
U.S. Department of Education: Alabama's high school graduation rates inaccurate

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A new report by the U.S. Department of Education found that the Alabama State Department of Education did not accurately report its high school graduation rate for a period of 4 years.

The report comes from an audit the Federal department conducted looking at the 2013-2014 school year and covered the adjusted cohort graduation rate. This is the rate of people who graduate high school within a 4-year period.

The Department of Education uses this number to calculate the official graduation rate.

In their random sample of 67 students, the Department of Education found five students that had not met graduation requirements of the State.

The Alabama State Department of Education reported one dead student as a graduate for the 2013-2014 school year. The other four did not meet the academic standard for a high school diploma.

The graduation rate also included Alabama Occupational Degree holders. These are degrees that don't require the same curriculum as a high school diploma.

The report said this degree's curriculum "emphasizes life skills and development of appropriate work skills and habits, such as being punctual, dressing appropriately, personal hygiene, and following directions."

The Department of Education ruled in March 2012 that the Alabama State Department of Education could not include them in their graduation rate.

An email from the former State Superintendent Dr. Thomas Bice showed that he defied the U.S. Department of Education's ruling and said that he would count the Alabama Occupational Degree towards the graduation rate.

Bice sent the email to all local superintendents around Alabama in May 2012.

“As you are aware the USDOE [U.S. Department of Education] recently issued a ruling that those students who have obtained an Alabama Occupational Diploma cannot be included as a graduate in our calculation for 4-year cohort graduation rate. Without going through the many reasons why this is an unacceptable decision I will sum it up with it is just wrong. This morning I shared with the State Board [sic] that I had made the decision that we would be counting our AOD students in our calculations and that I would be meeting with Secretary Duncan later this month to explain my decision. I know you and your staff are in the middle of finalizing your data and wanted you to be aware of this decision. We have made the appropriate changes within our system here at the SDE [State Department of Education] to make sure those students are counted.”

The Alabama State Board of Education sent a letter to the Department of Education supporting Bice in his decision to count Alabama Occupational Degrees towards the graduation rate.

Bice never met with Obama-era Secretary of Education Arne Duncan according to the report.

The report said that even Alabama's standards for a high school graduate did not include these occupational degrees.

“However, the former State Superintendent's statements are contrary to ALSDE guidance, such as its May 2010 AOD Manual, which states students pursuing the AOD may not count credits earned in the AOD courses of study toward the regular diploma except as electives,” the report states.

The Education Department stood by their decision to not include AOD holders.

The report said that the newly-revised ALSDE workbook for the 2011-2012 school year removed AOD holders from the graduation rate.

The report states that the Education Department had no idea at the time that Alabama was still counting the occupational degrees towards their graduation rate for the 2011-2012 school year. Alabama continued to report these degree holders until 2014.

The study did not comment on whether data after 2014 is valid or not but said the Education Department cannot be assured that any data from ALSDE is “accurate and complete.”

The Alabama State Department of Education acknowledged their mistake in December 2016.

“The ALSDE has determined, after completing an initial audit, that the graduation rate was misstated to the people of Alabama – policymakers, educators, parents, students, all citizens – and to the USDE,” a press release said.

They also acknowledged that they did not monitor local school districts with “necessary scrutiny.” The ALSDE then promised to restructure their monitoring systems under new State Superintendent Michael Sentance.

The Department of Education recommended that Alabama removed AOD from its Adjusted Graduation Rate immediately until it can match standards set by the State.

They also called for the ALSDE to report the “data limitations” to the Department of Education.

The ALSDE responded by complying with all the recommendations. They also annotated their graduation data available online to include that it is unreliable data.