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NEW REPORT OFFERS RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEFINING AND IMPROVING GRADUATION RATES: Calls for New Federal Funding Stream for High Schools and an Expansion of Adolescent Literacy Initiatives

Decrying the low graduation rates that plague low-income and minority students, a new report calls for a federal investment of \$3.5 billion to address the academic needs of low-performing high school students.

Over the last several months, high school reform has enjoyed newfound attention from the policymaking community, including the nation's governors and President Bush. At the same time, the debate over how to define and improve high school graduation rates, particularly in light of increased accountability from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), has intensified. A new report from the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) takes an in-depth look at this debate and offers policy recommendations for improving graduation rate calculations and student outcomes.

According to the report, *What Counts: Defining and Improving High School Graduation Rates*, two issues dominate the debate on high school graduation rates. First, there is a need for a common understanding of "what [the] high school graduation rate" means. With different researchers using different methodologies and obtaining slightly different graduation rates, a simple concept—the number of students who actually receive their diploma—can be lost in technical jargon and esoteric language. Meanwhile, many practitioners are left to weed through the reports without much guidance on a particular calculation's value or relevance. As the NASSP report points out, while the different methods may produce a different result and academics can argue their validity, it is the practitioner who "must deal with the big picture—that at least one-third of our students are not graduating from high school," and about one-half of African-American and Hispanic students are not graduating on time. This issue—the great need to dramatically improve graduation rates, particularly for low-income and minority students—is the second focus of the report.

The variety of methodologies used to calculate graduation rates and limited resources (both technological and human) have created a climate in which school principals find themselves caught in the middle. The report notes that it is currently extremely difficult to account for all of the students who leave a school over a four-year period. Even with the best tracked figures, inaccuracies can arise as students move, transfer, or decide to obtain their GED. "Finding these students requires time and effort and takes limited resources away from other, perhaps more central priorities like improving student learning," the report reads. Given these challenges, NASSP recommends the implementation of school-based quality data systems that can track student enrollment, progress, and graduation, allowing schools to report accurate results to their

New Report Offers Recommendations for Defining and Improving Graduation Rates

(Continued from p. 1)

districts and states. The report also asks for resources for staff professional development and training on these systems.

“While most agree that the mission of high schools is to graduate students prepared for postsecondary life, the larger debate comes down to providing schools with the capacity to improve teaching and learning,” said **Gerald N. Tirozzi, executive director of NASSP**.

“There’s a domino effect that must take place. To improve graduation rates we must first reform high schools, but to reform high schools we must first build their capacity to better serve low-performing students. Building school capacity for teaching and learning requires a significant long-term investment for implementing systemic improvement that raises individual student and school-wide performance levels.”

In order to make more sense of the graduation rate calculations and methodologies that exist, NASSP also recommends the formation of a national commission that includes policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to address this issue and suggest a uniform way of keeping track of students as they move in and out of schools.¹

In order to improve graduation rates, NASSP proposes the creation of a “new and separate funding stream to address the academic needs of low-performing high school students.” It notes that only 5 percent of Title I funds go to high schools, and calls for an investment of \$3.5 billion in high schools, a number that “would be comparable to the amount of Title I funds provided to elementary schools.” The report comes out clearly in support of investments in early education but stresses the need for much more funding at the secondary level. In its other recommendations, NASSP supports the funding and expansion of adolescent literacy initiatives to improve high school students’ academic achievement and graduation rates. It also asks for flexibility for states to address grade-level structures and high school completion options that run from three to five years so the “priority is student mastery of subject rather than just completion of seat time.”

The NASSP report examines the pros and cons of the three main methods states currently use to calculate graduation rates—longitudinal studies, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) method, and the basic completion rate. In addition, it evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of four methods that researchers have used to estimate graduation rates nationally and on a state-by-state basis, including formulas used by NCES, the Manhattan Institute, the Urban Institute, and Johns Hopkins University. (More information on each method is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/StraightAs/Volume4No15.html>.)

¹ In late 2004, a special task force on high school dropout and graduation rates created by **then U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige** issued a final report that addressed some of these issues. The task force’s report included the mathematical equations that it recommends for calculating on-time graduation rates, completion rates, transfer rates, and dropout rates. It said that these rates require data that follow individual students throughout their high school careers (so-called cohort data), but it also offers alternatives for states that currently do not have that capacity. (More information on the task force report is at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/StraightAs/Volume4No21.html#Task>.)

What Counts also offers a historical perspective on high school reform, tracing the movement back to the turn of the nineteenth century through the push for comprehensive high schools, the *Nation at Risk* report, and the enactment of NCLB.

The complete report is available at <http://www.principals.org>.

U.S. Department of Education Accepting Grant Applications to Support Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems

The U.S. Department of Education has announced a grant competition for a program to assist states in the design, development, and implementation of statewide longitudinal data systems. Only state education agencies (SEA) may apply. Successful applicants will receive between \$1 million and \$6 million for the entire project to develop longitudinal data systems that efficiently and accurately manage, analyze, disaggregate, and use individual student data.

A part of the No Child Left Behind Act, this grant program was funded for the first time last year when it received \$24.8 million in the fiscal year 2005 omnibus funding bill. Under NCLB, state accountability interests require increasingly detailed data for data decisionmaking. However, meeting these requirements may pose challenges to states, because they may not have the student-level data needed to meet reporting and analytical requirements efficiently. Also, states and the districts that provide them with data have limited staff resources to address multiple, often simultaneous, requests for data from federal, state, and other users.

Statewide longitudinal data systems are intended to allow states to generate and use the data needed to comply with reporting requirements in an accurate and timely manner, facilitate research to improve student learning and close achievement gaps, promote linkages across states, and protect student privacy. While applications from states with the most limited ability to collect, analyze, and report individual student achievement data will have priority, consideration will not be limited to those states.

The deadline for the submission of applications is June 20, 2005. More information for grantees, including applications, is available at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/slds/applicant.html>.



MULTIPLE MEASURES ARE BETTER THAN ONE: New Report Says High School Graduation Should Not Rely on a Single Test

A multiple measures approach to graduation, in contrast to a single test, can provide broader means for students to demonstrate their learning, better strategies for schools to evaluate the full range of standards, and rich individualized information about student learning, according to a new report from Stanford University's School Redesign Network. *Multiple Measures Approaches to High School Graduation* argues that "multiple measures" approaches, which examine a range of options to demonstrate student proficiency—such as student portfolios, essays, and research projects—have helped to raise achievement, and have done so without increasing dropout rates, which is one of the concerns about test-only approaches to determine eligibility for graduation.

"High school graduation policies have important consequences for teaching, learning, and student achievement," said **Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor of education at Stanford University, a member of the Alliance for Excellent Education's board of directors, and the lead author of the report.** "It is important to balance tests with other sources of evidence and to

Multiple Measures Are Better Than One

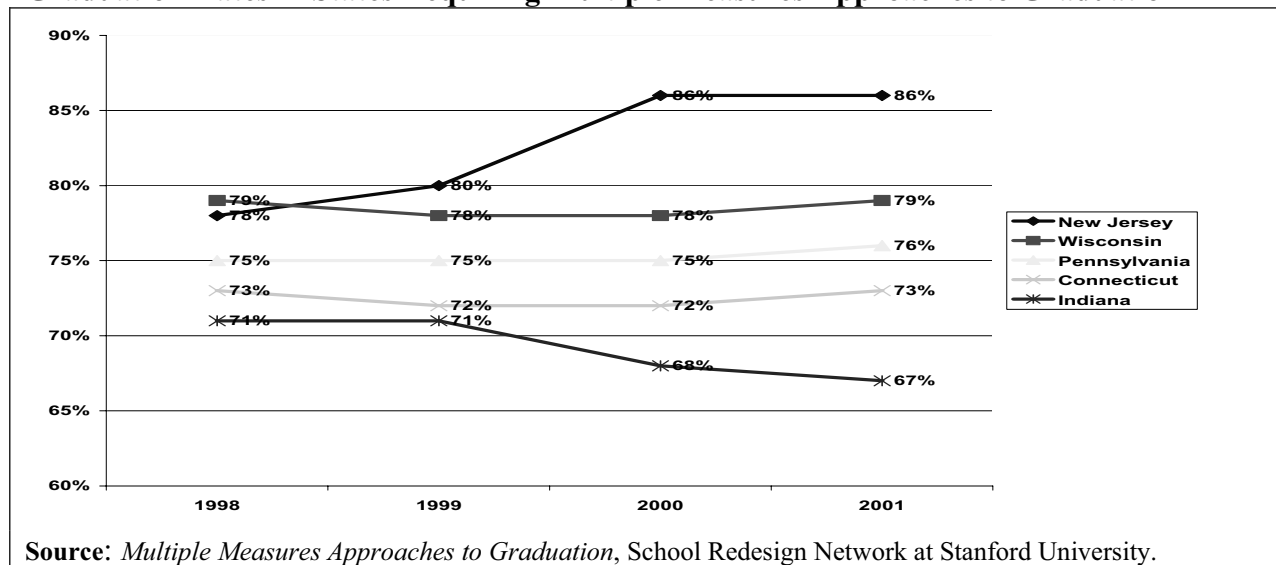
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encourage students to do real-world tasks that go beyond what can be measured with multiple-choice questions.”

According to the report, as many as seven in ten public school students will have to pass an exit exam as a component of high school graduation by 2008. This growing dependence on exit exams has led to concerns over fewer incentives to keep struggling students in school, a narrowing of the curriculum, and reduced graduation rates, especially for minority students. In an analysis of the graduation rates of five states that made passing an exit exam a requirement for graduation, the report found that graduation rates dropped an average of three percentage points after states implemented the exams.

As concerns about the tie between exit exams and higher dropout rates have increased, most of the twenty-five states that have passed legislation that includes an examination as requirement for high school graduation have begun using the state examination as one of a combination of indicators to determine graduation readiness. These states use alternatives—such as student portfolios, scores on other tests (like the ACT or the SAT), or the combined evaluation of local assessments—along with the state test, thus allowing a student to demonstrate knowledge through performance. The report notes that states that introduced multiple measures systems of assessment have tended to maintain higher and steadier rates of graduation compared to states with test-only graduation exams.

Graduation Rates in States Requiring Multiple Measures Approaches to Graduation



“Most authorities argue that using a variety of measures to organize and assess student learning—including measures that represent real-life tasks rather than only multiple-choice and short answer items—provides broader, more complete, and more accurate understanding of what students know than is possible with traditional tests alone,” the report reads. In addition, approaches that use essay examinations, research projects, or oral exhibitions encourage students

to “master complex skills as they apply them in practice” and “ensure that students will have opportunities to practice the skills they need to use outside of school.”

In addition to the benefits to the student, the report found that locally administered and scored performance assessments “help teachers better understand students’ strengths, needs, and approaches to learning, as well as the expectations of the tests.” These assessments also provide teachers with much more useful classroom information about their students and create the possibility that teachers not only will be able to “develop curriculum aimed at challenging performance skills” but also to shape their teaching in ways that are more effective for individual students. The report noted that the benefits of local assessments far outweigh those of the “external testing programs that send secret, secured tests into the school and whisk them out again for machine scoring that produces numerical quotients many months later.”

The complete report describes the assessment systems currently in place in the states that use a multiple measures approach to high school graduation, including many states that combine state requirements with local performance assessments and other measures. This report is available at <http://www.schoolredesign.net/srn/mm/mm.php>.



FACT OR FRICTION?: Challenges in Moving from Large, Comprehensive Schools to Smaller Schools

In an *Education Week* commentary, **Larry Myatt, founder of Fenway High School, in Boston**, draws upon his work in Boston and with educators in other cities and multistate networks to warn of nine “friction points”—places where the conversion from large to small high schools falters. (The complete list is shown on page 6.)

Myatt writes that the movement to break down large, comprehensive high schools has certainly gained a great deal of momentum over last few years, but that people still clamor to see schools that do the job well. Research has shown that successful small schools provide greater personalization, increase adult accountability for the achievement of all students, and create better links among schools, families, community organizations, and institutions of higher education.

Why haven’t more of these schools emerged? According to Myatt, “Given the complicated organization of high schools—built on years of state and federal policies . . . attempting to change one or two of the working parts quickly results in frustration and cynicism.” At the same time, simply reorganizing a large school into smaller units or building a new, small school will not, in and of itself, dramatically increase student achievement. “Despite calls for ‘reform,’ most high schools continue to function as comfortable environments for adults, displaying few tangible changes in operations, values, priorities, professional culture, and, most important, teaching methods and student engagement,” Myatt argues.

By focusing on the issues that bog down reform and inhibit the successful formation of small schools, Myatt, who is also the director of the small schools leadership project for the Great Boston Principal Residency Network at Northeastern University, hopes to invigorate the debate around research-and-development initiatives that offer a range of possible solutions and alternatives.

Larry Myatt's "Nine Friction Points in Moving to Smaller School Units"

- 1) **Facilitating Teacher Talk:** While research has shown that increased staff involvement and responsibility in smaller settings is crucial to improvement, Myatt notes that most teachers have little experience in making decisions about course offerings or student placement, nor in taking on other responsibilities that normally would fall to administrators. He argues that teachers need support in convening meetings, setting agendas, and interacting with collaborators outside the school.
- 2) **Challenging the Cultural Glue:** While large comprehensive high schools may have strayed from their intellectual vision, they still represent a "stronghold of identity" in communities. Football championships have been won and dances have been held at these schools, and relatives of today's students make up the alumni. Myatt writes that priority needs to be given to turning schools into more than "buildings," and an emphasis needs to be placed on collaboration between staff members and those outside the school to sustain strong relationships and "supports for achievement and lofty dreams."
- 3) **Horizontal Structures, Short-Lived Relationships:** Myatt supports teacher-student "looping" that can prevent a student from undergoing seemingly endless, unconnected sequences of teachers, schedules, subject matter, and fellow students. "Looping" occurs when a teacher moves with his or her students to the next grade level rather than sending them to another teacher at the end of the school year.
- 4) **Reprogramming Our Special Populations:** "Moving to smaller schools cannot be the means through which we continue, or further entrench, [the practice of segregating] special populations in smaller learning communities 'of their very own.'"
- 5) **Reconsidering the Guidance Model:** Myatt writes that guidance counselors often struggle to hold up under the load as small schools take on greater responsibility for the social and emotional lives of their students. He argues against the model of one student being interviewed while others wait for their "twice-yearly, twenty-minute life-after-high-school sessions." Instead, "highly trained teacher/advisors" could take on a greater role in helping students prepare for post-high school decisions, while student-support counseling can help with some of the emotional issues.
- 6) **Prisoners of the Infrastructure:** How can teachers and administrators be faithful to instructional priorities when dealing with a nine-hundred-seat auditorium and only three hundred students? Myatt argues for preplanning for smaller schools, as cities replace or refit their aging school buildings.
- 7) **Too Much Curriculum, Too Little Time:** "How can I offer nine levels of math with a math faculty of four?"
- 8) **Cohort Thinking vs. Human Nature:** Myatt discusses steps that schools and districts have taken to deal with students' individual styles, needs, strengths, and challenges.
- 9) **Public Engagement Cannot Be an Add-On:** "If we don't win the hearts and minds of the people involved, things will stay as they are."

The complete article is available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/04/06/30myatt.h24.html>.



DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN: Los Angeles Superintendent Announces Plan to Turn Around Lowest-Performing Secondary Schools

In the latest effort to turn around the lowest-performing secondary schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, **Superintendent Roy Romer** has announced a new plan to reassign staff, hire outside consultants, and rearrange large schools into smaller, more personalized environments. The nine schools have failed to meet state achievement goals for seven years in a row and, under No Child Left Behind, must be restructured. For some schools, this restructuring will be the second time in five years that Romer has had to step in and enact reforms—some schools, for example, have already been divided into smaller learning groups.

"We are taking a very comprehensive approach to finding solutions to improve academic achievement at these nine schools that will be tailored to each individual school," Romer said. "We would expect to develop strategies that will also work at other schools in the district. It is

also important to remember that even though these nine schools failed to meet federal requirements, many of them have been advancing academically by other recognized standards.” In addition to reconstituting the nine schools into smaller learning communities, Romer’s restructuring plan will include compacts with faculty and staff to commit to the restructuring process, reassignment of some personnel, a careful evaluation of administrator qualifications, possible stipends to attract personnel to hard-to-staff schools, a focus on equity and closing the achievement gap, and safe campuses through the deployment of school police officers.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Romer has said that a movement toward smaller schools would solve many of the district’s “most intractable problems,” including high dropout rates. However, it noted, some community groups and others say that “simply dividing up a troubled campus does not in and of itself reduce the serious educational problems on these campuses.”

John Perez, head of the Los Angeles teacher union, told the *Times* that the district had not done enough to include teachers, staff members, and parents in its reorganization plan. “They spring this restructuring plan on a faculty that has not had a single day of working with the district . . . in deciding how the school will be restructured. Our contention to them is that when you go through this process, as mandated by federal law, you’ve got to include the entire community.”

More information on Romer’s plan and the nine affected schools is available in the *Times* article at <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-dropout26mar26,1,4643939.story>.

Governor Announces Interest-Free Money for Small Schools in Michigan

Michigan Governor Jennifer Granhold (D) is pushing for zero-interest loans for school districts with high dropout rates, low test scores, and at least eight hundred high school students to help to build new, smaller high schools of no more than five hundred students. Approximately twenty-seven schools would be eligible to apply for the loans and could borrow up to \$15 million from a pool of \$180 million.

“Michigan lags in too many economic and education measurements not to try to heighten young people’s interest in school, even at such a relatively late stage as grades 9–12,” read an editorial in the *Detroit Free Press*. “Creating smaller schools where the disinterested and disaffected have a better chance of being rescued is an investment worth making.” (The editorial is available at http://www.freep.com/voices/editorials/ehigh18e_20050418.htm.)

The new, smaller schools would not replace older high schools but would house students elsewhere on the campus in new buildings or renovated structures such as old middle schools. **Jeremy Hughes, acting state superintendent of public instruction**, stressed that the new small schools could evolve into magnet schools with specializations in math, business, or the arts. “Just making things small isn’t necessarily going to make a difference in student achievement,” he told the *Detroit Free Press*. “There are benefits, though, in terms of being able to develop relationships with instructors, of being more than just a number.”

“Granhold has plan to offer interest-free money to build small schools” is available at http://www.freep.com/news/education/granholm11e_20050411.htm.

Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both in Washington, D.C., 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. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America’s secondary school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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Public Education Policy And Progress

Volume 5 No. 8: April 25, 2005

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Woodbridge, VA

Volume 5 No. 8: April 25, 2005

In this issue:

- New Report Offers Recommendations for Defining and Improving Graduation Rates: Calls for New Federal Funding Stream for High Schools and an Expansion of Adolescent Literacy Initiatives
- Multiple Measures Are Better Than One: New Report Says High School Graduation Should Not Rely on a Single Test
- Fact or Friction?: Challenges in Moving from Large, Comprehensive Schools to Smaller Schools
- Déjà Vu All Over Again: Los Angeles Superintendent Announces Plan to Turn Around Lowest-Performing Secondary Schools



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