While the majority of high school students graduate, some will not. For whatever reason, some young people will leave school before graduating. This chapter will look at this group of young people – the early school leavers.

Early school leaver rate versus drop-out rate

There are two different rates used to calculate the percentage who do not graduate: the early school leaver rate (a provincial measure) and the drop-out rate (a national measure). While these two rates measure the same concept, they are calculated differently and may not be the same.

The provincial early school leaver rate defined

The provincial Early School Leaver Rate (ESLR) rate is calculated by the Department of Education. It is based on student registration information for a specific school year. Once a school registers a student for their first high school course, they are recorded in the high school certification system. Each student is then tracked until he/she either graduates, or does not show up in a subsequent year on the high school certification system. A list of students who did not graduate and are not registered for high school courses is sent to each school in the province. The principal is asked to identify the status of these students – did they drop out of school, move out of the province, etc. This information is used to calculate the ESLR for a given year by following this formula:

$$\text{ESLR rate} = \frac{\text{Number of students identified by principals as having dropped out of school}}{\text{Total number of students registered in high school}} \times 100\%$$

The national drop-out rate defined

The national drop-out rate is determined by Statistics Canada using information collected from the monthly Labour Force Survey. Specifically, it is calculated by dividing the total number of young people between 20 and 24 years of age who do not have a high school diploma and are not attending school, by the total number of all 20 to 24 year olds. In other words:

$$\text{Drop-out rate} = \frac{\text{The number of young people (20-24 years old) without a high school diploma and not attending school}}{\text{All young people between 20 and 24 years of age}} \times 100\%$$
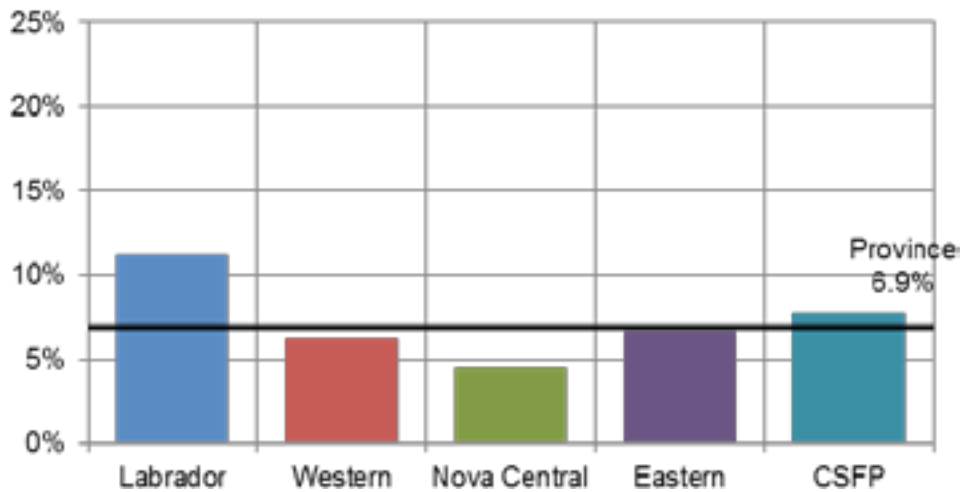
Provincial early school leaver rate

In 2012/13, the provincial ESLR was 6.9%. This is down from 7.5% in 2011/12. At the district level, the ESLR ranged from 4.5% in the Western School District to 11.2% in the Labrador School District (see figure 11a). Along gender lines, the male ESLR was higher than the female rate (7.7% vs. 6.0%).

Over the past five years, the provincial ESLR has dropped from 8.6% in 2008/09 to 6.9% in 2012/13 (see figure 11b). This pattern was also seen at the district level. In each school district the 2012/13 ESLR was between 1.4 and 3.0 percentage points lower than in 2008/09. At the district level, the highest rates were consistently in the Labrador School District and CSFP. The lowest rates were found in the Western, Nova Central and Eastern School Districts (see figure 11c). Along gender lines, the male ESLR is consistently higher than the female rate with approximately two percentage points separating them each year (see figure 11d).
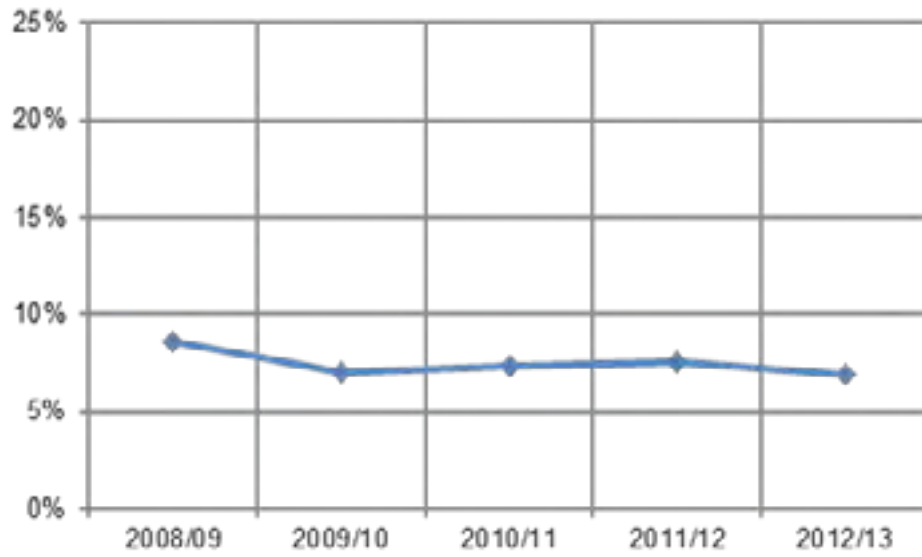
Figure 11:   Early School Leaver Rate
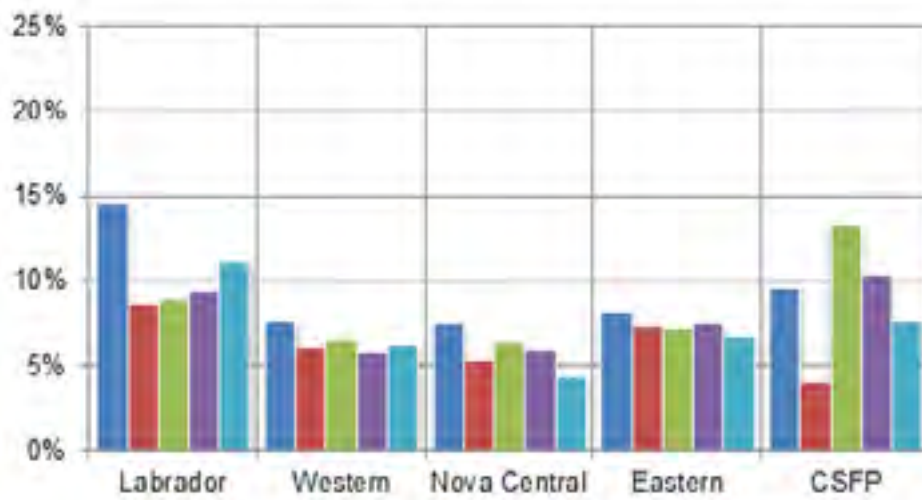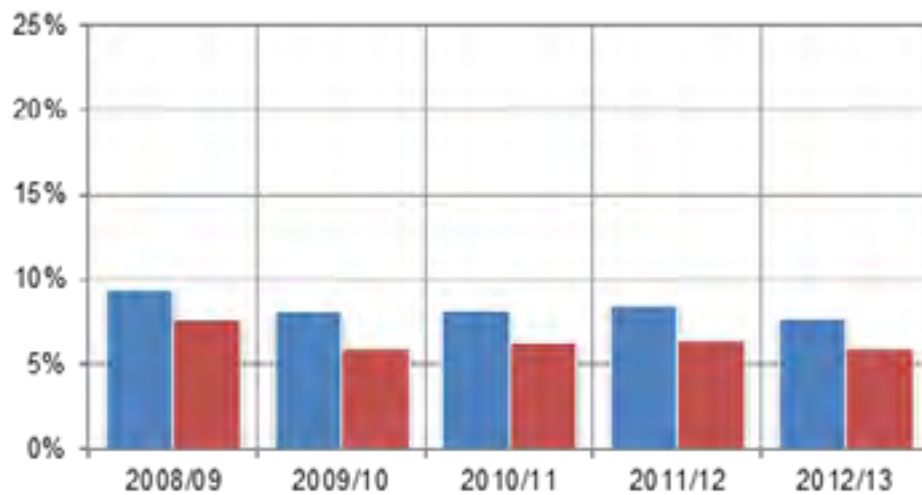
(a)   District and provincial (2012/13)

(b)   Provincial trends (2008/09 – 2012/13)

(c)   District trends (2008/09 – 2012/13)

(d)   Gender trends (2008/09 – 2012/13)
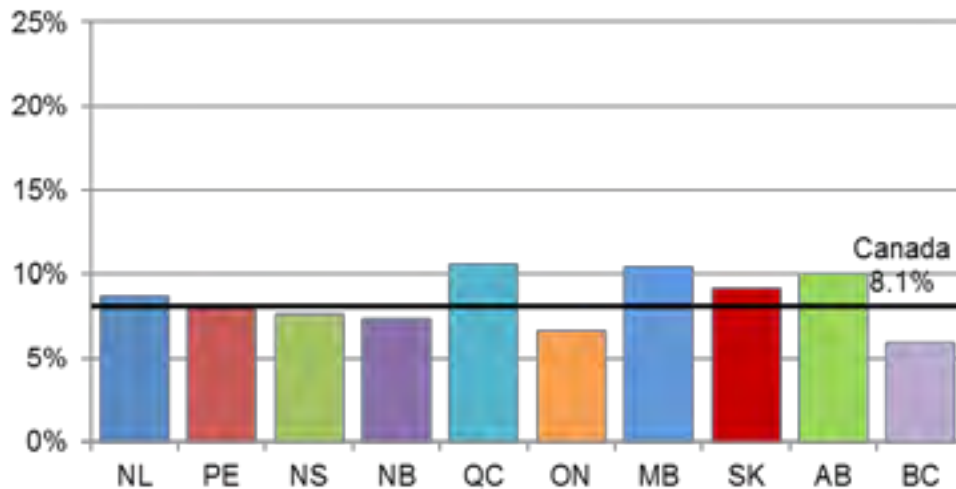

(Source: Table 11)

National drop-out rate[4]

In 2012, the provincial drop-out rate was 8.7% which was higher than the Canadian rate (8.1%). Across the country, the drop-rate ranged from a low of 5.9% in British Columbia to a high of 10.6% in Quebec. Newfoundland and Labrador had the sixth lowest drop-out rate in the country. However, less than three percentage points separate the six provinces with the lowest drop-out rate (see figure 12a).
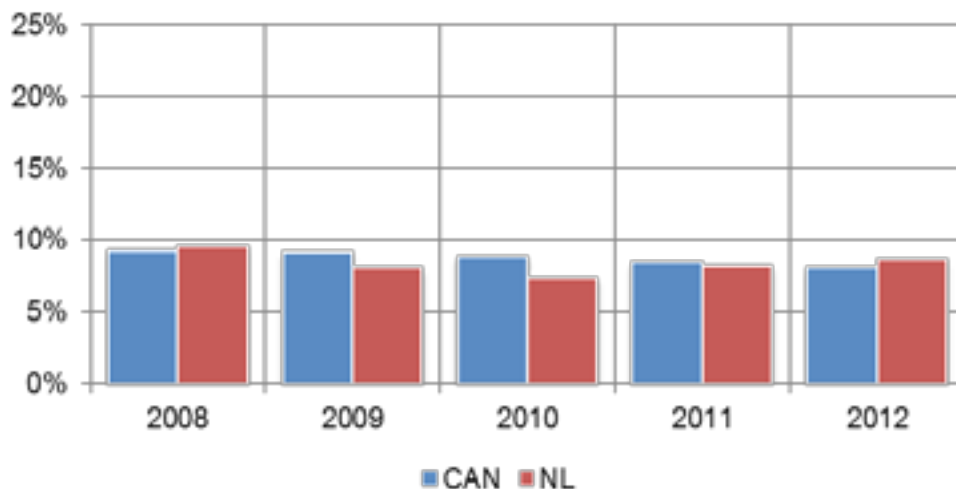
During the past five years, the provincial drop-out rate has slightly increased since hitting its lowest point of 7.4% in 2010. In each of following two years, the rate grew by less than one percentage point (8.2% in 2011 and 8.7% in 2012). The Canadian drop-out rate continued its decline dropping from 9.3% in 2008 to 8.1% in 2012 (see figure 12b).

Figure 12:   Drop-out rates

(a)   Across Canada (2012)

(b)   Trends in Canadian and Newfoundland and Labrador drop-out rates (2008 - 2012)

(Source: Table 12)

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4   The drop-out rate calculated by Statistics Canada is based on a three-year moving average.