

Low graduation rates are everyone's problem

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Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne recently acknowledged that revised graduation statistics indicate the number of students graduating from high school in four years slipped to 70 percent in 2006 from 77 percent in 2004. He attributes the change to better record keeping.

It is certainly good news that the Arizona Department of Education has more accurate graduation-rate data. But more accurate data could equally well have led to an increase in graduation rates as to a drop. So let's not be too quick to celebrate.

If we haven't really experienced a drop — but a data correction — this means that previous years' data were inflated. In fact, it means that approximately 4,000 to 5,000 fewer students graduated per year than we thought.

In 2005, under the leadership of the Center for the Future of Arizona, a statewide consensus was reached on an "ambitious but achievable" high school graduation goal for 2012 endorsed by education, business and community leaders, including the Arizona Department of Education and the Governor's P-20 Council, a group charged with improving and aligning our states' education systems from early childhood through postsecondary.

Until the new figures were released, Arizona was on track to achieve its 2012 statewide graduation goal of 86 percent. Until we have a thorough understanding of what is really going on with our high school graduation-rate statistics, we should remain committed to this goal.

Horne's comment that Arizona's 70 percent high school graduation rate is the national average is no cause for comfort and is hard to verify. States vary in how they calculate high school graduation rates, which is why U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings recently proposed that all states be required to use the same method for calculating graduation rates by 2012.

Low graduation rates affect all ethnic and socioeconomic populations. This is evident in the revised Arizona Department of Education data, as well as in the March 2007 Center for the Future of Arizona research study "Everybody's Problem: A Closer Look at Arizona's High School Graduation Rate." It compared Arizona with several states that share Arizona's method of calculating high school graduation rates.

The research found that graduation rates for all of Arizona's ethnic groups, including the majority white population, trail those of comparison states. This includes Texas, which shares similar demographics with Arizona and many of the same challenges.

Low graduation rates are not somebody else's problem but our collective challenge. From new families getting established to retirees whose children graduated long ago, our state's economic competitiveness relies on a well-educated work force. Everyone should care about high school graduation rates.

Beyond that, we need more students going to college, a proven way to improve individual and collective economic well-being. Without an educated work force, we will find ourselves with far too many citizens without jobs that pay a livable wage and who are not contributing to a vital economy.

We need to get Arizona's graduation rate back on track. Too much is at stake to do otherwise.