total	*	*	9	*	*	39	121	218	This graphic organizer was developed by Steve Dobo, Colorado Youth for a Change			
%	<1%	<1%	4%	<1%	<1%	18%	56%	100%				

*Indicates redacted data to cell containing fewer than five students. Age and credit data were available for 983 out of the 989 total dropouts in grades 9 through 12 in 2009–2010. The educational programs were based on the recommendation by the Everybody Graduates Center and are subject to differences in opinion.