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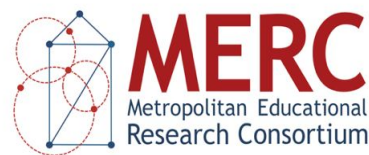
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Policy and Practice Brief 5: English Learners and High School Graduation: Beyond the Four Year Pathway

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School of Education

An ever-present concern among high schools is student graduation. The pressure is on to graduate students within the typical four-year time frame it takes to complete requirements, because “high school graduation rates have been used to evaluate school effectiveness and impose consequences on struggling schools under federal law for nearly two decades” (p. 1).¹ While most students graduate in four years, they are not required to do so.

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), each state must calculate and report its four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR), disaggregated by student subgroups.² The ACGR is based on students entering ninth grade the same year and completing the requirements for graduation within four years. ESSA also provides information for calculating and reporting extended year cohort reports, which include students who complete graduation requirements in one or more additional years beyond the original four years. However, states are not required to report an extended cohort’s graduation rate. Virginia elected to report four-year graduation rates and not to use the extended year rates as a federal accountability measure.³ This does not mean that students are not allowed to take more than four years to graduate, but rather that extended year graduation rates are not included as measures of accountability.

School divisions and administrators may feel the stress of on-time graduation as a result of the emphasis placed on ACGR under ESSA.⁴ The ACGR even holds significant weight in communities in terms of a high school’s accreditation. Research shows that policies intended to optimize this accountability measure can have consequences for ELs, such as forcing students to take multiple history, math, or science courses at one time, denying admission to specialty centers and advanced coursework, and even turning away newcomers and advising them to enroll in adult or alternative education programs. There is little data to indicate which ELs persist through graduation and which drop out, but research has identified reasons for dropping out including school environment factors, such as academic failure, behavioral issues, a lack of academic support, disliking school, and feeling unsafe, and external factors, such as needing to secure full-time employment.

In Virginia, the 2019-20 four-year graduation rate for all students was 92.3% and for English learners (ELs) was 73%.⁵ The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) does not publish

¹ <https://www.immigrationresearch.org/system/files/ELGradRates.pdf>

² <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED578682.pdf>

³ http://www.doe.virginia.gov/federal_programs/esea/virginia-essa-plan-amendment-3-redline.pdf

⁴ <https://www.immigrationresearch.org/system/files/ELGradRates.pdf>

⁵ http://www.doe.virginia.gov/statistics_reports/graduation_completion/cohort_reports/index.shtml

extended-year graduation rates in its publicly-available School Quality Profiles.⁶ Excluding the extended-year graduation rate reports is a concern because ELs are more likely to graduate in five or more years than students from any other subgroup.⁷ Only presenting four-year data may give a false perception of EL graduation rates and suggest that the five- and six-year graduates are not graduating. On the contrary, many of these students are using the extended time to acquire proficiency in English and simultaneously fulfill graduation requirements, such as passing state-mandated assessments for verified credits.

Every state has regulations concerning admission to schools. The Code of Virginia states that all children who are five years of age by or on September 30th of an academic year must be enrolled in school and remain in school until the age of 18.⁸ The maximum age to which free education must be offered is 20. However, Virginia law extends admission to schools for ELs by stating “School boards may accept and provide programs for students for whom English is a second language who entered school in Virginia for the first time after reaching their twelfth birthday, and who have not reached 22 years of age on or before August 1 of the school year. No tuition shall be charged to such students, if state funding is provided for such programs” (Code of Virginia § 22.1-5).

This means that ELs can stay enrolled in school until the age of 21 or 22 depending on their birthday. For ELs who are newcomers entering high school with low English proficiency skills, this extra time to graduate is particularly advantageous. Research shows that it takes multiple years to learn academic language, so allowing and encouraging students to remain in school to earn their high school diploma is an option for students who have the time and are willing to do so. Therefore, it is okay and it is within their legal rights for English learners to take more than four years to graduate from high school.

One way for high schools to support ELs is to get them more involved in the graduation process. Most students in Virginia earn either a Standard Diploma or an Advanced Studies Diploma. A Standard Diploma requires students to fulfill 22 standard credits and five verified credits, whereas an Advanced Studies Diploma requires the completion of 26 standard credits and five verified credits.⁹ Understanding the graduation requirements can help ELs decide for themselves if they would prefer to stay in school longer in order to earn their diploma, which degree is best for them, and get opportunities they would not otherwise have, such as attending specialty centers and taking advanced courses.

Often ELs do not even know what questions to ask or where to find information. More proactive high school guidance counselors are needed to educate ELs on their education options and the graduation process. This should include information about school policies, the credits students need to graduate, the differences between standard and advanced diplomas, the benefits to earning a high school diploma, programs to apply for at the high school level, and career counseling.

⁶ <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov>

⁷ <https://www.immigrationresearch.org/system/files/ELGradRates.pdf>

⁸ https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab5_1.asp

⁹ <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/graduation/index.shtml>