Understanding Idaho's Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate

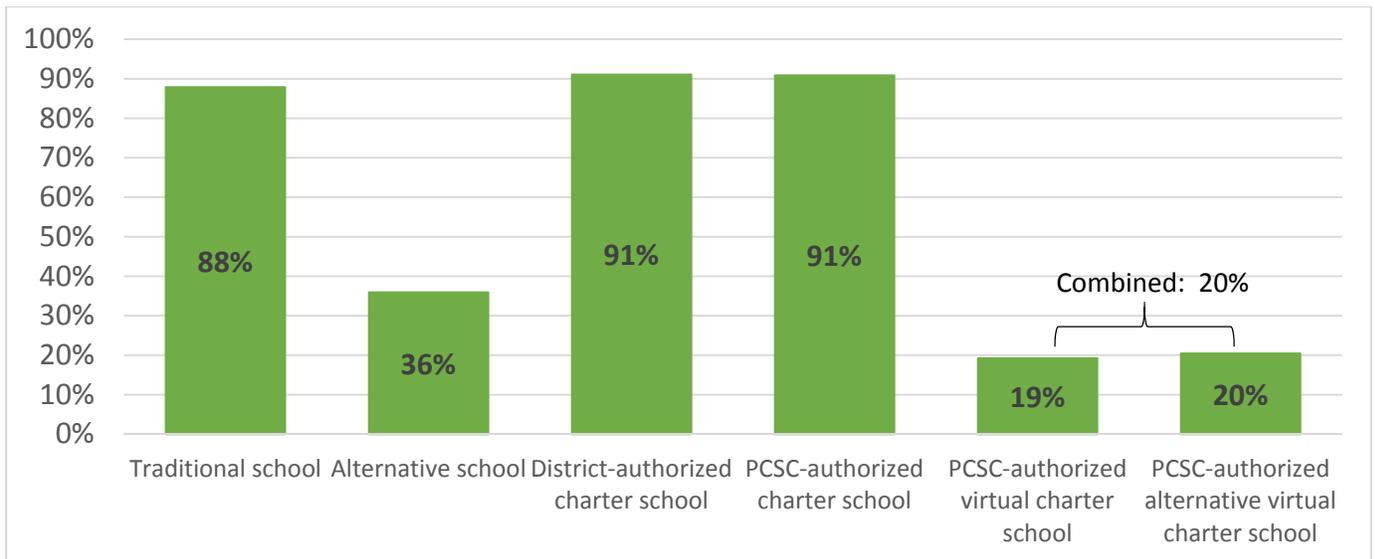## Cathleen M. McHugh, Ph.D.[1]
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In 2015, Idaho reported high school graduation rates using a new methodology (adjusted cohort graduation rate or ACGR) required by the federal government. The *reported* high school graduation rate fell from 84.1% for the Class of 2013[2] to 77.3% for the Class of 2014. These rates are *not* comparable as they are based on very different methodologies. Therefore, it cannot be said that the Class of 2014 graduated at a lower rate than the Class of 2013. However, it can be said that graduation rates in Idaho under the new methodology are lower than what most Idahoans anticipated.

This paper examines Idaho's ACGR in depth. It focuses on how the ACGR varies by type of district and type of school attended.[3] Figure 1 summarizes our main results. It shows that 88 percent of students who attend traditional schools graduate. However, only 36 percent of students who attend an alternative school graduate while only 19 percent of students who attend a virtual charter school graduate and only 20 percent of students who attend an alternative virtual charter school graduate. These trends hold even after holding constant student demographics.

Figure 1: ACGR by district and school type, 2014

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[2] Idaho State Department of Education, Report Card, School Year 2012-2013, http://apps.sde.idaho.gov/ReportCard/SchoolYear/10. Retrieved January 15, 2016.

[3] Earlier versions of the paper did not differentiate between virtual charter schools and alternative virtual charter schools.

There were two schools which did not readily fit into any of the categories. One was a PCSC-authorized charter school that was a blend of a virtual charter school and brick-and-mortar charter school. We classified this school as a "Blended charter school." The other was a school in a cooperative school district.   We classified this as an "Other school district". We do not report ACGR for either of these categories as there is only school in each category.

Throughout the paper, the number of students refers to the total number of students in the graduating cohort. In other words, the number of students is the number used in the denominator of the ACGR calculation. Table 1 shows the ACGR, number of schools and districts, and total number of students in each category.

Table 1: ACGR by school and district type, 2014

District type	Number of schools/districts	Total number of students	ACGR
Traditional school in traditional school district	134 schools in 109 districts[4]	17,970	88%
Alternative school in traditional school district	38 schools in 32 districts	2,469	36%
Other school in traditional school district[5]	7 schools in 5 districts	193	80%
District-authorized charter school	5 schools in 4 districts	224	91%
PCSC-authorized charter school	10 schools in 10 districts	296	91%
PCSC-authorized virtual charter school	5 schools in 5 districts	1,039	19%
PCSC-authorized alternative virtual charter school	4 schools in 4 districts	518	20%
PCSC-authorized blended charter school	1 school in 1 district	76	Data suppressed but lower than traditional schools
Other school district	1 school in 1 district	55	Data suppressed but lower than traditional schools

We further examined the traditional school districts according to the size of the graduation cohort in the district. Table 2 shows the different groups, the number of districts in each group, the number of students in each group, and the ACGR for each group.

The ACGR in traditional schools is just under 90 percent for districts of all sizes. The smaller districts do just as well or better as the larger districts. Districts with between 101 and 250 students in their graduation cohort have the lowest ACGR at 85 percent. Three schools in this group rank among the lowest for traditional schools in terms of ACGRs. These three schools are in close geographic proximity

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[4] Idaho has 115 traditional school districts. Six of those districts are elementary districts and are not included in this analysis.

[5] These other schools include magnet schools, PTE schools, and virtual schools run by traditional school districts.

to each other which suggests their low ACGRs may be caused by the same factors. If these schools are excluded, then the ACGR for this group is also at 88 percent.

Table 2: ACGR for traditional schools in traditional districts by district size, 2014

Size of Graduation Cohort[6]	Number of districts	Total number of students	ACGR
25 or less students	28	423	90%
26 to 40 students	17	531	88%
41 to 100 students	21	1,447	90%
101 to 250 students	21	2,847	85%
251 to 900 students	18	6,655	88%
901 or more students	4	6,067	88%
Total Idaho	109	17,970	88%

It could be argued that traditional schools enroll a different type of student than the other types of schools. We have examined if the differences in graduation rates still exist even after controlling for a select group of student demographics. Specifically, we control for gender, race/ethnicity, whether or not a student is economically disadvantaged, whether or not a student is Limited English Proficient (LEP), and whether or not a student has disabilities. We find that the differences in ACGR by district and school type as shown in Table 1 still exist even after holding these student attributes constant. We cannot control for every student attribute – it is very likely that virtual charter schools, alternative virtual charter schools, and alternative schools enroll students who are different on other dimensions than students in traditional schools. Future research should focus on whether or not we can identify other student characteristics that may explain these differences.

We now concentrate on virtual charter schools, alternative virtual charter schools, and alternative schools. Students in these groups make up 18 percent of the high school graduation cohort. On average, 19 percent of students in virtual charter schools, 20 percent of students in alternative virtual charter schools, and 36 percent of students in alternative schools graduate. In order to see if there are some outliers in this group, Figure 2 shows the ACGR for all virtual charter schools, all alternative virtual charter schools, and all alternative schools.

The ACGR ranges from 0%[7] to 76% for alternative schools. Obviously, there are alternative schools which are successful at graduating students. More research should be done on what the successful schools have in common and if there are general best practices that could be replicated in other schools. The ACGR is much lower for alternative virtual charter schools and virtual charter schools. However, in each group, there is one school which is a bit of an outlier. Future research will focus on if there are

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[6] The graduation cohort is based on all students in the district and not just those attending a traditional high school.

[7] Only 10 percent of the students in the alternative school with a 0% completion rate earned a GED. Five percent were continuing in the same school. Almost one-quarter had transferred but the school did not have the proper documentation. Approximately fifteen percent were known or likely dropouts.

general best practices for these schools which can be replicated in other schools. Future research will also focus on identifying factors which lead to low ACGRs for these schools.

Figure 2: ACGR for individual virtual charter schools, alternative virtual charter schools and alternative schools, 2014
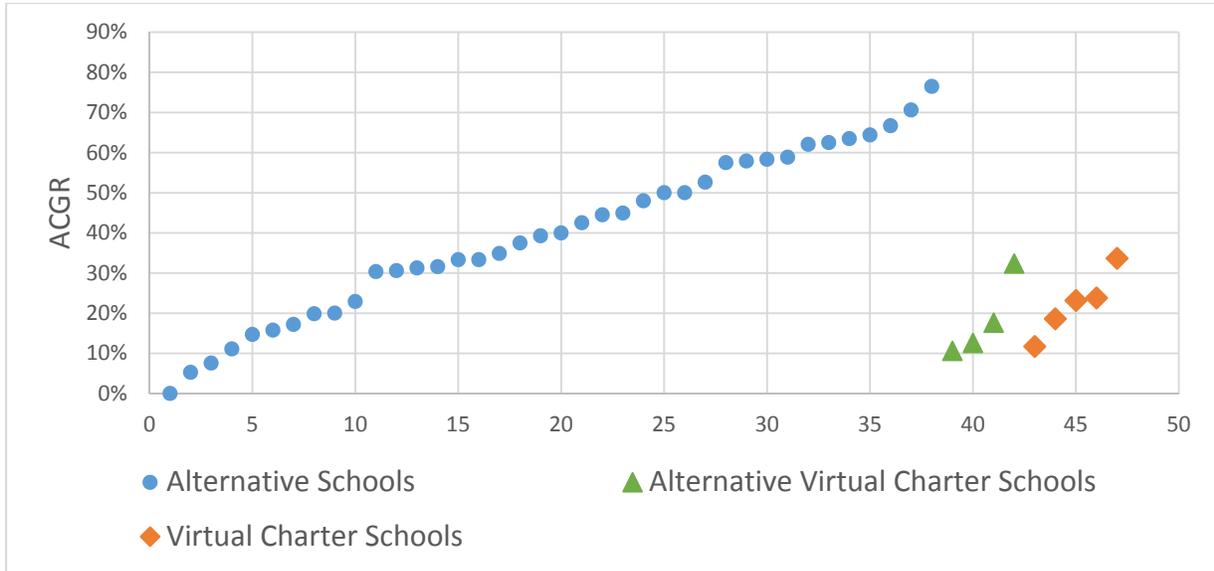
Data Note: During the process of examining the data, it became apparent that the Department of Education was very diligent about ensuring that each school had the proper documentation to remove a student(s) from the graduating cohort, as per the federal guidance. The Department of Education audited submitted documentation for every student appeal submitted by districts and approved, returned, or denied based on federal guidance which ensures that the data we analyzed is consistent across district types and school types.