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UVa releases paper on understanding new dropout rates

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New dropout rates released statewide on Tuesday are likely different, and more complicated, than those educators and parents have seen before. In fact, the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service has released a paper on understanding the new method.

Education experts have called the new rates the most accurate view of just how many students make it to graduation. Rather than relying on estimates, it uses actual data to monitor a group of students, also known as a cohort, through high school.

Michael Spar, a research associate at Weldon Cooper, wrote the paper and said the new figures represent the entire graduation story, whereas the old method of calculating dropouts showed only a snapshot in time.

"With the new cohort dropout rate you are asking a very different question," he said. "The question you're asking is, if you go back four years how many from that class drop out?"

Dropout rates used in the past were annual figures of how many students dropped out. Tuesday's figures, released by the state education department, show how many students starting ninth grade for the first time in 2004 graduated in 2008.

Statewide, nearly nine out of every 100 Virginia students who started high school in 2004 dropped out and did not graduate four years later. Most Lynchburg-area divisions fared better than the state rate, with numbers below 9 percent.

Spar applauded the state education department for its effort to identify students who are dropping out or at risk. He also said writing the paper was important because the new rates are another piece of the graduation puzzle. Spar said the dropout rates show students who aren't captured as part of the graduation equation.

Because the dropout data is so thorough — statewide, division-wide and individual school rates are shown,

and rates are broken down into subgroups such as gender, race or socioeconomic level — it's easier to identify students who drop out.

As a result, Spar said parents and school officials will start asking questions. For example, school systems might ask whether the home life of one group is not conducive to school, if the system is doing something to discourage a group, or if there aren't appropriate programs in place?

“I think people are going to start looking at the differences in groups and starting to ask how come,” he said, especially if achievement gaps are pronounced. “It's going to put up a red flag — what's happening folks?”

w To read Spar's paper, visit <http://www.coopercenter.org/demographics/PUBLICATIONS>.