

REVISED RESPONSE TO CUEE STATEMENT #2 FOR GRADUATION RATES
By David E. Mullis (October 18, 2011)

CUEE and the Vote Yes Committee continue to defy the information provided by the Valdosta Board of Education and the Lowndes County Board of Education without any evidence to support their defiance. Their latest attempt is to attack the graduation rates reported by the Valdosta City Schools. Using a total lack of knowledge of specific facts, they attempt to manipulate data presented by the Valdosta City Schools to show that the City cannot report its own facts correctly. Therefore, I revised my response contained the The Grassroots Handbook Against School Consolidation on this issue as follows:

2. CUEE STATEMENT: The graduation rate for Valdosta High School is in the low 50% range based on the new standard for reporting graduation rates. The graduation rate for African Americans is less than 50%.

THE SIMPLE TRUTH

This statement is completely false and misleading. **“Nationally, only about 70 percent of students graduate from high school on time with a regular diploma; for African American and Hispanic Students, this number drops to little more than 50 percent.”** (Alliance for Excellent Education, www.all4ed.org; Federal High School Graduation Rate Policies and the Impact on Georgia, 1201 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 901, Washington, DC 20036).

Georgia uses the federally accepted “Lever Rate” to calculate graduation rates in Georgia (as do numerous other states) and has been using this method since 2002. All graduation data reported by Georgia for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) accountability to present is the Lever Graduation Rate. However, pursuant to NCLB the United States Department of Education (USDOE) has set a deadline for all states to adopt and use the “Four Year Adjusted Cohort Rate” for graduation (this is the “new standard” referred to by CUEE). This is done to create some uniformity of graduation rate comparisons between the 50 states. However, states have been permitted to file for waivers to extend the time in which a state must comply with the deadlines of NCLB. Georgia is one of numerous states to apply for these waivers. The deadline to shift to the four year cohort is school year 2011-2012. If waivers are granted the deadline may become school year 2012-2013 or even later.

For school year ending 2009, the Georgia Department of Education (GDOE) reported an estimated four year cohort rate in addition to the AYP accountability lever rate. This cohort rate had no purpose other than as a trial comparison and perhaps to set a base from which to begin calculating four year cohort rates. This is the statistic referred to by CUEE in making its profound declaration. As will be shown below, Georgia included all 9th graders including repeating 9th graders in the cohort for this statistic. An accurate cohort would include only 1st time 9th graders. This flaw caused the

graduation rate for VCS to be 53.06% for the district, when it should actually be 66% for the district. There was no comparison for VHS, only the district. This graduation rate comparison between lever rate and cohort rate for 2009 is the only cohort rate comparison I can find reported by Georgia. The new cohort rates will not be released until December 2011-January 2012.

The graduation rate for VHS has been improving steadily each year over that last 5 years under the federally approved Lever Rate. Below are the actual graduation rates for VHS and the entire District (Valdosta City Schools including Valdosta High School and the Alternative School). Please note that graduation rates are reported by the State of Georgia as an interim rate in the summer and as the complete rate in the fall because summer graduates are also reported in the final calculation. The rates for all years except 2011 are the fall rates. The 2011 rates reported are the summer rates because the fall rates have not yet been released to the public.

TOTAL GRADUATION RATES FOR ALL STUDENTS

The Total Graduation Rate for Valdosta High School was **57.3% for 2007** (fall report), **61.1% for 2008** (fall report), **71.5% for 2009** (fall report), **72.5% for 2010** (fall report), and **76.5%** for 2011 (summer report). The 2011 fall report has not yet been released, but was reported by Valdosta City Schools as **77.9%**. The steady increase is obvious for VHS.

The Total Graduation Rate for Valdosta City Schools (District) was **57.3% for 2007** (fall report), **61.1% for 2008** (fall report), **71.5% for 2009** (fall report), **71.9% for 2010** (fall report), and **69.1% for 2011** (summer report). The 2011 fall report has not yet been released, but was reported by Valdosta City Schools as **71.7%**. The significant increase is obvious for VCS.

AFRICAN AMERICAN GRADUATION RATES

The African American Graduation Rate for Valdosta High School was **49.7% for 2007** (fall report), **53.4% for 2008** (fall report), **67.2% for 2009** (fall report), **67.3% for 2010** (fall report), and **71.6% for 2011** (summer report). The 2011 fall report has not yet been released, but was reported by Valdosta City Schools as **73.3%**. The significant increase is obvious for VHS.

The African American Graduation Rate for Valdosta City Schools (District) was **49.7% for 2007** (fall report), **53.4% for 2008** (fall report), **67.2% for 2009** (fall report), **67.1% for 2010** (fall report), and **63.6% for 2011** (summer report). The 2011 fall report has not yet been released, but was reported by Valdosta City Schools as **66.7%**. The significant increase is obvious for VCS.

Therefore, one must ask, "Why would CUEE say the graduation rate for Valdosta High School is in the low 50% range for all students and below 50% for African Americans? The answer is simple. CUEE wants to mislead the voters into believing that the graduation rate for Valdosta High School is lower than it actually is. Therefore, not only does CUEE make false statements, it also fails to state that the graduation rate has improved significantly over the past 5 years for all students and for African American Students. Again, this is an attempt by CUEE to give the appearance that something other than what is being done must be done. They do not tell us

what should be done other than to consolidate the school systems. The logic is frightening to say the least.

Actually, the calculation of graduation rates is a complex undertaking and is only meaningful in context of comparing it to other years of reporting within the state and the nation. Below is a more technical explanation of how the graduation rates are calculated and why there is a difference between the two methods of calculating the rates.

THE TECHNICAL TRUTH

Since 2002, Georgia has calculated its high school graduation rate using an NCES "Lever Rate" formula - one of the three federally allowed high school graduation rate formulas since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. All of the above graduation rates are reported using the Lever Rate. As stated above, the "four year cohort method" was supposed to become mandatory for all schools nationwide for school year ending 2012, but due to a waiver filed by the State of Georgia, this method may not become mandatory for Georgia until year ending 2013 or later. The lever method, which is the current method, and the four year cohort method are described below.

Under the current lever rate method from 2002 through 2010-2011, Georgia calculated its graduation rates each year by taking the total number of graduates for the year and dividing by the total number of graduates plus all special education graduates, certificate of attendance recipients and dropouts from grades 9-12 for the year. Under the four year cohort method, a cohort is created consisting of all first-time ninth graders 4 years ago, plus students who transfer into the cohort, and minus students who transfer out, immigrate to another country, or are deceased. This number is divided into the total number of the cohort students who graduate. Therefore, the four year cohort graduation rate looks at a 4 year cohort rather than a yearly graduation rate.

The reason for this move to the four year cohort method is explained by **The Carl Vinson Study**. The Carl Vinson Study states that graduation rates have historically been difficult to measure because schools have not always been consistent or accurate in the way they document students who leave school for various reasons (e.g., transfer to another school, moving away from the community, dropping out, etc.). For this reason, graduation rates have historically shown much more variation among schools than may actually be the case. (Pg 16).

Therefore, the "four year cohort method" is an attempt by the government to choose one method by which all states must calculate their graduation rates so that the graduation rates of all states will be somewhat consistent with each other. However, in order for the four year cohort rate to be accurate, the four year data base must be accurate. The State of Georgia began calculating a four year cohort rate for comparison purposes in school year ending 2009. The problem is that in 2009, the State included all 9th graders into the four year cohort including repeating 9th graders (a true cohort only uses 1st time 9th graders). Using this cohort, the State

calculated a District cohort rate for Valdosta City Schools of 53.06% by dividing 364 by 686 in the cohort. If the cohort only included 1st time 9th graders as it should have, the cohort would have been 550 and the cohort rate would have been $364/550 = 66\%$. But this would have been the cohort rate for the District, not Valdosta High School, and it included repeating 9th graders. The Cohort rate for 2011 has not been released yet. The Cohort rate for 2012 cannot be calculated until the end of 2012 school year.

WHAT CAUSES THE DIFFERENCE IN THE LEVER RATE AND THE COHORT RATE?

A large portion of this estimated statewide drop will result from using a different definition of who qualifies as a graduate and who is included in the cohort. For example, currently Georgia includes students with disabilities who take longer than four years to graduate as long as they graduate pursuant to an Individualized Education Plan. Under the Cohort method, these students with disabilities are included in the total cohort but excluded from the graduating cohort resulting in a lower graduation rate. Unfortunately, this puts the pressure on the schools to encourage students with disabilities to graduate within four years, even if it is in their developmentally delayed best interest to remain in high school longer than 4 years.

My son with disabilities who is in 8th grade, repeated kindergarten 1 year and 1st grade 1 year before moving up grade levels annually. He can repeat a maximum of 3 years and still graduate with a regular diploma. We did this to give him a better foundation from which to build and we saved 1 year for high school in case he needs it for development in high school. This means that if we hold him back one year in high school for developmental purposes, the high school will suffer a lower graduation rate to their detriment.

Second, under the lever rate, Georgia eliminated from the total graduates, students removed from school pursuant to court order or legal issues, who did not file proper transfer paperwork (e.g., juvenile delinquency and custody issues). Under the 4 year cohort method, these students will have to be included in the total cohort resulting in a lower rate of graduation.

CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, CUEE is spewing meaningless statistics out of context to give the appearance that educational reform other than what is already being done in the schools justifies unifying the schools systems in Valdosta/Lowndes. The fact is the graduation rate has risen in the past five years under the lever rate method through implementation of leading national educational programs like **Early College, AID and Race to the Top**. Recasting the graduation rates in terms of an un-adopted and flawed four year cohort method has no purpose other than to give the appearance that the VHS is a failure when it is not. VHS is a very successful school, but it has a high concentration of free or reduced lunch students. Wherever high concentrations of socio-economically disadvantaged students are present,

the graduation rates suffer. VHS has implemented the **Early College, AID and Race to the Top** programs to combat this problem.

Then why would CUEE make such an unqualified statement without explaining that graduation rates at Valdosta High School have increased over the past five years within a consistent model of evaluation. The answer is simple. CUEE is deliberately trying to mislead and manipulate the voters of Valdosta with inaccurate information and dangerously gross oversimplifications as warned against in the **NECP Study**.