

## EDUCATION WEEK

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# Study Probes Enrollment 'Bulge' in 9th Grade

By Debra Viadero

Three decades of mounting academic and testing requirements are snagging growing numbers of students in the 9th grade, according to a study released last week.

Produced by researchers at Boston College, the study documents a 9th grade enrollment "bulge" that has nearly tripled since the late 1960s.

The bulge is the name education researchers give to the percentage increase in students in the 9th grade over the number who were enrolled in 8th grade. Over the same period, statistics show that growing numbers of students seem to be disappearing between the 9th and 10th grades.

The researchers attribute those trends to the rising use of standardized exams, stiffer course requirements for graduation, and, more recently, the growth of "high stakes" accountability programs. In the face of those developments, they say, schools are retaining students in 9th grade—and, in some cases, derailing them from the path to a regular high school diploma.

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["The 9th Grade 'Bulge'](#)

[Over 30 Years."](#)

Such changes, together with more recent declines in high school graduation rates, signal a "real national emergency," according to the Boston College authors.

"If we don't get kids through secondary education, they may well become a real burden on society," said Walter M. Haney, the lead author of the study.

### Conclusions Debated

Other experts interviewed last week did not quibble with the trends the report documents. They did take issue, though, with some of the study's methods and conclusions.

John Robert Warren, an assistant sociology professor at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, said other factors besides the movement for academic standards and high-stakes testing might explain the growing 9th grade bottleneck and sliding graduation rates.

"Is it because kids quit school?" he said. "Is it because they move to a different state? To say that it's because of high-stakes testing would require more careful investigation than they have done."

Even if grade repeaters are causing the bulge, added Jay P. Greene, a senior fellow at the New York City-based Manhattan Institute, is that good or bad?

"Ultimately, we care about graduation rates as an indicator of acquisition of skills," he said. "If students are being retained in 9th grade because they lack the skills to be promoted, then it does them no good to pass them on to the 10th grade."

Though few studies have documented the extent of the growth of the 9th grade bulge, educators

have long recognized the year as a pivotal transition point for students. In the 112,000-student Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., school system, for instance, a school watchdog group flagged a 29 percent bulge among 9th graders as early as 2002.

"I was drawing bar graphs, and all of a sudden this bar for 9th grade was so big I had to check myself," said Steve Johnston, the executive director of the Swann Fellowship, the Charlotte-based nonprofit group that drew attention to the issue there.

Local school officials said at the time that the numbers had ballooned because the district had enacted tougher high school promotion requirements. In an effort to build in extra safety nets, Charlotte-Mecklenburg school leaders have since initiated 9th grade "academies," an extended "freshman focus" period, tutorial programs, and career-planning help for 9th graders.

Nationwide, the Boston College researchers found that 9th grade enrollment bulges had grown in all but three states: Arkansas, Louisiana, and Maine. In 12 states, the percentage of "extra" students in 9th grade was 15 percent or more.

Across the country, the report says, the bulge has grown from 4 percent in 1970 to 13 percent in 2000.

### **Decline in Graduates**

Mr. Haney, the director of the college's National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy, said the growth poses a problem because "research evidence is pretty clear that if a kid flunked 9th grade, the odds are pretty strong that he's not going to make it to graduation."

The researchers calculated graduation rates two ways—by dividing the number of graduates by the number of 8th graders 4½ years earlier, and by dividing graduates by 9th grade enrollments 3½ years earlier. Most of the decline came in the 1990s, when the percentage of students graduating dipped from 78 percent early in the decade to 75 percent in the 2000-01 school year.

Like their critics, the authors recognize that the drop in graduates could stem from a variety of factors, some of which they attempted to rule out.

To see whether the students were leaving public schools for private schools, for instance, they looked at private school enrollments nationwide, but found that the numbers had held steady. They also looked at statistics for home schoolers, teenage-mortality rates, and U.S. Census Bureau data on the percentages of school-age children migrating out of states.

Those broad statistical checks were not systematic enough to convince researchers such as Mr. Warren that the standards and testing movement was at fault. But Mr. Haney and his co-authors insist that such policies are the most likely culprit.

What's more, they say, some anecdotal evidence suggests schools may be actively "pushing out" students who are likely to fail high-stakes exams. Such exams are used to decide which schools or teachers get bonuses, which students graduate or move to the next grade, and which districts earn failing labels.

Their report points to Houston, for example, where administrators in 15 schools last year reported dropout rates incorrectly. ("[Houston Case Offers Lesson on Dropouts](#)," Sept. 24, 2003).

Charges of pushing students out have surfaced in New York City and in Birmingham, Ala.

"Sad though it is," Mr. Haney said, "it's just really happening that schools are sacrificing kids to

make schools appear to look better. How extensive the phenomenon is we don't know."

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