

Editorial - A more realistic dropout count

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The percentage of students who graduate from Colorado high schools each year is anywhere from 61 percent to 82 percent - depending on who's doing the figuring.

The vast discrepancy is one reason why lawmakers approved Senate Bill 91 last year. It was an attempt to create uniform rules for determining exactly how many of our young people graduate from high school and to better track those who slip through the cracks.

Yet a measure before the State Board of Education today falls short of the law's intent because it doesn't deal appropriately with transfer students.

If approved as currently written, it would effectively water down Colorado's graduation rates.

Under current rules, districts are allowed to use the state's formula differently, often masking their true performance. For example, a student who fails to show up at school could be marked as a transfer student, even though officials aren't really sure if he's moved to another school or is flipping burgers somewhere.

Some districts actively seek to find out what happened to transfers; others don't. State Board of Education member Jared Polis calls the transfer rule a "loophole so big you could drive a truck through it."

We support an amendment he'll offer today that would require districts to only mark students as transfers if another school calls and seeks that student's academic records.

Otherwise, school districts will continue to play games with the rules, and thus, school children.

"We hope to solve the mystery of disappearing students," Polis said.

The state board argued last spring to let it, not the legislature, write the rules implementing calculation of Colorado's graduation rates. If the board doesn't accept Polis' amendment, and approves the watered-down version that would allow students to be classified as transfers solely on the say-so of their parents, education advocates will seek another bill this session that requires lawmakers to write the tougher rules.

Polis' amendment would align Colorado's rules with those in 47 other states, and it will give educators a truer picture of what's happening in today's high schools.

It won't help Colorado's graduation rate, per se, but at least the numbers will be more realistic. Until the state gets serious about its dropout problem, would-be graduates will continue to fall between the cracks and simply disappear.

That's just unacceptable.

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