

County high school grad rate bests state averages

More than 8 in 10 county seniors got diploma in 2012

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WATSONVILLE — In Santa Cruz County, graduation rates are higher and dropout rates are lower than the statewide average.

Nearly eight in 10 California students who started high school in 2008 picked up a diploma with classmates in 2012, according to data released this week by the state Department of Education. Slightly more than 13 percent dropped out of school.

Statewide, the figures represent an improvement from years past, but the county performed slightly better, with the combined graduation average of traditional and alternative high schools 3 percent better than California as a whole and the dropout rate 2 percent lower.

Looking only at the county's seven large comprehensive high schools, the picture is even brighter, with all but Watsonville seeing more than 90 percent of last year's senior class making it to graduation, according to the state data.

With a graduation rate of more than 86 percent and dropout rate of 7.3 percent, Watsonville was ahead of the statewide averages as well.

San Lorenzo Valley High School continued a 3-year upward trend with more than 99 percent of its students graduating in 2012, the best showing of the seven.

"We are proud of the district's growth over time," said Superintendent Julie Haff. "There are many contributing factors, though I believe it is about engagement and support."

Haff said the school offers academic intervention classes during the regular school day, and has systems in place to catch students at risk of failing courses early and to give them a chance to turn around their performance.

Peer mentoring and conflict resolution programs and a variety of extracurricular activities also help keep students connected to school, she said.

In Santa Cruz, more than nine in 10 high school students graduated, and fewer than 4 percent left school early.

"We are pleased that our dropout rates are significantly lower, and our graduation rates significantly higher than both the county and state averages," said Gary Bloom, superintendent of Santa Cruz City Schools. "That being said, we continue to work hard to produce even better outcomes."

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AT A GLANCE

2012 GRADUATION/
DROPOUT RATES

| | Graduation | Dropout* |
|--------------------|------------|----------|
| Aptos | 97.2 | 0.7 |
| Harbor | 96.3 | 1.2 |
| Pajaro Valley | 91.4 | 5.1 |
| San Lorenzo Valley | 99.3 | - |
| Santa Cruz | 96.8 | 2.4 |
| Scotts Valley | 95 | 2.8 |
| Soquel | 91.6 | 2.0 |
| County | 81.4 | 11.4 |
| State | 78.5 | 13.2 |

* Figures don't add up to 100 because some special education students are enrolled in non-diploma programs, some students pass the General Education Development exam, or GED, and some remain in school.

SOURCE: California Department of Education

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In the Pajaro Valley, Assistant Superintendent Murry Schekman said the district is making progress by more effectively using resources such as Watsonville/Aptos Adult Education and Renaissance High School, a small continuation school where students who have fallen behind on credits can catch up.

Schekman also said while the data has improved, inaccuracies continue to creep in. He said when schools received the numbers earlier this year, officials tried to track down missing students. In one case, a Pajaro Valley student who had

transferred to school in Modesto was labeled as a dropout, probably due to a data entry error, he said.

Aptos High School Principal Casey O'Brien believes the state's data is "suspect." Last year, the state reported a graduation rate of 89 percent, while his figures showed 97 percent of seniors finished high school.

In 2012, Aptos graduated percent 97 of its students, and saw less than 1 percent drop out, according to the state numbers. That's closer to reality, said O'Brien, who gives the rate as 98 percent.

"At Aptos High, we don't lose kids," he said.

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