

# High School Graduation Guidance

## An Introduction to the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate Calculation in New Jersey

### Background

In 2005, the National Governors Association (NGA) introduced the 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate calculation in an effort to move all states towards using a common calculation. The Adjusted Cohort formula has been deemed more accurate than other calculations in its ability to track student movement over time. In 2008, the federal government adopted NGA’s formula and mandated that states calculate cohort rates beginning with 2011 graduates. The adoption of a common national standard in calculating graduation rates ensures that student movement in and out of districts is tracked over time and results in a graduation rate that accounts for all students more accurately and consistently than in the past.

The State of New Jersey introduced the adjusted cohort graduation rate calculation in 2011 to determine rates for schools and districts. Through NJ SMART, the State’s longitudinal student data warehouse, both 4-year and 5-year adjusted cohort graduation rate calculations are used to derive the graduation rates of students across the state. The four-year and five-year graduation rates are published annually in the NJ School Performance Reports and ESSA Accountability Profiles.

The 4-year adjusted cohort formula essentially divides the number of students that graduated in 4 years or less (i.e., those students receiving a diploma) by the number of first-time ninth graders who entered the cohort four years earlier. In equation form, the rate calculates:

$$\frac{\text{4-Year Cohort Graduates in Year X}}{[\text{First-Time 9}^{\text{th}} \text{ Graders in Year X-4}] + [\text{Transfers In}] - [\text{Verified Transfers Out}] - [\text{Excluded From Cohort}]}$$

Similarly, the 5-year adjusted cohort formula divides the number of students that graduate in 5 years or less by the number of first-time ninth graders who entered the cohort five years earlier. The numerator includes students that graduated both in 4-year and 5-years.

NJ SMART’s District Reports feature, which grants school districts the ability to view their graduation data from multiple points of analysis, empowers districts to track the status of students and their cohorts throughout their high school tenure. Using this tool, districts can identify emerging trends and effective interventions based on the student-level data that they submit through required and optional NJ SMART data submissions.

### 4-Year Graduation Cohorts

Under the adjusted cohort methodology, each incoming 9<sup>th</sup> Grader in New Jersey is assigned to a graduation cohort based on the expectation that each will graduate in 4-years. For example, if a student entered ninth grade in 2016, then she/he would be assigned to the 2020 Cohort. Once a student is

# High School Graduation Guidance

assigned a cohort year, they remain in that same cohort regardless of when they actually graduate. In other words, cohorts are assigned once and are not changed if a student becomes “off-track.”

While students are actively enrolled in high school, their status is tracked to determine whether they are on-track or off-track to achieving graduation in four years. Students’ grade levels determine their progress towards graduation. For example, if a student in Cohort 2020 is in eleventh grade during the Fall of 2018, they would be considered “on-track”. However, if a student from the 2020 cohort is enrolled in tenth grade during the Fall of 2018, then they would be considered “off-track” since she/he would be at risk of not graduating within four years.

When a student exits or enters a district, it may affect the district’s cohort size, resulting in an *adjusted cohort*. For example, if a Cohort 2020 student transfers from District A to District B, then District B’s cohort count is increased by one student and District A’s cohort count is decreased by one student. However, if that student dropped out of District A before being successfully transferring to another district, then District A would be responsible for that student and their cohort count would not be adjusted. Rules determining “district ownership” of individual students have not changed and are clearly documented in NJDOE regulations.

## Cohort Statuses

There are eight possible cohort statuses for any given high school student within NJ SMART. Four of these possible statuses refer to inactive students (i.e., students that have exited the school district and have not transferred to another New Jersey public school district) and four statuses refer to active students (i.e., students who are currently enrolled in a New Jersey school).

The Cohort status for individual students is updated through two different mandatory submissions in NJ SMART: SID Management, which provides basic student information such as school enrollment and demographic data, and State Submission, which provides supplemental information for those same students, including grade level and socioeconomic indicators. At the beginning and end of each school year, LEAs submit this data to NJ SMART. The quality of the data submitted in these collections impacts the accuracy of students’ cohort statuses. Table 1 lists the possible cohort statuses for both active and inactive students in a given cohort year.

Table 1: Cohort Statuses in NJ SMART

| Cohort Status        | Submission for Updates             | Enrollment Status | Description   |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|---|
| Graduated            | SID Management                     | Inactive          | Students that have been exited with a School Exit Withdrawal Code of ‘L’ (Graduated).   |
| On-Track Continuing  | SID Management<br>State Submission | Active            | Submitted Grade Level suggests that a student is on-track to graduate by their assigned cohort year.                                |
| Off-Track Continuing | SID Management<br>State Submission | Active            | Submitted Grade Level suggests that a student is still attending school but is at least one year behind their assigned cohort year. |

# High School Graduation Guidance

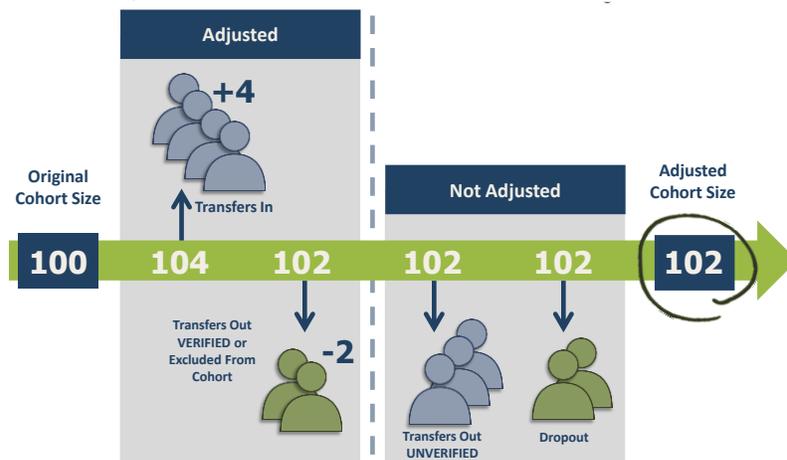
| Cohort Status                  | Submission for Updates | Enrollment Status | Description  |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|--|
| Active Student -Status Unknown | State Submission       | Active            | Students have been assigned a cohort year but were not submitted in the most recent State Submission; therefore, it could not be determined whether the student is on- or off-track.   |
| Transfer In                    | SID Management         | Active            | Students that were exited with a valid School Exit Withdrawal Code and have been successfully uploaded by another NJ SMART submitting district. These students will not yet have an 'On-Track Continuing' or 'Off-track Continuing' status until they are submitted to State Submission and their current Grade Level is compared to their assigned cohort year. |
| Transfer Out – Unverified*     | SID Management         | Inactive          | Students that were exited with a transfer-out School Exit Withdrawal Code but have not yet been uploaded by another NJ SMART submitting district.  |
| Dropout                        | SID Management         | Inactive          | Students that were exited with a dropout School Exit Withdrawal Code and not uploaded by another NJ SMART submitting district.   |
| Excluded From Cohort           | SID Management         | Inactive          | Students that are excluded from the adjusted cohort under special circumstances, including death of a student and transfer out of state/country.   |

\*Note: Transfer Out – Verified is not an official cohort status for a student, because once a transfer has been verified, that student officially exits the initial district and appears as a “Transfer In” in the new district.

As students transfer enrollment into and out of respective districts, the cohort count of each district is continually adjusted. Since the graduation rate is calculated by dividing the number of graduates by adjusted cohort count, this movement will affect a given district’s graduation rate. Chart 1 illustrates how the different cohort statuses affect cohort count.

# High School Graduation Guidance

Chart 1: How is Cohort Size Adjusted Over Time?



## High School Graduation Cohort Status Profile

Data from NJ SMART profiles will serve as graduation data for the State. In addition, NJ SMART provides this student-level data directly to districts through its District Reports tool. The High School Graduation Cohort Status Profile is available on the District Reports tab in the NJ SMART portal for LEA use. It is highly encouraged that superintendents, business administrators, curriculum coordinators, principals, and other critical education staff familiarize themselves with these profiles. Trainings on these and other profiles are offered on a continual basis and the NJ SMART Help Desk is available each day to provide any necessary guidance for district users. Beyond serving as a data warehouse, the NJ SMART system is a critical and useful educational tool for educators, school administrators, and school districts.

The Cohort Status Profile summarizes student counts in the eight cohort statuses for schools within a given district. In addition, the profiles disaggregate each cohort status by various subgroup indicators, such as Gender, Lunch Status, and Special Education Status. From the Profile, districts have the ability to drill down to look at individual student lists in each of these categories. For example, a district could drill down to view a list of all of their female graduates, or a list of all of their 11<sup>th</sup> grade dropouts. From the student list, districts can drill down further to view an individual student's enrollment record, which displays key demographic data, enrollment history, and many other valuable pieces of information for any given student.



In addition to identifying trends across different indicators, districts can utilize this profile to investigate their student data. For example, by taking advantage of NJ SMART optional submissions, districts can analyze the short- and long-term impact of different strategies, programs, and interventions that they have deployed and tracked. In addition, this profile marks the first time that districts are able to access

# High School Graduation Guidance

information on students that have exited their district through NJ SMART. Districts are able to drill down to Student Lists of Transfer Out-Unverified students in order to identify which students they transferred out of the district (assuming the student was transferring to another NJ district) but are still accountable for because those students never actually enrolled in the new district. District personnel responsible for tracking transfer documentation can use this list as a basis for tracking down these students, verifying documentation of transfers, and communicating with the intended transfer district.

## Official vs. Unofficial Profiles

The High School Graduation Cohort Status Profile allows districts to view their submitted student data using either Official Snapshots (data they reported to the NJDOE) or Unofficial Data (Local Data Mart, which is for district use/view only).

In viewing a given Cohort over the course of a year, districts have three options for the Official Profile, which will display students' cohort statuses at the time of that snapshot: October 15<sup>th</sup>, June 30<sup>th</sup>, and August 31<sup>st</sup>. The profile will display information submitted during SID Management as well as State Submission, as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Official Snapshots

|                       | October 15th | June 30th | August 31st Official Graduation Snapshot |
|-----------------------|--------------|-----------|--|
| SID Snapshot Date     | 10/15        | 6/30      | 8/31                                     |
| State Submission Date | 10/15        | 6/30      | 8/31                                     |

Graduation rates will be calculated using the August 31<sup>st</sup> Official High School Graduation SID Management Snapshot, which will be matched with End-Of-Year State Submission data. August 31<sup>st</sup> marks the NJDOE's official end to a given school year for graduation rate calculation purposes. This end-of-summer deadline allows for the inclusion of summer graduates. The August 31<sup>st</sup> SID Snapshot is unique to the Graduation Profile and is displayed only in graduation-related district profiles. It captures student movement in and out of districts during the summer months. This snapshot is used to calculate high school graduation rates for the State, and is, therefore, only applicable to viewing graduating cohorts. For example, the August 31, 2020 snapshot will be available solely for viewing Cohort 2020 and 2019 students.

Official snapshot profiles reflect student data at a specific point in time. This data is reported to the NJDOE. In addition to snapshot profiles, districts have the option of running Local Data Mart (LDM) profiles that allow them to review and analyze current data in the portal. This data is for district's individual use only and is not reported to the state. The LDM is intended to be a tool that allows districts real-time access to critical data and analysis tools. Districts that regularly use LDM functionality typically perform better in managing year-end submissions and find greater benefits from the NJ SMART system.

Viewing the Cohort Status Profile with LDM data is particularly useful to districts in examining their graduating cohort's status in summer months between June 30<sup>th</sup> Snapshot and the official August 31<sup>st</sup> Snapshot. In order to run this LDM profile, districts must have uploaded SID Management and State Submission files.

# High School Graduation Guidance

## Official State Snapshot Reports

- Periods of time when all LEAS must submit official student data for state and federal reporting purposes.
- Official snapshots include: October 15<sup>th</sup>, June 30<sup>th</sup>, and August 31<sup>st</sup>
- Snapshots included the most recent official SID Management and State Submission data.
- To view official state data from these periods in District Reports, choose “Official State Snapshot Report”.

## Local Data Mart Reports

- Periods of time between official snapshots when LEAs can update student records and run district reports with refreshed data.
- LDM data is pulled from real-time SID Management and refreshed State Submission.
- To view LDM data, upload files to SID Management and State Submission, click the Refresh button on the Refresh/ Release page in the State Submission, and choose “Local Data Mart Report” in District Reports.

## High School Graduation Profile

After appeals have been applied, NJ SMART will submit high school graduation rates at the school, district, and state levels to the NJDOE. The High School Graduation Profile, which will be submitted to the US DOE and used in national comparisons of high school graduation rates, will include the following information:

1. **August 31st Snapshot**, amended by any district appeal decisions made by the NJDOE
2. **Accountable Perspective**, showing graduation rates for schools/districts of the students that they are *accountable* for, which may not always correspond to the students *attending* their schools, per outlined regulations
3. **Entering Values for Key Subgroup Elements**: Gender, Race/Ethnicity, Lunch Status, Special Education Status, Limited English Proficient, Migrant Status, and Homeless Status. (Other variables appear in the Cohort Status Profile, like Time in District and Attendance, but these breakdowns by Cohort Status are not submitted to the NJDOE.)

At the time of this August 31<sup>st</sup> Snapshot, students with any cohort status besides ‘Graduated’ or ‘Excluded from Cohort’ will count as non-graduates in the rate calculation.

$$\frac{\text{Graduated}}{\text{Adjusted Cohort Count}} = \frac{\text{Graduated}}{\text{Graduated} + \text{Transfer Out-Unverified} + \text{On-Track}^* + \text{Off-Track} + \text{Status Unknown}}$$

\*Note: Districts may see On-Track Continuing students in their August 31<sup>st</sup> Snapshot, since the previous State Submission (which updates Grade Level for active students) occurred at the end of the 2019-2020 school year. This would represent students who were in twelfth grade in 2019-2020 but had not graduated by August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020.

# High School Graduation Guidance

## Entering Values for Subgroup Data

In most NJ SMART District Reports, districts view their most recent data for students – either reported (Snapshots) or recently refreshed (LDM). The High School Graduation Cohort Status Profile is unique in that it will display “Entering Values” for some subgroup variables, instead of most recent. Entering Values refer to the subgroup values that districts assigned to students when they entered their 4-year graduation cohort. For example, for most Cohort 2020 students, subgroup data will reflect the 2016-2017 values that districts assigned to these students in relevant NJ SMART submissions.

Entering Values will be displayed and reported to the NJDOE for the following subgroup data in graduation profiles: Gender, Race / Ethnicity, ELL Status, Special Education Classification, Migrant Status, Homeless Status, and Free and Reduced Lunch. The values assigned for these variables will be unaffected by later submissions once this initial (or, entering) value has been assigned.

The August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011 High School Graduation Snapshot marked the first appearance of these Entering Values in the Cohort Status Profile.

Table 2: Entering Values for Subgroup Data in Graduation Profiles

| Subgroup Variable              | Submission for Updates       | Source   |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| Gender                         | SID Management               | Derived from the snapshot when the Cohort Year was first assigned.                   |
| Race/Ethnicity                 | SID Management               | Derived from the snapshot when the 4-Year Graduation Cohort Year was first assigned. |
| Lunch Status                   | SID Management               | Derived from the snapshot when the 4-Year Graduation Cohort Year was first assigned. |
| Special Education <sup>1</sup> | Special Education Submission | Derived from the snapshot when the 4-Year Graduation Cohort Year was first assigned. |
| ELL Status                     | SID Management               | Derived from the snapshot when the 4-Year Graduation Cohort Year was first assigned. |
| Migrant Status                 | State Submission             | Derived from the snapshot when the 4-Year Graduation Cohort Year was first assigned. |
| Homeless <sup>2</sup>          | State Submission             | Derived from the snapshot when the 4-Year Graduation Cohort Year was first assigned. |

<sup>1</sup>As Special Education Classification was not collected until 2008, the Entering Value will be derived from the October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008 Submission for all students assigned a cohort year prior to that school year.

<sup>2</sup>As Homeless was not collected until 2011, the Entering Value will be derived from the June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011 Submission for all students assigned a cohort year prior to that school year.

# High School Graduation Guidance

## 5-Year Graduation Rate Profile

Since 2012, the NJ SMART High School Graduation Cohort Status Profile has been displaying 5-year graduation rates for graduation cohorts, in addition to 4-year rates. Students will remain in their same 4-year adjusted cohorts, and the profile will show cohort status after five years from the cohort entry point. For example, most Cohort 2020 students entered their cohort in September of 2016 when they were in ninth grade. Their 4-year graduation rate will be calculated through the August 31, 2020 Official Snapshot. Districts will later be able to view that cohort’s 5-year graduation rate using the August 31, 2021 Official Snapshot, in order to see all of their Cohort 2020 students that graduated in 4 years plus students that graduated (or changed cohort status) in their fifth year.

Chart 3: Illustration of 5-Year Graduation Rates



## Graduation Appeals Process

LEAs can appeal specific graduation data in the NJ SMART High School Graduation Status Profile through requests made during NJ SMART’s Graduation Appeals Process. The NJDOE considers each request and makes all rulings on appeals.

An example of a potential appeals scenario would be if District A exited a student from NJ SMART as a transfer, knowing that they would be transferring and enrolled in District B, but District B did not upload the student to NJ SMART in a timely fashion. In all appeals scenarios related to conflicts with other districts, LEAs must first make a reasonable attempt to resolve the situation through inter-district communication. Districts must document these outreach attempts. If communication fails, then District A can appeal that student’s status as a “non-graduate” in their district through the NJ SMART Appeals Process.

In order to submit an appeal request, LEAs must submit all relevant information through an online Appeals Form, available in the Reporting tab of the NJ SMART portal. After the DOE has evaluated the appeal request, the district will be notified of the decision. Communication attempts in regards to transfer conflicts should be documented in the appeal request in order for the request to be considered. Please refer to the [High School Graduation Appeals User Guide](#) for further details.

# High School Graduation Guidance

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## Training & Resources

NJ SMART hosts a series of web-based trainings throughout the summer and fall to instruct school district personnel on the new graduation rate and on how to utilize the High School Graduation Cohort Status Profile. It is highly recommended that superintendents, business administrators, and other relevant district personnel begin to familiarize themselves with the adjusted cohort formula and this NJ SMART reporting tool. Scheduled live training and on demand eLearning videos are posted on the eLearning Videos & Webinars section of the [NJ SMART Resources & Trainings](#). In addition, numerous resources are available in the Documents for Downloads section, including the training PowerPoint presentation, FAQs, [User Guide to the High School Graduation Cohort Status Profile](#), and [High School Graduation Appeals User Guide](#) that describes the components found in the profile and how to drill-down to student-level data.

The NJDOE's website has additional information regarding the development of the new high school graduation rate, a comprehensive list of frequently asked questions for school districts, and a link to the [Federal Guidelines](#). In addition, please visit the [National Governors Association \(NGA\)](#) website for more information on the development of the adjusted cohort formula and the motivation behind moving towards a common calculation.

Finally, for further information on NJ SMART and available resources, please visit [NJ SMART Resources & Trainings](#). Questions regarding NJ SMART functions and data submissions should be directed to the NJ SMART Help Desk by calling (800) 254-0295 or [njsmart@pcgus.com](mailto:njsmart@pcgus.com).