

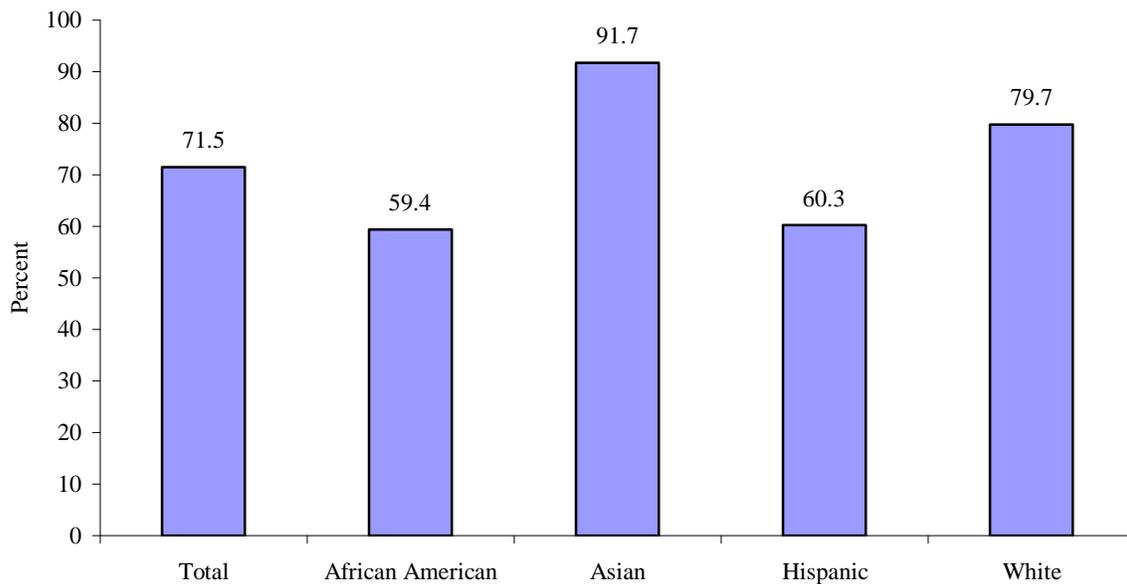
## Ethnic and Gender Differences in California High School Graduation Rates

By Russell W. Rumberger and Susan Rotermund

California faces two major educational challenges: to raise the state's overall high school graduation rate, and to eliminate differences in rates among ethnic and gender groups. This brief investigates these differences and finds them to be sizeable, both among ethnic groups and between males and females within ethnic groups.

Although there are several ways of calculating high school graduation rates, we used a method adopted by the National Center for Education Statistics known as the *averaged-freshman graduation rate*.<sup>1</sup> Based on this method, Figure 1 shows the statewide public high school graduation rate for 2006-07, together with rates for the four major ethnic groups. The statewide

**Figure 1**  
Public High School Graduation Rates for California by Ethnicity, 2006-07

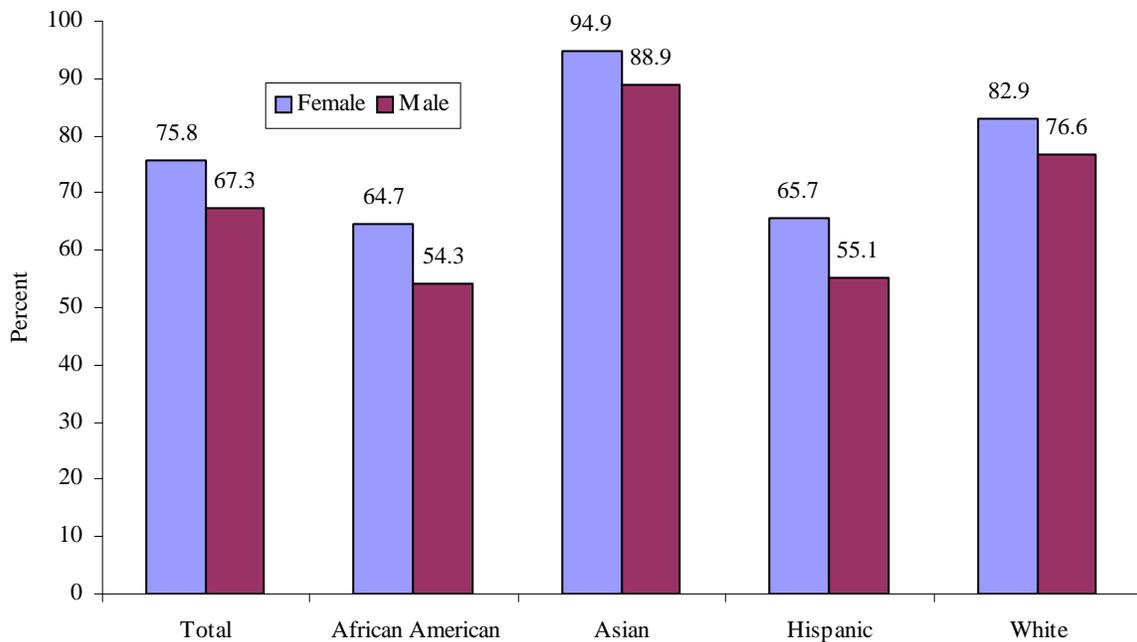


<sup>1</sup> The most accurate method, known as the *four-year graduation rate*, is to use longitudinal data to determine the percentage of entering ninth grade students who graduate with a regular diploma within a four-year period. The federal government will require all states to use this definition beginning in 2010-11. Unfortunately, California's longitudinal student data system, known as CALPADS, will not be able to compute this rate until 2010 or 2011. In the meantime, the state now estimates two other rates, the *9<sup>th</sup> grade to graduate rate*, based on the number of ninth-graders enrolled four years prior to graduation, and the *NCLB rate*, based on a formula approved by the federal government for No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability that estimates ninth-grade enrollment from dropout figures. See CDRP Statistical Brief 4, *What is California's High School Graduation Rate?* ([http://lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts/pubs\\_statbriefs.htm](http://lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts/pubs_statbriefs.htm)).

graduation rate is 71.5%, which falls between the two rates reported by the California Department of Education.<sup>2</sup> The graduation rate for Asians exceeds 90%, while the graduation rate for Whites is 80%. Graduation rates for African American and Hispanic students are much lower at 60%, or more than 20 percentage points below the rate for Asian and White students.

Gender differences are also sizeable, as shown in Figure 2. Overall, the high school graduation rate for females is about 8.5 percentage points higher than for males. The same patterns hold across all ethnic groups; however, the gaps between male and female graduation rates vary across ethnic groups. For Asians and Whites, the gender gap is about six percentage points, while for African American and Hispanic students, the gender gap is 10 percentage points, or almost twice as large. Similar disparities in the gender gap appear in other areas of educational performance. For example, the California Postsecondary Education Commission reports a gender gap in college-going rates for African American and Hispanic high school graduates, while no such gap exists among Asian and White high school graduates.<sup>3</sup> Addressing the achievement gap in California will require attention to both ethnic and gender differences.

**Figure 2**  
Public High School Graduation Rates for California by Ethnicity and Gender, 2006-07



<sup>2</sup> The state reported a 9<sup>th</sup> grade to graduate rate of 67.7 percent and an NCLB rate of 80.6 percent. Data retrieved February 27, 2009 from Dataquest:

<http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/CompletionRate/CompRate1.asp?cChoice=StGradRate&cYear=2006-07&level=State>

<sup>3</sup> See 2007 College-Going Rates to Public Colleges and Universities. Retrieved February 27, 2009, from:

<http://www.cpec.ca.gov/StudentData/CACGREthnicity.asp>

A welcome trend in recent decades has been the sustained rise in high school graduation rates up to a national average of 85% for 2017-18”as well as a significant narrowing of differences by race and ethnicity for this educational milestone (though gaps remain). Policymakers are rightly focused on making sure even more young Americans successfully complete their high school education, and on further narrowing gaps between various subgroups. To that end, the Department of Education requires states to report high school completion rates for the prior academic year to track progress at a national level. Richard V. Reeves. John C. and Nancy D. Whitehead Chair. Senior Fellow - Economic Studies. Director - Future of the Middle Class Initiative. RichardvReeves. Eliana Buckner. “Updated Trends in California’s Graduation Rates through 2012” (with Lauren Taylor). California Dropout Research Project Statistical Brief 16 (August 2013). Vita. “Ethnic and Gender Differences in California High School Graduation Rates” (with Susan Rotermund). California Dropout Research Project Statistical Brief 11 (March 2009). “Why Students Drop Out of School: A Review of 25 Years of Research” (with Sun Ah Lim). The California State Legislature is considering the establishment of an Ethnic Studies requirement for high school graduation. This raises a basic question: can state education leaders agree on a set of basic principles to help guide the teaching of high school Ethnic Studies? At the request of the California State Board of Education, I have developed the following suggested set of Ethnic Studies curriculum principles (my original draft was submitted on September 17, 2019). This means clarifying the role of race and ethnicity in California and U.S. life while incorporating the experiences of a broad range of ethnic groups. Yet, due to curricular time constraints, difficult choices will have to be made at the district and classroom level. In principle, Ethnic Studies should embrace all ethnic groups.