



Email this article  
Print this article  
Most popular pages

[Click to send](#)  
[Click to print](#)  
[Today](#) | [This Week](#)

## Arizona dropout prevention programs are working

**Tom Horne**

Aug. 14, 2005 12:00 AM

You can tell a lot about the priorities of an officeholder by looking at choices made on the budget. When I took office in 2003, out of a strictly limited budget, I created a new position for full-time work on dropout prevention.

That person's job has been to study best practices in dropout prevention and convey that information to high schools throughout the state.

In comparing dropout rates, states have vastly inconsistent reporting methods. Experts agree that the graduation rate, which indicates the success of dropout prevention, is a more reliable measure because its methods of reporting graduation are more consistent.

Since I took office in 2003, our graduation rate has increased from 72.7 percent to 77 percent.

We have been able to locate three institutions that do national comparisons of graduation rates. Their most recent calculations are for 2002. The Manhattan Institute used a different method of calculating the graduation rate than Arizona does but came up with a similar number for 2002: 70 percent. The national average is 71 percent.

The 1 percentage point difference is statistically insignificant.

In 2002, then, Arizona was right at the national average, with a number of states significantly lower: New Mexico at 65 percent, New York at 64 percent, Florida at 59 percent and so on.

The other two institutions that do nationwide comparisons are the Urban Institute and United Health Foundation. They have slightly different numbers but still show Arizona within 1 percentage point of the national average in 2002.

Since 2002, Arizona has had a dramatic increase in its graduation rate. Unless the rest of the country has had an equally dramatic increase, Arizona is now above average in its graduation rate.

The *Kids Count Data Book* quoted in the newspapers about two weeks ago claiming Arizona has the worst dropout rate in the nation is flat wrong. Its method used census data to see how many people ages 16 to 19 told census reporters that they were in or out of school.

This would include, for example, a person who came from another country and never showed up at school. A person whom the schools have never seen, much less had an opportunity to teach, cannot properly be charged to them as a "dropout."

Our method is to divide the number of students who graduate by the number of students who entered in ninth grade as reported by the schools. This is the method approved recently by the National Governors Association.

We first started keeping statewide data in 2003, the year I took office. It will take four years before ninth-graders for whom we have statewide data become seniors, and

then we can calculate the graduation rate on that basis.

This coming year will be the first year that students must pass all three AIMS tests to graduate. This can cause a temporary reduction in the progress of our graduation rate. But assurance that graduates have demonstrated academic proficiency means that, as we resume increases in graduation rate, it will be of students who have mastered the skills needed to succeed in today's economy, not the result of social promotion.

This is an essential distinction. We must convince students of the importance of their acquiring the skills they will need to succeed in today's economy, but not artificially inflate the graduation rate by lowering standards. As mentioned, our method is to study best practices and convey that information to high schools throughout the state.

At a recent conference for schools, called Spotlight on Success, we honored three successful dropout prevention programs:

### **Jobs for Arizona's Graduates (JAG)**

The JAG teacher takes personal responsibility for, and is held accountable for, ensuring that program participants stay in school, graduate and have a career and post-secondary plan after graduation. Through student-led activities, young people develop their leadership and technical skills. Service learning and leadership projects are important components of the program. JAG students have logged over 19,000 hours in community service learning projects. In 2003, JAG averaged a 94 percent graduation rate. Student retention in 2004 was 99 percent.

### **NAU Gear Up**

"Gear Up" stands for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs. It is a dropout prevention and college-access program for economically disadvantaged students. It has significantly increased the number of low-income students staying in school. Each "class" is served beginning in seventh grade and is followed through high school graduation. Nearly 4,000 students are managed by coordinators at 11 sites across Arizona. Eighty-eight percent of Gear Up juniors are on track to graduate in 2006.

### **ACE+**

The Maricopa County Community College District's ACE+ program identifies those students with the largest risk factors: homelessness, economic hardship, those who come from single-parent homes, including those average students who have poor attendance records. It recruits students during their sophomore year; students begin taking college classes the following summer and attend college classes on Saturdays during the junior and senior years while in high school. ACE students can graduate with up to 24 transferable college credits, which equates to almost one full year of college credit. ACE also serves a diverse group of students, with 60 percent of them being Hispanic. ACE's graduation rate is 88 percent to 96 percent.

These are the proper ways to increase the graduation rate. We continue to promote programs like these at our upcoming high school renewal summits.

General categories include outside mentoring, peer counseling, flexible hours, and career and technical education.

By emphasizing the best practices to convince students that they need, not only to stay in school, but to do the work necessary to acquire academic proficiency, we will increase our graduation rate by the proper method: increasing the desire of students to learn.

**Tom Horne is the Arizona superintendent of public instruction.**