



Research Report

**MAKING THE GRADE: THE GRADE 9
COHORT OF FALL 2002: Overview**

**Dr. Robert S. Brown
Research Co-ordinator**

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**Susan Manning, Senior Manager
and General Editor**

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Making the Grade – The Grade 9 Cohort of Fall 2002: Overview
Dr. Robert S. Brown

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Toronto District School Board
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1 Civic Centre Court, Lower Level
Etobicoke, ON M9C 2B3

Tel.: 416-394-4929

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MAKING THE GRADE

The Grade 9 Cohort of 2002-2007

Overview

For high school students in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), graduation rates are rising and dropout rates are falling, continuing a decade-long trend. More students than ever are also going on to attend post-secondary institutions.

That is the good news. However, we still see troubling gaps between the achievements of some groups. We can also identify at the beginning of their high school careers – even before, often – which students are likely to graduate or drop out. Changing the outcome therefore requires appropriate supports as early as possible.

Those are some of the findings gleaned from a five-year study of students who entered Grade 9 in the fall of 2002.

“Cohort” studies are a tradition in the TDSB; the first tracked the Grade 9 class of 1959 as it progressed through the system. Now, we did the same with the Grade 9 students of 2002. Where were they five years later? What can we learn from their performance?

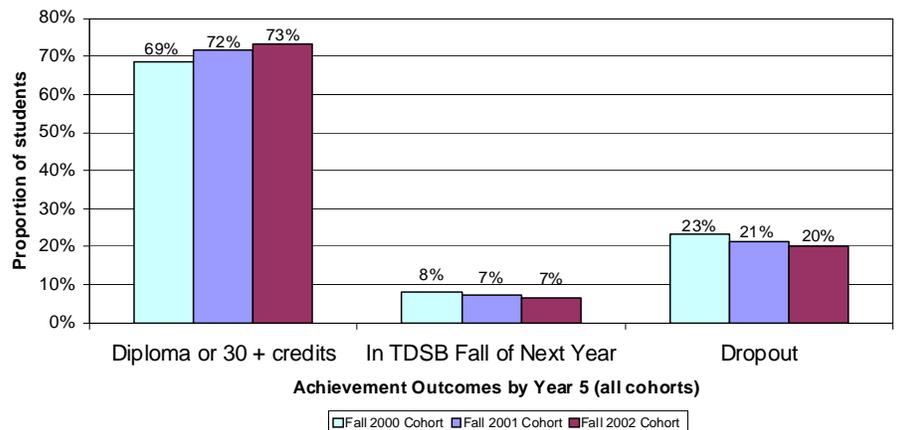
Graduation rates jump

We started in fall 2002 with 18,204 students in Grade 9. Of those, 2,030 transferred at some point to schools outside the TDSB. That left 16,173 students to track. (For ease, we will refer to them as the 2002 cohort.) Five years out, by the summer of 2007:

- 73% (11,836) had graduated.
- 20% (3,257) had dropped out.
- 7% (1,080) were still in the TDSB for a sixth year of secondary studies.

How does this compare to other TDSB studies tracking Grade 9 students? Previously, we studied the Grade 9 class that started in fall 2000. Over just those two years, we saw clear improvements – a jump in the graduation rate from 69% to 73%, and a decrease in the dropout rate from 23% to 20%.

Figure 1: Grade 9 Cohorts of Fall 2000, Fall 2001, and Fall 2002: Outcomes at the End of Five Years of Secondary School



More good news – students in certain groups that have had relatively low graduation rates are showing some of the biggest improvements.

For instance, we divided students into 10 categories of family income (based on the neighbourhood where they live). The students in the lowest income level had a 26% dropout rate. That may seem like a lot, but the dropout rate in this income group for the Grade 9 students that started in 2000 was considerably higher, at 34%.

There is also a clear link between the compulsory courses that students take in Grades 9-10 (academic, applied or locally-developed, i.e. “essentials”) and graduation rates. All groups increased their rates compared to the 2000 cohort, especially students who took mostly locally-developed courses – a 33% graduation rate vs. 28% for the 2000 cohort.

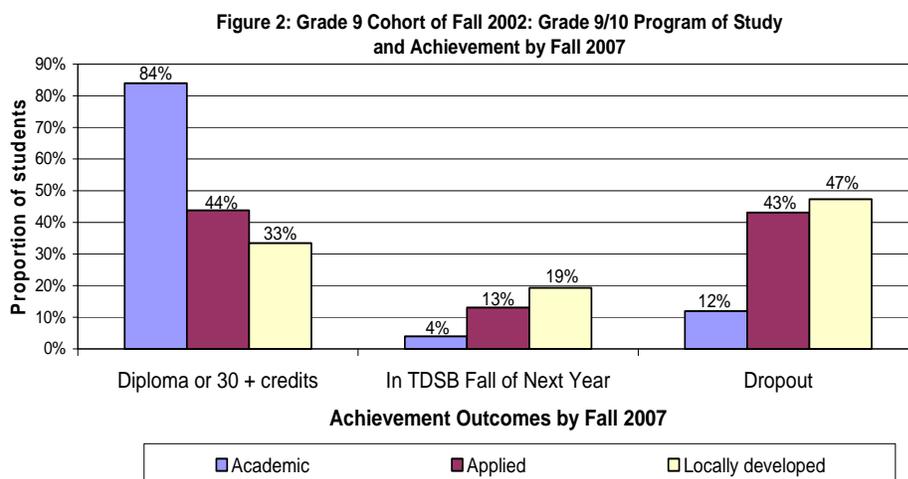
Progress can seem incremental. Yet it is still grounds for optimism. That said, the 2002 cohort results have some stark reminders of where we need to do better.

Need to focus on big gaps

Looking at the 2002 Grade 9 cohort, we see many dramatic differences in who is more or less likely to graduate, based on early performance.

Officially, in the Ministry of Education’s curriculum, streaming no longer exists. Yet it remains in place for all intents. For the 2002 cohort:

- 84% of students who took a majority of academic courses in Grades 9-10 graduated.
- 44% of students who took a majority of applied courses graduated.
- 33% of students taking a majority of locally-developed courses graduated.



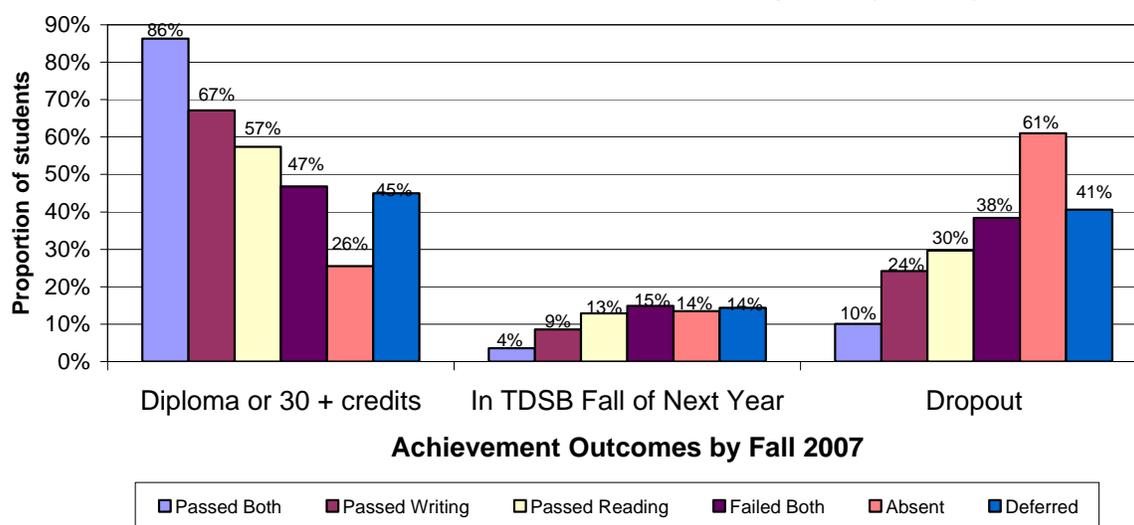
A gap in the numbers is not surprising. Yet a gap this large points to de facto streaming, something that we must examine.

Graduation/dropout rates are also closely related to achievements early on in high school, or even before. For instance, almost all students (92%) who were at Level 4 (mark of 80% or higher) in mathematics in Grade 8 graduated by the end of five years in high school. Only 39% of Grade 8 students with a Level R (mark of below 50%) in mathematics ended up graduating high school five years later.

The results of the Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) are also signposts. Among the 2002 cohort:

- Students who successfully completed the test the first time it was offered were most likely to graduate on time, and least likely to drop out.
- Of the students who wrote but failed the test, most will still graduate, although it may take some longer.
- Students who were deferred from writing the test the first time (because they were not prepared), or who were absent for it, are at the greatest risk of dropping out.

**Figure 3: Grade 9 Cohort of Fall 2002:
First OSSLT Test Results and Achievement by Year 5 (Fall 2007)**



Again, no surprise. Students who are higher achievers are, of course, most likely to graduate. Nevertheless, it underscores the urgency of focusing on at-risk students early on.

Looking at links between certain behaviour and graduation rates raises the chicken-and-egg question. What comes first? Take absenteeism. Are students absent because they are at-risk? Or are they at-risk because they are absent? We can see in year two of high school which students are on track and which are at risk:

- Students with low absenteeism in Grade 10 (3% or less) had high graduation rates.
- Conversely, students with significant absenteeism (more than 20%) had a greater than even chance of dropping out by the end of year five.

That is logical. Students are absent because, somehow, they do not feel engaged in their studies. Absenteeism is a symptom, not a cause itself. Still, the correlation between absenteeism and graduation/dropout rates reminds us, yet again, that we need to focus on solutions and strategies for these at-risk students very early on.

Demographic challenges

Let us move from academic performance to other links – the connection between certain demographic and socio-economic groups and graduation/dropout rates.

The TDSB has income data on every Toronto neighbourhood from the federal census, which we can match to the areas where students live. Among Canadian cities, Toronto has one of the greatest variations of neighbourhood incomes, from the highly privileged to the extremely disadvantaged. We see the same variations in graduation/dropout rates, which move in lockstep with neighbourhood income levels.

Quite simply, when we divide students into 10 neighbourhood income groups, students in the highest income neighbourhoods have the lowest dropout rate (12%); those in the lowest income neighbourhoods have the highest dropout rate (26%). The difference in dropout rates between the groups at opposite ends of the income scale – more than two-to-one – is a sign that a great socio-economic divide still exists.

This finding, too, probably is not surprising. But what do we make of other results that are not as predictable – graduation/dropout rates for language and region of birth?

Students in the 2002 Grade 9 cohort spoke 16 “key” languages (at least 100 students spoke them). Fifty-five percent of the students spoke English only; their dropout rate of 23% was a little higher than the 20% overall rate. What about some of the others?

- Some language groups have dropout rates far below the average. The two best – Bengali, with a 7.3% dropout rate; and Chinese, with a 9% dropout rate.
- Other languages showed a sharp reduction in dropout rates compared to the 2000 cohort. The three biggest improvements – Punjabi students went from a 34.6% dropout rate to 19.8%; Arabic students went from 27.8% to 16.7%; and Korean students went from 20% to 13.8%.
- Students who speak still other languages continued to drop out at a far greater rate than the average for the 2002 cohort. The three highest dropout rates (which all showed modest improvements compared to the 2002 cohort) – Portuguese students at 38%, Spanish students at 37.5% and Somali students at 35.1%.

Likewise, when we look at the 2002 cohort by region of birth, some groups showed a marked improvement in dropout rates compared to the 2000 cohort. But the groups with the highest dropout rates remained the same.

- The dropout rates fell from 29% to 18% for Southeast Asian students, and from 35% to 16% for students from South and Western Europe.
- However, the rates for the groups with the highest dropout rates barely moved. Students from the English-speaking Caribbean had a 38% dropout rate (down from 40% for the 2000 cohort); and students from Central and South America had a 37% dropout rate, the same as the 2000 cohort.

Table 1: Key Languages and Dropout Rates: the Fall 2000, Fall 2001, and Fall 2002 Cohorts

Language	% dropouts: Fall 2000 Cohort	% dropouts: Fall 2001 Cohort	% dropouts: Fall 2002 Cohort	Number of students in the Fall 2002 cohort
Arabic	27.8	19.5	16.7	132
Bengali	16.7	10.8	7.3	177
Chinese	12.0	10.0	9.0	1921
English	22.9	23.4	22.5	8415
Greek	17.7	12.2	25.2	103
Gujarati	14.3	9.0	9.3	182
Hindi	*	20.0	*	86
Korean	20.0	12.1	13.8	283
Persian (Farsi)	30.6	27.4	25.2	301
Portuguese	42.5	37.0	38.0	108
Punjabi	34.6	18.8	19.8	227
Romanian	10.8	*	*	86
Russian	19.6	23.0	22.9	402
Somali	36.7	28.4	35.1	208
Spanish	39.1	38.9	37.5	216
Tamil	16.9	15.4	13.7	614
Urdu	19.5	20.4	17.4	438
Vietnamese	24.6	23.3	20.9	234

**not released since number in group is less than 100.*

In looking at language groups and regions of birth, what accounts for some of the high dropout rates? This is not just an issue related to recent arrivals, or English as a second language learning. The gap between different groups is too great for it to be just that.

In fact, when we look at another set of numbers, graduation rates based on a student's years in Canada, there is virtually no difference between students born in Canada (72.8% graduation rate), students who've been here five years (72.8%), and students who've been here one year or less (70.9%).

There are other differences, too, among certain groups, though not quite as dramatic as the ones already noted. For instance, in the 2002 cohort female students are more likely to graduate than male students – 78% vs. 69%. The gap of 9% has narrowed compared to the 2000 cohort (74% vs. 63%), with both genders showing improvement.

From looking at demographic data – whether income, language or region of birth – we know which groups tend to have more at-risk students. All of this tells us that we need to pay close attention to the factors that influence the graduation/dropout rates of these students.

Majority of students pursue post-secondary studies

What happened to the 2002 cohort after leaving the TDSB? The results are incomplete, but we do know that 68% of all students who started Grade 9 in 2002 had applied to a post-secondary institution by 2007. That is the overall percentage; to put it in an even more positive light, 92% of this group of TDSB graduates applied to post-secondary.

Of the students who applied, 70% applied to university only. Another 20% applied to college only. The rest applied to both university and college.

Assuming that previous patterns apply, and that three-quarters of applicants will actually attend a post-secondary institution (a conservative estimate), that translates into 51% of the 2002 cohort going on to university or college – the highest proportion we have ever tracked in the TDSB. That proportion will rise even higher, as it does not include the students who were still in the TDSB at the time of the study, for a sixth year of secondary studies.

Conclusion

The results of the Grade 9 2002 cohort are fairly consistent with the TDSB's annual indicators. By taking snapshots of a cohort as the students move through the system, we gain insight into where we are improving and where we still have work to do, who is achieving and who is at risk.

In many areas, the results are extremely positive – the rise in graduation rates, the decline in dropouts, the relative improvements in the achievements of some groups, and the sizeable contingent that went on to post-secondary studies. Other results confirm where our students are falling short – and where we need to intervene.

Ultimately, the information gathered from the 2002 cohort will help us to create and hone the progressive policies and strategies that will support – and lead to greater success for – *all* students.

