

Central San Joaquin Valley, California graduation rates rise in 2013

By Hannah Furfaro

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2013 graduates of Hanford High stand for the national anthem during graduation commencements at the Jacob L. Neighbor Field Thursday, June 6, 2013 in Hanford, Calif.

GARY KAZANJIAN

More central San Joaquin Valley students are getting their high school diplomas while the number of youngsters who drop out each year is slowly declining, according to a state report unveiled Monday that shows California's overall graduation rates are also inching upward.

The annual report indicates students at many of the Central Valley's largest school districts -- including Central, Clovis, Fresno and Sanger -- are graduating at higher rates than three years ago.

About 76% of Fresno Unified seniors graduated from high school in 2013, up from 69% in 2010. Numbers rocketed upward at Hanford Joint Union High School District, which went from 75% in 2010 to 88% last school year. Numbers ticked up slightly at both Clovis and Sanger unified districts, which both graduate more than 90% of seniors each year.

"We feel like we're trending in the right direction for the most part, although we're never going to be satisfied until we're 100%," said Clovis Associate Superintendent Carlo Prandini.

Statewide, the graduation rate also jumped a few points, from about 75% in 2010 to just over 80% in 2013.

State Superintendent Tom Torlakson points to more after-school offerings, smaller class sizes, and more programs for low-income students to explain the slight increases.

Dropout rates are also continuing to fall, he said. That number went from almost 17% in 2010 to 11.6% last school year. That includes slight decreases among both Latino and black students, which went from over 20% dropout rates in 2010 to between 14% to 20% last school year.

"That number of course is very troubling," Torlakson said of the state dropout rate during a telephone news conference Monday. "But we're pleased nonetheless to see some incremental progress this year."

In the central San Joaquin Valley, dropout rates dipped from double-digits to below 10% in many places, including Visalia Unified, which went from 14% to 8% in three years. Hanford went from 18% to 8% during the same time period.

Bobby Peters, Hanford's coordinator of curriculum, instruction and assessment, said better tracking methods have helped bring that rate down.

In recent years, district registrars began going through their enrollment lists monthly, he said, to call parents of students who are no longer attending Hanford schools. Tracking whether a student has switched districts -- or has truly dropped out altogether -- helps the district target only the most at-risk students.

"If a student is still with us, we have a student come in," he said. "We talk about why they're not coming to school and find out if there's something we can do to help them out."

Marci Lopez, director at The kNOw Youth Media organization in Fresno, said it's not surprising to see those rates fall as the economy improves and schools begin focusing more on students' emotional well-being.

That's especially true in more rural areas, she said, where students have fewer distractions than those in more urban neighborhoods.

"Normally when young people live in a less developed area there's less to do besides school," she said. "School is where they have their social interaction."

The state's new education funding method, called the Local Control Funding Formula, directs more money to low-income and English learners and should help boost graduation rates even higher in future years, she said. The goal should be "100%, as lofty as it sounds," she added.

The state report also breaks down how many California graduates are eligible to attend a University of California or California State University school when they get their diploma. The rate is based on how many students take a certain number of college-preparatory English, math, science, social science and elective classes.

Fresno Unified's college eligibility rates jumped by more than 10 percentage points in three years from 25.5% to 39%. Clovis Unified went up only slightly -- from 54% to 57% -- but administrators say they expect that number to rise in future years.

Clovis plans next year to hire six transition coordinators, who will help students pick their schedules to stay on track for college, Prandini said. The district is proposing in future years to hire an additional 12 school counselors, who would work with students all the way down to seventh grade.

"It starts way back in elementary school to make sure they get the right intervention to be proficient or advanced," Prandini said. "You can't wait until the tenth grade or the eleventh grade."

California's role

The state report comes on the same day as a national study which says progress in California will be key to pushing the nation's graduation rate over 90% by 2020.

The "Building a Grad Nation" report, produced by a coalition of advocacy groups and researchers at Johns Hopkins University, credits the nation's most populous and diverse state with developing effective strategies that helped push its 2012 graduation rate to 79%, an increase of five percentage points from two years earlier and one point below the national average.

The study concludes that the high school graduation rate in the United States will not increase as quickly as experts think it can without more improvement in California, which educates one-fifth of the nation's low-income schoolchildren and more Hispanic students than any other state.

Torlakson admitted that progress has been slow, with rates improving by about 1.5 percentage points each year.

"We have to have continued momentum in California, that's absolutely a fact," he said.

Graduation and dropout rates

District	Graduation rates		Dropout rates	
	2013	2010	2013	2010
Central	78	74	13.5	17.5
Clovis	92	90	4	6
Fresno	76	69	16	20
Hanford	88	75	8	18
Madera	82	79	12	14.5
Sanger	96	93	2	5
Visalia	88	80	8	14
California	80	75	12	17

Source: California Department of Education

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College-eligible graduates

Percent eligible in 2013, by race*

District	Latino	Black	White	Total
Central	27	34.5	39	37
Clovis	43	61	59	57
Fresno	33	33	47	39
Hanford	22	16	41	30
Madera	27	18.5	33	29
Sanger	42.5	60	54	47
Visalia	32	29	43	37
California	29	29	47	39

*College eligibility is determined by the percentage of students who take all the required courses to attend either a UC or CSU by the time they graduate.

Source: California Department of Education

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