

# High School Graduation FAQs

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This document answers frequently asked questions related to the NJ SMART High School Graduation Cohort Status Profile and Graduation Appeals process.

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## Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates

### 1. Question: When did the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) begin using the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) methodology?

Answer: The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) began using the adjusted cohort graduation rate methodology, which all states are required to use for reporting per [federal requirements](#), in 2011.

### 2. Question: What is a graduation cohort?

Answer: A graduation cohort is a group of students who entered 9<sup>th</sup> grade during the same school year. In New Jersey, all first-time 9th graders are assigned to a cohort. During high school, the cohort is adjusted each year to add verified transfers in and subtract verified transfers out.

The adjusted cohort is the group of students who remain in the cohort after these adjustments are made. Any students who drop out during high school and any students who are still enrolled remain in the adjusted cohort for graduation rate calculations.



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Students with disabilities who do not meet all the graduation requirements for their graduation year because of modifications or exemptions in their IEPs will not be included in the graduates count (the numerator) when calculating the federal version of the adjusted cohort graduation rate, but they will still be included in the adjusted cohort (the denominator) for the calculation.

See the [New Jersey Graduation Assessment Requirements page](#) for details about the graduation assessment requirements by graduating class.

## **State Version:**

The cohort status of “Graduated” will be assigned to any student with a School Exit Withdrawal Code of “L.”

The numerator includes students with a cohort status of “Graduated.”

The denominator includes all students in the adjusted cohort at the time of the calculation. This includes students with following cohort statuses:

- Graduated
- On-Track Continuing
- Off-Track Continuing
- Dropout
- Active Student: Status Unknown
- Transfer Out – Unverified

## **Federal Version:**

The cohort status of “Graduated (Federal)” will be assigned to any students who have a School Exit Withdrawal Code of “L” and:

- IEP Graduation Course Requirement is not equal to 1;
- IEP Graduation Attendance is not equal to 1;
- ELA Graduation Pathway Indicator is not equal to M; and
- Math Graduation Pathway Indicator is not equal to M.

If a student has a value of 1 for either the IEP Graduation Course Requirement or IEP Graduation Attendance fields or a value of M for either the ELA or Math Graduation Pathway Indicator, this indicates that the student did not meet all of the graduation requirements. As a result, the student will be assigned a cohort status of Graduated (State, Not Federal).

As a note, the ELA and Math Graduation pathway requirements do not apply to students who graduated with the class of 2021 (between September 1, 2020 and August 31, 2021) or the class of 2023 (between September 1, 2022 and August 31, 2023) because students were not required to meet graduation assessment requirements if graduating in those years.

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The numerator for the federal graduation rate includes students with a cohort status of “Graduated (Federal).” It will not include students with a cohort status of “Graduated (State, Not Federal).”

The denominator includes all students in the adjusted cohort at the time of the calculation. This includes students with the following cohort statuses:

- Graduated (Federal)
- Graduated (State, Not Federal)
- On-Track Continuing
- Off-Track Continuing
- Dropout
- Active Student: Status Unknown
- Transfer Out – Unverified

#### **4. Question: Does the change to graduation rate calculations require districts to report graduates differently in NJ SMART?**

Answer: No, districts should continue to report any students who earn a state-endorsed diploma with a School Exit Withdrawal Code of “L” (“Graduation”).

Additionally, it is important to note that this is only a change to how graduation rates are calculated for federal reporting; it does not affect requirements to earn a diploma or the type of diploma that the State awards to students with disabilities.

#### **5. Question: How can I view and compare the “state version” and the “federal version” of the adjusted cohort graduation rate?**

Answer: When you run the NJ SMART High School Graduation Cohort Status Profile Report, both the “State Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate” and the “Federal Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate” will be displayed side by side.

#### **6. Question: Which version of the adjusted cohort graduation rate will be reported?**

Answer: The NJDOE reports both versions of the adjusted cohort graduation rate. The “federal version” is used for all federal reporting and for ESSA school accountability. The “state version” is also included, along with the “federal version,” in the School Performance Reports. The “state version” is used for the New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJQSAC).

#### **7. Question: Why was the calculation of the federal adjusted cohort graduation rate changed?**

Answer: USED conducted a Performance Review of the NJDOE’s compliance with federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requirements in October 2019. The final performance report from USED determined that the NJDOE needed to make changes to the methodology used to calculate the adjusted cohort graduation rate beginning with the 2020-2021 school year.

Additional changes have been made yearly to align with changes to the state graduation assessment requirements since students graduating with the class of 2021 and the class of 2023 were not required to meet the graduation assessment requirements.

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## 8. Question: How are student groups defined for reporting adjusted cohort graduation rates?

Answer: The NJDOE reports adjusted cohort groups for the following student groups:

- Gender
- Race/Ethnicity
- Economically Disadvantaged Students
- Students with Disabilities
- Multilingual Learners
- Homeless Students
- Migrant Students
- Students in Foster Care
- Military-Connected Students

Prior to 2020-2021, all student groups were based on a student's status when they entered the cohort, typically in grade nine. As of 2020-2021, all student groups, except for Gender and Race/Ethnicity, are based on a student's overall status since entering the cohort. This means that if a student was reported in that student group at any time in high school, the student will be considered as part of that student group for reporting purposes. This change was made based on updated guidance from USED.

Gender and Race/Ethnicity are currently determined based on entering status, however the NJDOE is considering changing this to be based on most recent status. More information will be provided if this change is made.

### Cohort Assignment

## 9. Question: How are students assigned to a cohort in NJ SMART?

Answer: Students are assigned to a graduation cohort in NJ SMART the first time they are uploaded into the NJ SMART system in a high school grade level (grades 9 through 12) and captured on an Official SID Management Snapshot. Districts can see all students assigned to each cohort in the NJ SMART High School Graduation Cohort Status Profile Report.

## 10. Question: How are cohorts assigned to students who transfer into a New Jersey public school after ninth grade?

Answer: Students will be assigned to whichever cohort they would have joined in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. For example, if a student entered the NJ SMART system as a 10<sup>th</sup> grader in October of 2022, that student would have been assigned to the 2025 cohort.

## 11. Question: Will a student's cohort change if they are retained and repeat the same grade, skip a grade, or graduate early?

Answer: No, once a student is assigned to a cohort, they will remain in that cohort.

If a student is retained and repeats a grade, the cohort status will become "Off-Track Continuing." If a student graduates early, their cohort remains the same. For example, if a student in Cohort 2025

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graduated in June 2024, that student would remain in Cohort 2025 and would be included in the four-year graduation rate for 2025 cohort. That student will not be included in the graduation rate for the 2024 cohort.

## 12. Question: Can I change a student's cohort year?

Answer: The student's cohort year can only be changed if the student was incorrectly assigned to the wrong cohort year. The SID Management system would need to reflect that the student belonged in a different cohort year. For example, the student's assessment record should clearly show that the student completed grade-level assessments that align to a different cohort year.

A student's cohort year can only be changed through a graduation appeal after the NJDOE has confirmed that the student was incorrectly assigned. More information about the fall 2025 graduation appeals process will be provided in the coming months.

## Cohort Status

### 13. Question: Which students should be marked as graduates?

Answer: Only students who earn a state-endorsed diploma by August 29<sup>th</sup> should be marked as a graduate (School Exit Withdrawal Code of "L"). A state-endorsed diploma is awarded to students who meet state course requirements, state attendance requirements, and state [graduation assessment requirements](#). This includes students with disabilities who have not met all the requirements because of a modification or exemption in their IEP.

Students with disabilities who earn a state-endorsed diploma but did not meet the state course requirements, state attendance requirements, and/or state assessment requirements because of a modification or exemption in their IEP should continue to be marked as graduates in NJ SMART. Changes to federal graduation calculations do not impact how districts should report these students.

### 14. Question: My district inactivated a student as a dropout but then the student was activated in another district. Will this student still count as a "Dropout" for my district in graduation rate calculations?

Answer: No, NJ SMART will recognize the student as active in a new district, and they will no longer be considered a dropout in graduation calculations.

### 15. Question: Are students who become "Off-Track Continuing" in another district and then transfer into our district included in our graduation rate even though they were not in our district when they were retained?

Answer: Yes, they will count as off-track in your district. Graduation cohort statuses are based on a four-year expected timeline of graduation for each student and are updated based on student progress through grade levels. "On-Track / Off-Track Continuing" statuses are not affected by transferring to a new school.

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**16. Question: Are students who transfer out-of-state considered “Transfer Out – Unverified” since those students will not be reactivated on another district’s register in NJ SMART?**

Answer: A verified transfer to an out-of-state school will count as “Excluded from Cohort” and the student will be subtracted from your school’s cohort count (i.e., your district is no longer responsible for the student with respect to this calculation). Districts should make sure to use a School Exit Withdrawal Code of “T8” (“Transfer out of the state or country”) for students who transfer outside of New Jersey. Written documentation is required to verify that a student has transferred to an out-of-state school.

**17. Question: How are students who graduate early (e.g. in three years) accounted for in graduation rate calculations?**

Answer: As long as students are exited with a School Exit Withdrawal Code of “L”, they will be counted as graduates for their cohort (i.e., the cohort they were assigned in 9<sup>th</sup> grade) in the four-year, five-year, and six-year graduation rate.

**18. Question: Is a “Status Unknown” student included in graduation rate calculations?**

Answer: Yes, if you have active students with “Cohort Status Unknown” statuses at the time that the graduation rate is calculated, they will be included in your adjusted cohort count (i.e., in the denominator of the graduation rate calculation).

**19. Question: How do we report students who are staying for post-graduate work and how are they included in graduation rate calculations?**

Answer: Students who meet graduation requirements and receive a state-endorsed diploma should be exited as graduates (“L”) in the year in which they have met the requirements, and the diploma is issued.

If a student is participating in an approved Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) program and will continue in the program to earn an associate degree after a high school diploma is earned, the student should be exited as a graduate (“L”) when they meet the high school graduation requirements and the School Exit Date should be based on when the diploma was issued. Similar to other graduates, P-TECH students who have received their high school diploma but are still enrolled as they work towards their associate degree should be reported as inactive through the Fall Snapshot after they graduate high school. After the Fall Snapshot, the student’s inactive record can be removed, and the student should no longer be reported in NJ SMART. Participating districts will receive additional guidance on how to share information with NJDOE about students continuing in the program and completing associate degrees.

The graduation cohort status for students in P-TECH programs will be calculated using the same methodology as used for all students in the cohort, and the graduation cohort will not be changed for students participating in a P-TECH program. Students in these programs will remain as graduated in the adjusted cohort calculation once they are captured as graduated on an official snapshot. If a student in a P-TECH program does not complete the graduation requirements and earn a diploma in



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## Special Education Students

**23. Question: Will students who are eligible to receive special education services and programs until the age of 21 remain in my graduation cohort? Can I change their cohort year?**

Answer: Students who are eligible to receive special education services and programs until the age of 21 are assigned to a graduation cohort using the same methodology used for all students. These students cannot be excluded from your cohort or assigned to a different cohort, per federal policy and guidance: [High School Graduation Rate Non-Regulatory Guidance](#).

Students eligible to receive special education services and programs beyond the fourth year of high school can participate in commencement ceremonies with their graduation class and receive a certificate of attendance (*N.J.S.A. 18A:7C-5.2*). However, these students should not be marked as graduates until they receive a state-endorsed diploma by satisfactorily completing their IEP and meeting appropriate graduation requirements.

**24. Question: How are students who are parentally placed in non-public schools (in order to receive special education services) included in the graduation rate calculation?**

Answer: If the student was submitted to the most recent SID Management Snapshot with a Non-Public value of “REC” or “NREC,” they will be categorized as “Excluded from Cohort.” Please use the School Exit Withdrawal Code of “PPE” to inactivate all non-public students so that their cohort statuses will display as “Excluded from Cohort.” Parentally placed non-public students should not be reported with an exit code of “L” (Graduated).

**25. Question: What are the requirements to use code “M” (Alternate Requirements in the IEP) for the ELA and Math Graduation Pathway indicators?**

Answer: This code can only be used for students who are currently determined eligible for special education and related services and have an IEP. It should only be used for students who did not meet the graduation assessment requirements by passing the statewide assessment or a substitute competency test or through the portfolio appeals process, but instead met alternate requirements specified in their IEPs.

## Accountable High Schools

**26. Question: How is a student’s accountable school or district determined when calculating graduation rates?**

Answer: The assignment of a student’s accountable school and district is based on the [Graduation Accountable Rules User Guide](#) on the [NJ SMART Resources & Trainings](#) page. The Accountable CDS Perspective is derived based on students’ CDS Codes as submitted by districts; please refer to [NJ SMART’s Reporting Responsibilities](#) document to ensure that all students’ Attending, Receiving, and Resident CDS Codes are being reported correctly. A student’s In-District Placement field, located in SID Management, is also used to determine their accountable school.

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A school's Federal School Type, State School Type, Operational Status, and school grades from the [CDS System](#) also impact accountability designations. Districts should ensure that the information in CDS is up to date.

**27. Question: The NJ SMART High School Graduation Cohort Status Profile has options to view graduation data from both the attending and accountable perspective. Which version will be used for public reporting of graduation rates?**

Answer: All public reporting of graduation rates reflects the accountable perspective.

## Graduation Appeal Requests

**28. Question: Where do I go to appeal graduation data?**

Answer: Graduation appeals for 2025 will be handled in the New Jersey Statewide Longitudinal Education Data System (NJSLEDS) in fall 2025. LEAs will still be able to submit the same types of appeals that they could submit in NJ SMART, although the process may be slightly different. More information and details about the 2025 graduation appeals process will be provided in the coming months.

**29. Question: What types of information can be changed through graduation appeals?**

Answer: LEAs will have the opportunity to appeal any data that was submitted in error in the August 29th snapshot that impacts the calculation of graduation rates. This includes:

- School Exit Withdrawal Codes and School Exit Dates
- CDS Codes (Resident, Receiving, and/or Attending)
- ELA and Math Graduation Pathway Indicators
- In-District Placement
- IEP Graduation Course Requirement and IEP Graduation Attendance
- Student Group Status (Gender, Race/Ethnicity, Economically Disadvantaged, etc.)

LEAs will also be able to request SID merges or submit appeals to correct a student's assigned cohort if a student was incorrectly assigned to a cohort.

Certain types of appeals require documentation. Documentation requirements for the 2025 appeals process will be provided in the coming months.

**30. Question: Will I be able to submit an appeal to remove a student from my cohort who transferred out of my district after the end of the 2024-2025 school year?**

Answer: No, if the student transferred after the end of the 2024-2025 school year, then the student completed the 2024-2025 school year in your district and your district should remain accountable for that student in 2025 graduation rates. Appeal requests to remove students who transferred after the end of the 2024-2025 school year will not be approved. Students who transfer to another district after the close of the 2024-2025 school year should not be reflected in the new district's graduation rate until 2026 rates are calculated.

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**31. Question: Will I be able to appeal if I forgot to inactivate my 12th graders before the August 29<sup>th</sup> Snapshot?**

Answer: Yes. You will be able to submit an appeal in NJSLEDS in the fall to correct the errors.

**32. Question: Can I appeal to remove a student from my cohort who is showing as dropped out, but the student received a state-issued diploma by passing a high school equivalency test?**

Answer: No. For the purposes of calculating the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR), under 34 C.F.R. §200.19(b)(1)(iv), a “regular high school diploma” means the standard high school diploma awarded to students in a state that is fully aligned with the state’s academic content standards and does not include a GED credential, certificate of attendance, or any alternative award. Therefore, a student who leaves school to obtain a state-issued diploma based on passing a high school equivalency assessment (i.e. GED, HISET, TASC) is counted as a dropout in NJ SMART. Please note that this reflects the Federal policy: [High School Graduation Rate Non-Regulatory Guidance](#).

**33. Question: Do the graduation rates posted on the NJDOE website and in the New Jersey School Performance Reports reflect approved appeals?**

Answer: Yes, the final graduation rates that are reported in the School Performance Reports and used for both ESSA and NJQSAC reflect all approved appeals.

**34. Can I submit an appeal to correct a student’s accountable school?**

Answer: LEAs will not be able to submit appeals specifically to correct accountable school, but they will be able to appeal LEA-reported data that impacts the calculation of the accountable school, such as the resident, receiving, or attending CDS codes reported or the in-district placement field. The determination of accountable school is also based on information in the CDS system, such as State and Federal School Type, operational status, and grades offered. Refer to the [Graduation Accountable Rules User Guide](#) for information on how the accountable school is determined.

## Graduation Appeals: Student Transfer Questions

**35. Question: How are districts required to document transfers?**

Answer: When NJDOE transitioned to the adjusted cohort graduation rate methodology, a [memo](#) was shared with districts that explained the importance of documenting transfers. The memo included a link to a [form](#) to keep on file for the documentation of transfers. This documentation is subject to audit by NJDOE.

Students who transfer from one public school district to another must have documentation of a transfer once the student ID (SID Number) is accepted by the receiving district. Other types of transfers will require a parent/guardian’s signature and other specific documentation on file to verify

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the transfer, if applicable. Without the proper verification, the transfer must be classified as a dropout or a transfer out – unverified.

If districts request changes to a student's cohort status during the appeals period, districts may be required to provide documentation. **Documentation requirements for the 2025 graduation appeals process will be provided in the coming months.**

**36. Question: I have a transfer card verifying that a student transferred to another public-school district in New Jersey; however, the student is still included in my district's cohort. Can I appeal?**

Answer: Yes. You will need to contact the receiving district to determine if they uploaded the student. If this was not done, instruct them to upload the student immediately. It is also possible that the receiving district assigned the student a different state identification (SID) number. If so, you will need to acquire that SID number to submit an appeal so we can merge the two records.

However, if the student was never enrolled or attended the other public school district, appeals will not be approved based on a transfer card alone.

**37. Question: A student transferred out of my district to a school that is not an NJ SMART submitting district (e.g., a non-public school in New Jersey, a school outside the state or country, parental instruction, or a private facility). Will that student still be counted in my district's cohort? Can I appeal?**

Answer: Yes, a student who transferred to a non-public school, a school outside the state or country, to parental instruction, or a private facility will still appear in your cohort in NJ SMART. However, if the appropriate exit code of T3 (transfer to nonpublic school within NJ), T8 (transfer out of state or country), T9 (transfer to parental instruction), or TP (transfer to private facility) was used, the student will be included in the "Excluded from Cohort" status and the student will not be included in graduation rate calculations.

If the student transferred to one of these types of schools and the wrong transfer code was used, you will be able to appeal to correct the school exit withdrawal code through the graduation appeals process. You will be asked to provide documentation to verify the request. **Documentation requirements for the 2025 graduation appeals process will be provided in the coming months.**

**38. Question: What transfer code should be used for a student transferring to an adult education program to pursue a state-issued diploma by passing a high school equivalency assessment (e.g. GED, TASC, HISET)? Can I appeal to remove the student from my cohort?**

Answer: If a student leaves your district to attend an adult education program to pursue a state-issued diploma by passing a high school equivalency assessment (i.e. GED, HISET, TASC), a dropout code (D1-D8 or D11) should be used as the School Exit Withdrawal Code. These students will remain in your cohort and will be considered as dropout students. They cannot be appealed to be removed from your cohort.

If a student transfers to an adult high school program to pursue a locally issued, State-endorsed high school diploma, then the TA School Exit Withdrawal Code should be used. The resident district

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should be submitting these students in NJ SMART, and the students will remain in the resident high school's cohort.

**39. Question: Why am I receiving an error that the School Exit Date is after August 29th?**

Answer: A student's School Exit Date must be on or before August 29<sup>th</sup> to be considered a part of the August 29<sup>th</sup> Graduation Snapshot. Students who transferred or exited after August 29<sup>th</sup> are a part of the next school year and those changes do not impact the four-year graduation rate for the 2025 cohort, the five-year graduation rate for the 2024 cohort, and the six-year graduation rate for the 2023 cohort.

**40. Question: What transfer code should be used for a student transferring to an online high school program?**

Answer: If a student leaves your district to attend an online high school program, a transfer code of T9 (Transfer to parental instruction) should be used as the School Exit Withdrawal Code. These students will be excluded from your cohort for graduation rate calculations. Districts should maintain documentation that includes a signed letter from the parent/guardian indicating that the student will be provided with appropriate educational services.