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HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES, WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM: 2007-08

Author: Glenda Haynie, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction has reported a four-year on-time cohort graduation rate for each high school and district for three years. This rate is based on the number of first-time 9th grade students who graduate four years later. The graduation rate for 2007-08 is based on incoming 9th grade students of 2004-05. While the overall 2007-08 WCPSS rate of 78.8% was relatively high compared to the state and other school districts, large discrepancies exist between student subgroups. Black/African American students, Hispanic/Latino students, and students from three identified academic risk groups (students with disabilities, students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and students with limited English proficiency) had graduation rates below that of other students.

BACKGROUND

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires schools that graduate 12th grade students to report a graduation rate as part of the measurement of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Until 2005-06, the available data systems across the state were not capable of producing a true “four-year” cohort graduation rate as intended by the legislation. Loosely defined, a four-year cohort graduation rate answers the question, “Of the 9th grade students who start school in a particular year, how many of them receive a high school diploma four years later”?

Although a seemingly simple question on the surface, the state’s data systems were unable to produce such a rate until 2005-06 due to the many complicated details behind capturing and reporting that type of information. Prior to 2005-06, the state had relied primarily on a less desirable method referred to as an “on-time” graduation rate for calculating and reporting graduation rates for AYP purposes. This measurement answered the alternative question, “Of the students who graduated in a particular year, how many of them did so in four years or less”? Rates in this report cannot be compared to rates prior to 2005-06.

DEFINITION OF THE GRADUATION RATE

The 2007-08 four-year cohort graduation rate is defined as follows: The percentage of students entering the 9th grade *for the first time* during the 2004-05 school year who earned a diploma by or

prior to the spring of 2008. There are a number of complex rules established by the state with respect to how and whether students are counted. Examples of those rules and exceptions include:

- Students who transfer into a school *after* 9th grade are included provided that they transfer in on grade level.
- Students who transfer from one NC public school to another are taken out of the sending school's calculations, and are added to the receiving school's calculations.
- Students who receive certificates of completion rather than an actual diploma (e.g., certain students with disabilities) are not counted as graduates.

Students are excluded from school calculations under the following conditions:

- Students who were repeating 9th grade in 2004-05 (i.e., were also 9th graders in 2003-04), or
- Students who left the school and their whereabouts cannot be tracked (e.g., students who move to another state or another country).

There are students in the district calculation that are not included in any school rate. These students are initially in a school cohort, but transfer off grade level from one WCPSS school to another WCPSS school. These students are removed from the sending school, and are not included in the receiving school cohort, but stay in the district cohort.

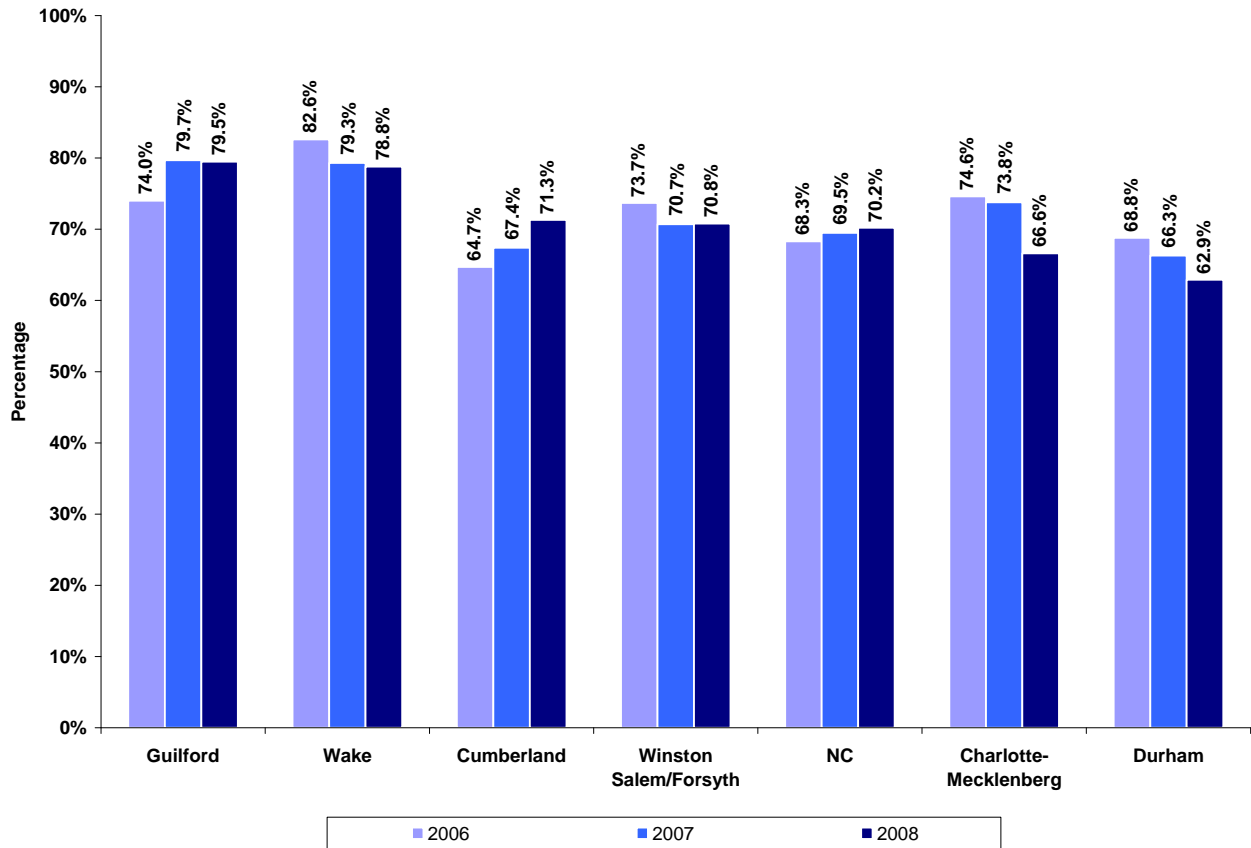
Trends in Graduation Rate Results

The overall graduation rate for WCPSS in 2007-08 was 78.8%, meaning that about four out of every five students who enrolled in 9th grade for the first time in the Fall of 2004 had graduated four years later.¹ This WCPSS rate was down slightly from 2006-07, when 79.3% of the cohort graduated. Comparisons reveal that WCPSS rates still compare favorably to other North Carolina school districts, the state, and the nation:

- As shown in Figure 1, WCPSS rates were as high or higher than most other large NC urban public school districts in 2007-08.
- WCPSS graduated students at a higher rate than the state (Figure 1).
- Education Week, which used a different method to estimate rates, reported WCPSS to be second highest in graduation rates among the 50 largest public school districts in 2005-06, 10th highest in 2006-07, and 6th highest in 2007-08.

¹Rates for individual WCPSS schools are listed in the Appendix.

Figure 1
Four-Year Graduation Rates for Selected Districts and NC,
2005-06 to 2007-08*



* Note that Guilford (2006) and North Carolina (2006 and 2007) percentages have changed from earlier reports.

WCPSS trends for 2007-08 by subgroup reveal several gaps:

- The four-year graduation rate varied considerably (from 52% to 92%) among ethnic subgroups, with White and Asian students showing the highest rates and American Indian and Hispanic/Latino students the lowest. Also, all ethnic groups are showing a decreasing three-year trend except Asian and Multiracial groups (Figure 2).
- Female students had a higher graduation rate than male students, by close to 9 percentage points overall (Figure 2). Within ethnic groups, male rates vary from 43% to 90%, and female rates vary from 58% to 94% (Figure 3).
- Students with disabilities (SWD), students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL), and students with limited English proficiency (LEP) also had graduation rates that were substantially below the system-wide average. All three of these graduation rates decreased compared to 2006-07 (Figure 2).

Figure 2
WCPSS Four-year Graduation Rates
Three-Year Trends by Subgroups

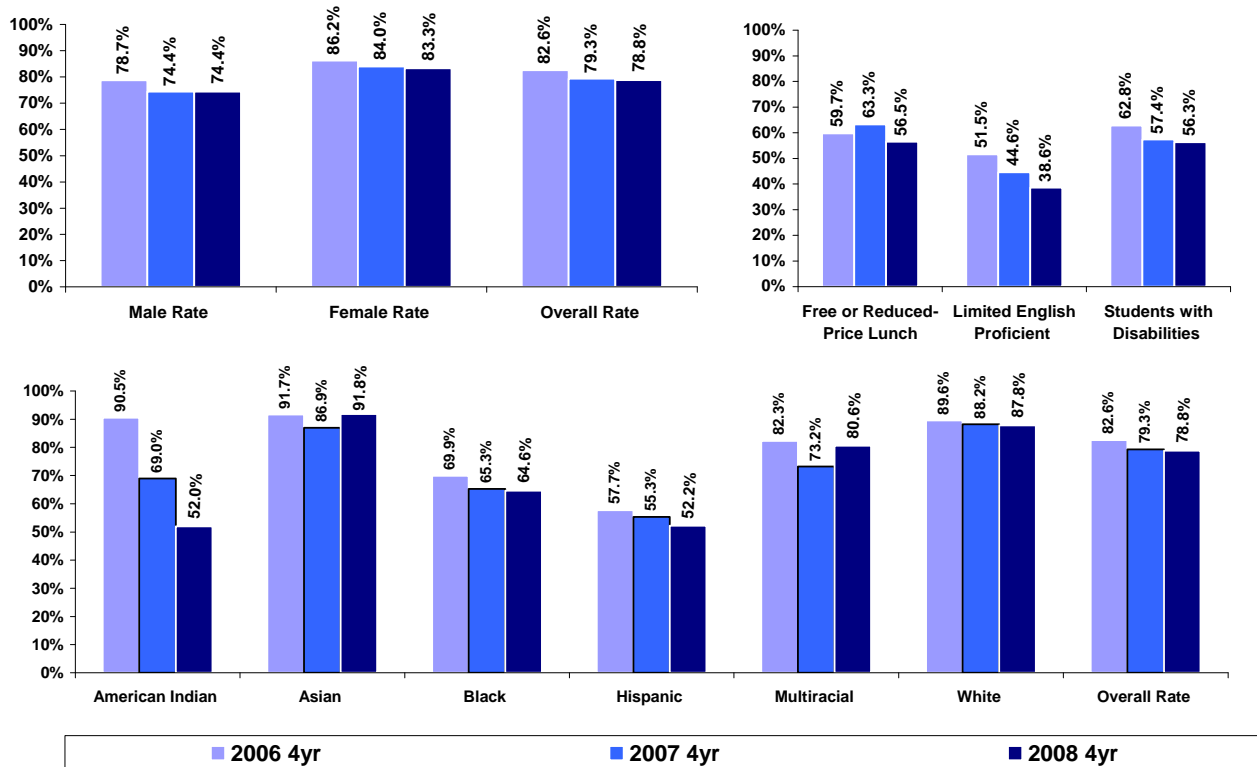
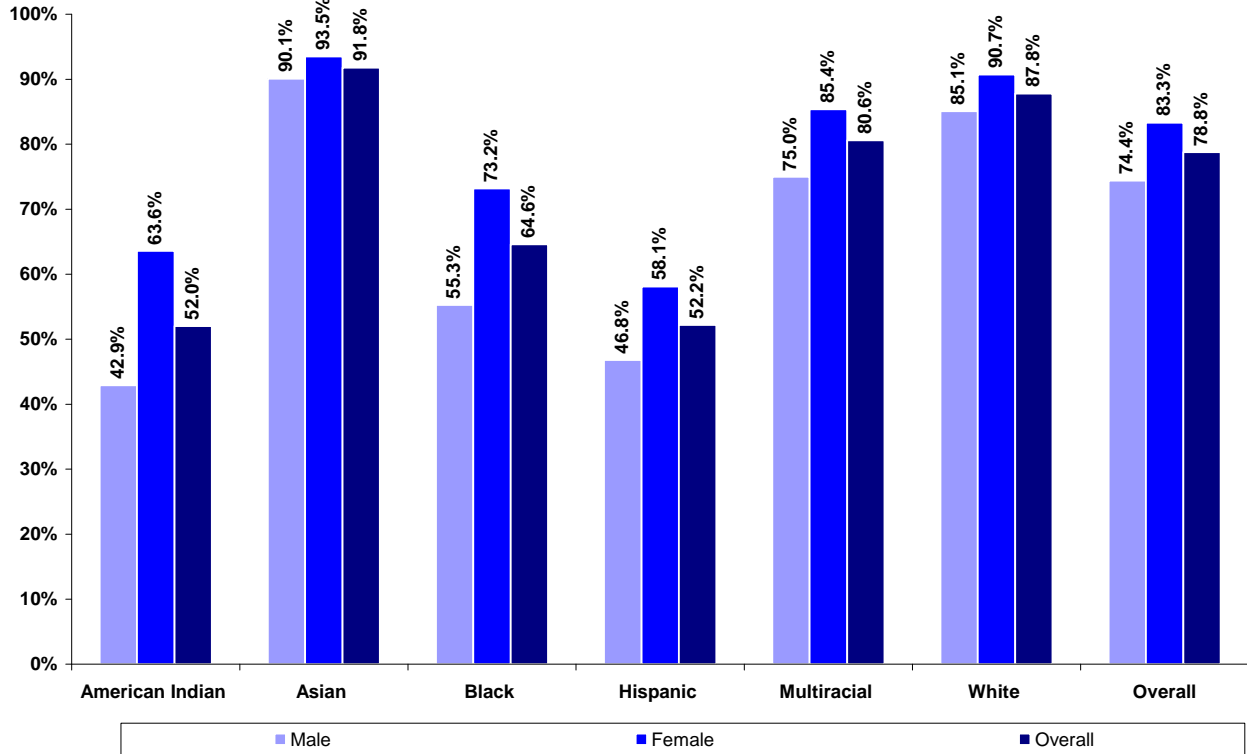


Figure 3
WCPSS Four-year Graduation Rates by Gender and Ethnicity, 2007-08



SUMMARY

The overall graduation rate of 78.8% for WCPSS in 2007-08 was relatively high compared to the state and other similar school districts. However, it was down slightly compared to the previous two cohorts, and large discrepancies still exist between various student subgroups. Black/African American students, Hispanic/Latino students, and students from the three identified academic risk groups (SWD, FRL, and LEP) had graduation rates that were substantially below those of other students.

Over time, changes in these cohort graduation rates will show whether more students are graduating from WCPSS on time prepared for the future. With the advent of new, more stringent statewide graduation requirements for students who entered high school in 2006 and beyond, the possible effect of that policy change on graduation rates can also be examined beginning with the graduating class of 2010.

Appendix

Four-year Graduation Rates by WCPSS High School, 2007-08

School/Unit	Rate
NC	70.2%
WCPSS	78.8%
Apex	90.1%
Athens Drive	79.0%
Broughton	77.7%
Cary	85.3%
East Wake Arts	85.7%
East Wake Engineering	89.6%
East Wake Health	96.3%
East Wake Tech	78.6%
Enloe	86.3%
Fuquay	76.1%
Garner	74.7%
Green Hope	92.6%
Knightdale	77.4%
Leesville	84.4%
Longview	22.2%
Middle Creek	84.8%
Millbrook	76.2%
Phillips	65.6%
Sanderson	77.5%
Southeast	85.9%
Wake Forest	83.8%
Wakefield	84.0%

Note: Rates are not calculated for high schools that did not have a graduating class in 2008.