

LTUSD dropout rate declines from previous year

By Kathryn Reed

Lake Tahoe Unified School District is bucking the state trend of rising dropout rates.

Data released this week for the 2008-09 school year show the South Shore district with a 5.3 percent dropout rate in grades 9-12. This compares to 2007-08 when the district 9-12 dropout rate was 6.5 percent.



The opening of the Career and Technical building is touted as a draw to keep kids enrolled at STHS.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

This compares to the state rate of 5.7 percent in 2008-09 and 4.9 percent the previous school year.

“It’s going in the right direction,” LTUSD Superintendent Jim Tarwater said.

The current data reflects the third year of using the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System or CALPADS.

“We now have a data system that allows us to track students more accurately and have honest conversations about how to improve graduation rates and reduce dropouts among all subgroups of students,” Jack O’Connell, state Superintendent of Public Instruction, said in a prepared statement.

Most of the dropouts are seniors – 15 for the 08-09 school year at South Tahoe High School. One junior and one sophomore also dropped out.

At Mt. Tallac, the continuation high school, for that same reporting period it was 31 seniors, two juniors and one sophomore who dropped out.

At the transitional learning center, 10 seniors dropped out.

It’s normal for seniors to have the highest dropout rate, according to Tarwater. If they don’t have the units to graduate or have failed the state high school exit exam, they see no reason to keep going to school.

With better tracking of students in the transitional learning center, Tarwater is hoping those numbers will come down in the future to reflect a more accurate number. But some students leave the country and therefore cannot be tracked, but are considered a dropout for LTUSD.

The state’s 3-year-old data collecting system allows the district to send queries electronically to find out if a student has enrolled someplace else. Without knowing where students have gone, they are considered dropouts.

“Part of what we are trying to do with the netbooks is get kids engaged and hook them more,” Tarwater said. The plan is for all students in grades 3-12 to have one of the mini

computers.

Assignments can be downloaded if a student is absent. The possibility of using Skype when they are out of town is being looked at.

The district is also banking on the new facilities at the high school that are bringing more programs and enriching the ones in place as factors to drive students to be in the classroom.

Enrollment remains a concern. The bottom has not been reached. The district started with 3,910 when the doors opened in August. Now enrollment is at 3,867.

It's the high school that is losing students. Since the beginning of the year 12 ninth-graders have left, four 10th-graders, 10 11th-graders, and 11 12th-graders.

The middle school is staying even.

The elementary level is a mixed bag of gains, losses and status quo.

"Some of those kids are legitimate. There is probably a 10 percent mobility factor. Mainly it's related to work which makes a ton of sense to me," Tarwater said of why kids are leaving. If their parents got a job elsewhere, they had to go.

Every nine seconds, a student in the United States drops out of school, according to the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition. The National PTA is focusing on the dropout issue in the December 2010-January 2011 edition of its magazine *Our Children*, which will be available online later this month.