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# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## ***BUILDING A GRAD NATION: As Number of “Dropout Factories” Falls, Nation On Track for First Time to Meet 90 Percent High School Graduation Rate Goal, New Report Finds***

For the first time, the nation is on track to meet the goal of a 90 percent high school graduation rate by the Class of 2020, according to a new report from Civic Enterprises, the Everyone Graduates Center, America’s Promise Alliance, and the Alliance for Excellent Education. The report, *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic*, finds that the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) increased from 71.7 percent in 2001 to 78.2 percent in 2010. It also finds that the number of “dropout factories” fell from 2,007 in 2002 to 1,424 in 2011.<sup>1</sup>

Released February 25 at the 2013 Building a Grad Nation Summit, the report attributes the progress in raising the national high school graduation rate to better data, an understanding of why and where students drop out, a heightened awareness of the consequences that dropping out has on individuals and the economy, a greater understanding of effective reforms and interventions, and real-world examples of progress and collaboration.

The greatest gains in raising the high school graduation rate have occurred for Hispanic and African American students. From 2006 to 2010, the AFGR for Hispanic students increased from 61.0 percent in 2006 to 71.4 percent in 2010, according to the report. During the same time period, the AFGR for African American students increased from 59.2 percent to 66.1 percent. The AFGR for white students increased from 80.3 percent to 83.0 percent.

“This is no longer the Silent Epidemic that we wrote about six years ago,” said **John Bridgeland, chief executive officer of Civic Enterprises and coauthor of the report**. “For the first time, the nation is on pace to meet the 90 percent high school graduation rate goal. While this is a historic milestone, graduation gaps affecting our most disadvantaged students threaten our progress in reaching this goal and fulfilling the American dream for all.”

Indeed, the report finds “shockingly low” graduation rates for African American, Hispanic, and low-income students, students with disabilities, and limited English proficiency students in many states. According to the report, twenty states still have high school graduation rates of 66 percent or below for African Americans students, while sixteen states also show graduation rates of 66 percent or below for Hispanic students. For low-income students, the graduation rate is 66 percent or less in eighteen states. In contrast, no states have white graduation rates lower than 66 percent; only four states have graduation rates below 75 percent for white students.

<sup>1</sup> A dropout factory is a high school in which twelfth grade enrollment is 60 percent or less of ninth grade enrollment three years earlier.

Among individual states, Minnesota is home to the most significant graduation gap in the nation between white and African American students (35 percentage points) and between white and Hispanic students (33 percentage points). In total, forty states have double-digit gaps between the high school graduation rates for white and African American students; thirty-five states have double-digit gaps between white and Hispanic students.

Geographically, southern states showed significant improvement, representing five of the ten states with the greatest improvement in AFGR since 2006. The top-performing state was Tennessee, which improved its AFGR from 63.4 percent in 2003 to 80.4 percent in 2010. Connecticut, where the AFGR declined from 80.9 percent in 2003 to 75.1 percent in 2010, was the lowest-performing state.

Southern states also showed the greatest improvement in reducing the number of dropout factories. As shown in the table below, the South accounts for the top seven states with the greatest decline in dropout factory high schools. At the top of the list is Texas, which reduced its dropout factories from 240 in 2002 to 108 in 2011.

	2002 Total Number of Schools	2011 Total Number of Schools	Change	Change in the Number of High School Students Attending Schools with Promoting Power at or Below 60%
Texas	240	108	-132	-172,792
Florida	162	69	-93	-185,652
Alabama	71	22	-49	-34,390
Georgia	156	108	-48	-58,234
North Carolina	106	63	-43	-52,100
South Carolina	101	62	-39	-34,599
Tennessee	58	23	-35	-33,940

“It’s exciting to see that the nation’s collective efforts are working,” said **Robert Balfanz, coauthor of the report and research scientist at Johns Hopkins University**. “Because of this work, 200,000 more students graduated high school in 2010 than if the graduation rate had not improved since 2006. But for the country to reach its 2020 graduation goal, the states that aren’t on-pace need to get in the game.”

Although the national high school graduation rate is on pace to reach 90 percent by 2020, many individual states have much more work to do, the report finds. Currently, only Vermont and Wisconsin have graduation rates of 90 percent or higher. An additional eighteen states are on pace to reach a 90 percent graduation rate by 2020, but thirty states are unlikely to do so.

In addition to the data on graduation rates and dropout factories, the report highlights innovative programs and efforts around the country involving schools, nonprofits, businesses, media, educational and governmental institutions, including case studies in Texas; Orlando, FL; the South; Shelbyville, IN; and Portland, OR.

The complete report is available at <http://americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Grad-Nation/Building-a-Grad-Nation.aspx>.



## **THE ENGLISH LEARNER DROPOUT DILEMMA: New Report Examines Consequences, Causes, and Solutions to High Dropout Rate Among English Language Learners**

A new report from the California Dropout Research Project at the University of California–Santa Barbara finds that English learner (EL) students make up 11 percent of students nationally, a percentage that climbs to 20 percent when students who were once classified as EL students are included. The report, *The English Learner Dropout Dilemma: Multiple Risks and Multiple Resources*, examines the consequences, causes, and solutions to the high school dropout crisis among EL students and argues that the social, economic, and health consequences of dropping out threatens both the general population as well as EL students.

As is the case for all dropouts, the economic costs for EL students who fail to earn a high school diploma are “steep,” the report notes, “both to the individual who must navigate the adult labor market without a base set of academic credentials, and to the society at large that must incorporate an inadequately prepared individual into its economic and civic spheres.”

One interesting difference the report identifies between outcomes for all dropouts and EL dropouts is the greater role education plays in an EL student’s civic participation. Specifically, the report points to research finding that social science course credits are “directly associated” with the odds of voting and registering to vote among children of immigrant parents, but not for children of U.S.-born parents. “Given the potential of social science course-taking to shape EL students’ future political participation, high school graduation has the power to influence not just their individual futures, but those of their communities as well,” the report notes.

While acknowledging that determining an accurate dropout rate for EL students is difficult due to multiple factors,<sup>2</sup> the report finds that EL students are about two times more likely to drop out than native and fluent English speakers.

“The dropout risk is high among EL students not only because they are learning English, but also because they are also significantly more likely than the general population to be disadvantaged racial or ethnic minorities, poor, and born to immigrant parents, each a status group at heightened risk of dropping out,” the report notes. “Whether EL students’ pronounced risk of attrition is due to linguistic, academic, background or school characteristics, or any combination thereof remains to be determined.”

The report also notes that while many of the same factors that produce dropouts in the general population also apply to EL students, some factors are unique to the EL population, including tracking as a result of EL status, access to certified teachers, and a high-stakes accountability system in which a greater proportion of EL students’ instructional time is spent on assessment preparation compared to non-EL students.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, EL students are a “constantly changing demographic,” the report argues, in which the most academically and linguistically proficient among them exit from the EL student group on a regular basis when they can demonstrate English proficiency and grade-level academic competency.

To address these issues, the report offers solutions in three areas: (1) targeted reforms at the programmatic level; (2) comprehensive reforms at the school level; and (3) systemic reforms to education in general. Examples of solutions presented in the report include the following:

- **Opportunity to learn: Academic content in EL programs:** Reframing EL programs to focus on academic rigor along with English acquisition to address one of the root causes of the EL dropout dilemma: poor academic preparation.
- **Teacher certification: Improving pedagogy in EL programs:** Low levels of teacher certification in and across EL programs threaten the quality of EL education.
- **Primary language instruction and moving beyond the English-only high school:** While most high schools offer course work in English only, successful programs capitalize on EL students' resources (literacy in the primary language) to allow content area development while they acclimate to new academic context and learning in English.
- **Shift from a deficit to an additive perspective:** EL students enter the U.S. education system with numerous linguistic and cultural resources that remain largely untouched by their teachers and classrooms. Capitalizing on these resources can improve EL achievement and stem the flow of dropouts.

“EL students are already at-risk and marginalized in U.S. schools; their exclusion from the population of high school graduates will only increase the economic and civic disparities that confront U.S. society,” the report concludes. “Only through concerted efforts by policymakers and educators will EL education shift from a compensatory, deficit-oriented approach to an additive, academically centered design. Only a systemic paradigmatic shift will fully prepare EL students academically and socially, for higher education and the workforce ... Ultimately, systemic reform is necessary in order to reframe EL educational programs as additive rather than subtractive, and EL students themselves as resources rather than problems.”

The complete report is available at [http://www.cdrp.ucsb.edu/pubs\\_reports.htm](http://www.cdrp.ucsb.edu/pubs_reports.htm).

#### **Building on Common Core State Standards to Improve Learning for English Language Learners**

On February 26, the Alliance for Excellent Education conducted a webinar on the transition to Common Core State Standards and Next-Generation Science Standards and the opportunities and challenges for the growing number of English language learners (ELLs). During the webinar, panelists discussed numerous initiatives underway to help ELLs access grade-level content while building their language proficiency, including Stanford University's Understanding Language initiative and the Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) Framework for English Language Proficiency Development Standards.

Webinar panelists: **Kenji Hakuta**, Lee L. Jacks Professor of Education, Stanford University; **Carrie Heath Phillips**, program director, common core state standards implementation, CCSSO; **Susan Pimentel**, education analyst and standards and curriculum specialist; and **Maria Santos**, deputy superintendent for instruction, leadership, and equity-in-action, Oakland Unified School District (CA). **Mariana Haynes**, senior fellow at the Alliance for Excellent Education and author of *The Role of Language and Literacy in College- and Career-Ready Standards: Rethinking Policy and Practice in Support of English Language Learners*, served as the moderator.

Archived video and PowerPoint slides from the webinar are available at <http://media.all4ed.org/webinar-feb-26-2013>.



## **STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESSES: Governors Focus on Digital Learning, College Completion, and Reducing High School Dropout Rates**

### **Maryland: O'Malley Pushes for Digital Learning**

**Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley (D)** focused on three major changes to education in his [January 30 state of the state address](#): (1) transitioning to twenty-first-century digital learning tools; (2) expanding career and technical education in high schools; and (3) making college more affordable and accessible to all students.

Believing an investment in digital learning will improve public education in the state and bring it up to date, O'Malley proposed new investments in technology to accelerate the state's transition to digital learning, including iPads, laptops, and Smart Boards.

O'Malley praised Prince George's Community College for partnering with the county's public schools to permit motivated high school students to work toward two-year associate's degrees while obtaining their high school diplomas. He wants to make this sort of early access to affordable college a reality for more families and asked the legislature to vote for an innovation fund that would allow him to do so.

For students who plan to enter college after high school, O'Malley laid out four steps to hold down the cost of tuition and focus on degree completion: (1) redesign college curricula and add courses that will help students complete their programs; (2) move toward a system of competency, rather than number of hours a student spends in class; (3) rework financial aid so more students can afford to take a full course load; and (4) offer more online opportunities for college credit.

### **Mississippi: Bryant Aims to Reduce High School Dropout Rate**

The way to lower high school dropout rates, according to **Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant (R)**, is to improve early childhood education. In his [January 22 state of the state address](#), he issued a set of policies to improve the state's schools, including ensuring that students do not advance from third grade until they can read and funding an additional \$15 million in literacy improvement efforts. Bryant also proposed an additional \$3 million to continue the literacy research that the organization Building Blocks is conducting to make sure children begin school ready to learn.

Bryant praised Jobs for Mississippi Graduates, which provides dropout prevention services and school-to-work transition for at-risk and disadvantaged youth, saying he wants to see it and programs like it expanded. In addition, he proposed funding national certificates for high school students enrolled in workforce training, and he continues to support Teach for America and the Mississippi Teacher Corps.

"Our very economic stability as a state is threatened if our education system is not improved," Bryant said. "We must make reforms now so that our citizens can be productive contributors to our communities and less reliant on social welfare programs ... the path to Mississippi's economic success must pass through the school house door."

## **Missouri: Nixon Proposes \$150 Million Funding Boost for Education**

In his [January 28 state of the state address](#), **Missouri Governor Jay Nixon (D)** announced plans to increase education funding by \$150 million, including \$17 million for early childhood education, \$100 million toward K–12 classrooms, and \$34 million for higher education. He expects the additional resources to contribute to better test scores, higher graduation rates, more college degrees, and more competitive Missourians.

With the extra money devoted to early childhood education, Nixon plans to double funding for the Missouri Preschool Program and put more money into programs like Head Start. All students, he believes, should be prepared to learn when they enter kindergarten.

For K–12 classrooms, the extra \$100 million will go toward training more teachers, modernizing equipment, and lengthening the school year by six days, a move Nixon said would give teachers more time to work with their students and students more time to learn.

The additional \$34 million allocated for higher education funding is tied to specific performance goals like increased student retention, higher program completion rates, and improved learning, along with increased accountability for higher education institutions in the state. Additionally, Nixon wants to help students who started college, but never finished, obtain their certificates and diplomas online. The state will begin enrolling those students at Western Governors University—a nonprofit institution that offers bachelor’s and master’s degrees in four areas.

“The dream of a college education should be within reach for all Missouri families,” Nixon said. “Because education is the best economic development tool there is.”

## **Tennessee: Haslam Announces “Drive to 55”; Sets Goal for 55 Percent of Tennesseans to Earn Associate’s Degree or Higher by 2025**

“Education is another example of how in Tennessee we’re distinguishing ourselves as different from the rest of the country,” **Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam (R)** said in his [January 28 state of the state address](#). “This administration is absolutely committed to public education and understands that the large majority of our students attend public schools and always will.”

Haslam’s commitment to public education starts with technology. He announced an investment of \$51 million to assist schools across the state in obtaining technology upgrades. Other investments include \$34 million for increased safety measures, \$35 million for teachers’ salaries, and \$22 million for a new high school for the Tennessee School for the Deaf.

He acknowledged that money alone will not solve the state’s education problems and raise standards, and said he is pursuing a strategic plan to pursue reform that produces results. As part of this reform plan, he proposed an additional \$9 million for schools in the bottom 5 percent of the state, making their total funding \$47 million.

In higher education, the governor announced a pledge made with the Tennessee Board of Regents and the University of Tennessee system to limit tuition increases to no more than 6 percent at four-year schools and 3 percent at two-year schools. His goal is for 55 percent of Tennesseans to earn an associate's degree or higher by 2025, dubbed "Drive to 55." To reach that goal, he aims to improve affordability and access to higher education.

Haslam's goal of creating a more competitive Tennessee extends to technical education, as well. He announced that the state is funding a new technical education complex tied to advanced manufacturing skills.

### **West Virginia: Tomblin Praises Alliance for Excellent Education's "Project 24" Initiative**

"Education in West Virginia must change," **West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin (D)** said in his [February 13 state of the state address](#). "And that change begins now."

Tomblin said change must begin with the youngest children and outlined a plan to ensure that every child is reading at grade level by the end of third grade. "If a child cannot read at grade level by the end of the 3rd grade, bad things happen," he said. "They will remain poor readers in high school, and they will be more likely to become high school dropouts." To help meet this goal, Tomblin said the state would work to ensure that every new elementary teacher is specially trained in reading.

At the middle school level, Tomblin wants the state to incorporate more workforce education. This would continue into high school in the form of vocational training for students who do not plan to attend college. He proposed that every student have access to counseling from the community and technical college staff to ensure that they are learning the skills they need to find employment after high school.

Tomblin also focused on guaranteeing that every student is taught by a great teacher. He announced that the state will begin paying for teachers to seek their ten-year recertification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. In addition, he emphasized that quality professional development must be continually provided to all teachers across the state.

The governor ended his remarks on education by focusing on the importance of technology and digital learning in the classroom. He encouraged West Virginia to join the Alliance for Excellent Education's "Project 24," a ground-breaking initiative to help school districts implement a plan around digital learning and technology over the next twenty-four months.

***Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress*** is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events in Washington, DC and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor; Cyndi Waite; and Kate Bradley.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. For more information about the Alliance, visit [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org); follow the Alliance on Twitter ([www.twitter.com/all4ed](https://www.twitter.com/all4ed)); Facebook ([www.facebook.com/all4ed](https://www.facebook.com/all4ed)); and the Alliance's "High School Soup" blog ([www.all4ed.org/blog](http://www.all4ed.org/blog)).