



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



SITTING AT HOME ON GRADUATION DAY: New Report Says that 1.2 Million Students From the Class of 2006 Failed to Graduate with Classmates

As June comes to a close, the nation marks the end of another school year. Earlier this month, millions of high school seniors walked across stages at graduation ceremonies to receive their high school diplomas. For many students, Graduation Day culminated 13 years of study; for others, it served as a springboard into postsecondary education. However, according to a new analysis conducted by the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center, it was just another day for an estimated 1.2 million students nationwide who failed to graduate with their peers.

“Our research paints a much starker picture of the challenges we face in high school graduation,” said **EPE Research Center Director Christopher B. Swanson**, who oversaw the development of the report. “When 30 percent of our ninth graders fail to finish high school with a diploma, we are dealing with a crisis that has frightening implications for our country’s future.”

Based on 2002–03 data (the most recent available), only 69.6% of public school students nationwide graduate from high school with a regular diploma. Among minority students, graduation rates are particularly troubling for African Americans (51.6%), American Indians (47.4%), and Hispanics (55.6%). Asian (77.0%) and white students (76.2%) fare much better. The report also finds that female students (72.7%) graduate from high school at higher rates than their male classmates (65.2%). The gender disparity holds for every racial and ethnic group and is widest among African-American females, who graduate at a 57.8% rate, compared to only 44.3% for African-American males, a difference of 13.5%.¹

The report also breaks down graduation rates for specific geographic areas. Students from urban areas face the longest odds in their efforts to earn high school diplomas, with only 60% graduating on time, compared to 73.1% of rural students and 74.4% of students from the suburbs. When examining graduation rates for the nation’s 50 largest school districts, the report finds a mean graduation rate of approximately 56%. The districts with the highest and lowest graduation rates are shown in the chart at the top of page 2.

¹ Graduation rates featured in the analysis were calculated using the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) method that Dr. Swanson developed. Using data from the Common Core of Data, the CPI estimates the probability that a student in the ninth grade will complete high school on time with a regular diploma.

Sitting at Home on Graduation Day (Continued from p. 1)

Top 5 School Districts		Bottom 5 School Districts	
<i>District</i>	<i>Graduation Rate</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Graduation Rate</i>
Fairfax Co., VA	82.5%	Detroit	21.7%
Wake Co., NC	82.2%	Baltimore City, MD	38.5%
Baltimore Co., MD	81.9%	New York City	38.9%
Montgomery Co., MD	81.5%	Milwaukee	43.1%
Cypress-Fairbanks, TX	81.3%	Cleveland	43.8%

In order to determine at what point students are lost in the high school pipeline, the report analyzes the transitions from 9th and 10th grade, 10th to 11th, 11th to 12th, and 12th grade to graduation. It finds that 35% of the students who “fall off track” do so between 9th and 10th grade. In contrast, only 17% of students who make it to the 12th grade fail to earn a diploma.

The analysis is a part of a special issue of *Education Week* called *Diplomas Count: An Essential Guide to Graduation Policy and Rates* and marks the first in an annual Graduation Project series. In addition to the graduation rate estimates, the issue contains information on state policies related to high school graduation requirements and an examination of the (relatively low) worth of the General Educational Development (GED) credential. It also examines factors that predict whether a student is likely to drop out, including low attendance or failing grades in math or English. A final piece of the project is an online mapping service that allows users to zoom in on each of the nation’s individual school districts and compare district numbers to state and national numbers.

The complete report, supplemental information, and online mapping tool are all available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2006/06/22/index.html>.



MORE GRAD RATE CALCULATIONS: NCES Finds Slight Improvement in National Graduation Rate, Continued Discrepancies in State-Reported Rates

On June 20, the same day as the *Education Week* release, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) announced new figures that show a 0.4% improvement in the national high school graduation rate based on its Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR). The release shows increases from 2003–2004 in 32 states and in the District of Columbia, no change in 1 state, and declines in 15 states. Two states had missing data. However, the report also identifies 28 states that overestimated their graduation rates by more than 5%.

Even though the new numbers show progress at the national level and at the state level, the progress is very small. Among the 32 states that showed improvement, the average increase was only 1.7% and only 5 states saw increases of more than 3%. The District of Columbia, with an 8.6% increase, and Louisiana, with a 5.3% increase, showed the greatest progress. On the other hand, Nevada, with a 14.9% decrease, and Arizona, with a 9.1% decrease, saw the largest drops in graduation rates as calculated using AFGR. Overall, 14 states had rates of 80.0% or higher. Like Dr. Christopher Swanson’s Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) method, AFGR is an attempt to better understand national and state graduation rates that have been obscured for far too long by inaccurate data and flawed accountability systems at the state and federal levels. While the calculations are slightly different (and too technical to explain here), both methods

produce similar estimates that are seen as more reliable than those that states report. At the national level, the NCES report pegged the national high school graduation rate at 74.3% in 2003–04, up 0.4% from from 2002–03, which is a few percentage points from the rate calculated by Swanson.

The AFGR, based on data reported by state education agencies to the NCES, was meant to represent the first step toward gathering and providing better graduation rate data and making high schools more accountable for dropouts. As such, it is only a stopgap tool to present a more accurate picture of the national trend around high school graduation rates while states work toward developing and using more comprehensive data collection systems.

By publishing states’ AFGRs alongside the graduation rates that states report under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the U.S. Department of Education hopes to use the AFGR to draw attention to which states need to improve the reporting of their graduation rates. Based on the most recent rates, the following states have the largest differences between their reported graduation rate and the rate calculated by NCES:

State	Reported Rate	AFGR	Difference
North Carolina	95.7%	71.4%	24.3%
Mississippi	84.0%	62.7%	21.3%
South Carolina	78.0%	60.6%	17.4%
Indiana	90.0%	73.5%	16.5%
Massachusetts	96.2%	79.3%	12.9%

The complete report is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006606>.

Operation Kama’aina Come Home: Hawaii to Track High School Graduates

A new project in Hawaii will track the state’s high school students in an endeavor to lure them back to the island to fill jobs after they graduate from college. Operation Kama’aina Come Home will provide valuable feedback that could be used to change the state’s public education system. Hawaii’s Department of Education and Department of Business, Economic Development, and Tourism (DBEDT) will lead the effort.

“Every year, thousands of graduates leave the state to attend college on the Mainland,” said **Rick Manayan, DBEDT information director and special assistant to the director**. “Some will return. Some won’t. During the 1990s, we lost a lot of very talented graduates to the Mainland job market because of a lack of opportunities here, so we specifically wanted to target our people with Hawaii roots and attract them back with jobs that pay a higher median salary.”

The project will encourage graduating high school seniors to register online with their respective high school’s alumni association. That information will be kept on a website that will grant free access to Hawaii employers and allow them to post job openings targeted to native-born students. Although only a handful of high schools are currently onboard, **Hawaii State Schools Superintendent Pat Hamamoto** hopes that next year’s entire graduating class will be able to participate.

“DBEDT wants to know where our graduates go and what they do and we’re committed to work with them,” Hamamoto said. “It’s about bringing them back — for jobs, for the future. And I need feedback so we can improve what we do. I need to know where they are, what they’re doing, what kinds of jobs they’ve taken, [and] if they finish school.”

“State determined to lure back grads” is available at <http://www.honoluluadvertiser.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060607/NEWS07/606070350/1001>.



LESSONS FROM THE ALABAMA READING INITIATIVE: Report Offers Advice to States and School Districts on Starting an Adolescent Reading Program

Although primarily a program for elementary students, the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) is offered to students in 135 of about 1,000 middle schools and high schools statewide. Since the program's inception in 1998, the number of students who have demonstrated reading proficiency has increased by 8.8% in ARI schools—more than double the progress of schools not in the program.

In an attempt to learn from the ARI's success and to provide recommendations for other districts or states that want to start a secondary reading initiative, Carnegie Corporation of New York asked the American Institutes of Research (AIR) to conduct a study on the ARI's impact on Alabama's middle and high schools. Over the course of its investigation, AIR found positive outcomes for students and teachers alike. Through interviews with teachers, administrators, reading coaches, and others involved, the report, *Lessons and Recommendations from the Alabama Reading Initiative: Sustaining Focus on Secondary Reading*, tells how the ARI overcame obstacles such as an initial lack of support and inattention to the reading struggles of older students.

In its findings, the report notes that much of the ARI's success among secondary school students was due to educators who modified the ARI model to meet the needs of older students. Initially, the ARI model included reading-across-the-curriculum strategies for secondary schools, but this approach was never articulated well enough for teachers to understand how to implement it in content area classes. According to the report, Alabama's secondary teachers and their reading coaches adapted materials and approaches to meet their particular needs. In light of this experience, the study offers its first lesson to schools and districts: **Be responsive to the different needs of secondary and elementary students and schools—a one-size-fits-all approach won't work.**

While the elementary and secondary school components of the ARI have their own unique characteristics, the report's second lesson stresses that **a successful K–12 initiative must have a coherent continuum of reading instruction across all grades.** Such a continuum would not only articulate reading goals for students, but it would also outline “best practices” for teachers, offer ways that these elements could be aligned and modified at every grade level, and increase communication—especially between elementary and secondary schools.

The report's authors also conclude that **adequate and consistent support from specialized staff matters more than material resources for an initiative like the ARI.** In Alabama, the state was only able to provide a handful of staff to support implementation in secondary schools. At the school level, some schools have no school reading coach, whereas others have a coach who is responsible for implementing ARI at two or more schools or who divides his or her time among several tasks. In Alabama, schools worked creatively within budget constraints and relied on local means to support the continuation of the ARI.

In its final lesson, the report says to **be attentive to the local, state, and national policy environments related to reading.** The national focus on reading in grades K–3 has made it

difficult in Alabama to maintain the emphasis on literacy issues for older students—especially as funds have been devoted to expanding reading programs in the early grades. “Although ARI administrators maintain some support for secondary schools, they face an ongoing struggle to allocate funds and continue professional development related to Initiative approaches for teachers in grades 4 to 12,” the report reads. The report adds that the “current attention to adolescent literacy at the national level and through organizations like Carnegie and the Alliance for Excellent Education suggests that funding sources will be available to mount initiatives like ARI, and states and districts desiring to do so are advised to be attentive to possible ways to support their efforts.”

Although the report’s authors did not specifically examine test scores or other quantitative indicators, teachers and students reported positive outcomes as a result of the program. Teachers say that their teaching philosophies “had come to include awareness of the importance of reading in all content areas and their own personal responsibilities to address students’ reading difficulties.” They also report more collaboration across content areas as a “professional community developed among teachers around their shared intent to help their students read and learn more effectively.”

Students say that they have increased confidence in themselves as readers, find that they use the strategies they learned in ARI when reading on their own, and report personal accomplishments, such as better comprehension skills, increased vocabularies, and strengthened abilities to present ideas orally. Teachers also describe other qualitative measures of improved achievement in students, including a greater concern about academic success and increased aspiration for postsecondary education.

While the ARI has enjoyed success, it, much like rest of the nation, still has far to go in providing the necessary support to help older students become better readers. As the report notes, only 20% of students in middle schools, junior high schools, and high schools in Alabama attend schools that participate in the initiative.

The complete report is available at
http://www.air.org/publications/documents/ARI%20Popular%20Report_final.pdf.



TRANSFORMING HIGH SCHOOL TEACHING AND LEARNING: Focus on Teaching and Curriculum is Necessary to Improve High School Achievement According to Report

Noting that much of the work around high school reform has focused on organizational aspects, such as creating smaller schools and reducing class sizes (while adding that improved instruction and achievement do not flow directly from them), a new report from the Aspen Institute suggests that improvements in student performance require a change in the interaction of students and teachers around the content that needs to be learned. The paper, *Transforming High School Teaching and Learning: A District-Wide Design* by **Aspen Institute Senior Fellow Judy Wurtzel**, suggests ways to strengthen this interaction and thereby improve student achievement.

The report begins with a discussion of teacher professionalism, which, it says, teachers define as “freedom to make their own decisions about what, how, and sometimes even whom they teach.” Against that definition, it points to the progress of high-poverty districts and schools where gains

Transforming High School Teaching and Learning (Continued from p. 5)

in student achievement are occurring because of “improvement strategies that constrain teacher autonomy.”

In an effort to strike a balance between teacher autonomy and prescription, the report examines common elements from other professions and uses them to develop a “new vision of teacher professionalism that supports instructional improvement.” Based on observations from other professions, the report calls for tight prescription when there is clear evidence about what works; a substantial knowledge base about more and less effective practices exists; the professional is less expert; consistency matters; outcomes are poor; and client risk is high. On the other hand, it calls for less prescription when the opposite is true; for example, when evidence about what works is less clear or when the professional has more experience and expertise.

Using these guidelines, the report calls for a new teacher professionalism that holds teachers accountable for increasing student performance, improving their own practices through professional development, and working with other teachers in an effort to share knowledge. In return, the report asks the teaching profession to identify and prepare its members in the “knowledge, skills, and standards of practice that are most likely to lead to student learning” and to hold its members accountable if they are unable to improve student performance, including disciplining or ejecting them, if necessary.

The report is quick to acknowledge that some current teachers would not go along with this new definition. It calls for a comprehensive strategy to attract and retain highly qualified teachers who would but also stresses continued investment in current teachers. Noting that over 10% of teachers from urban areas leave every year, the report encourages districts to recruit aggressively but hire selectively, in order to create an “aura of selectivity.” Once hired, new teachers should receive induction programs that include them in professional development opportunities, provide them with expert mentoring in their particular content areas, and give them reasonable class loads that allow them the time needed for induction supports, according to the report. After teachers have taught for a few years, the report says that a district should conduct a rigorous evaluation and only offer tenure to teachers who demonstrate effectiveness. The report also encourages districts to create career ladders and compensation systems to retain highly effective teachers.

Although creating a culture of professionalism and attracting and retaining teachers who buy into the new culture are essential ingredients to transforming high school teaching and learning, the report also calls for “clear expectations for instructional practice,” “anchor standards,” and aligned assessments. It says that course work should be rigorous, aligned to standards, and explicitly tied to students’ prior work, the rest of their high school education, postsecondary education, and the world of work.

In regard to standards, the report argues that states and districts should adopt “anchor standards” that “move from a long list of standards for each subject to a limited number of core standards that define the essential elements of what students must know in each discipline.” It adds that standards should be accompanied by a comprehensive assessment system that determines student mastery and that provides data on whether a student is “on track” toward mastery.

The report also argues for a common core curriculum. For professionals, a core curriculum allows them to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of their practices. It also “grounds professional conversations and teacher work across schools.” The report says that common lessons can serve as a “powerful tool to support instructional improvement” and provides examples of what some of these common lessons could look like and how they could function.

In its conclusion, the paper addresses the implications of its recommendations, such as the role of students, the marshaling of resources, and “sustained and difficult conversations” among teachers and teacher organizations about how teachers view their obligations to their students.

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

Education Trust Finds “Stunning Differences” in College Readiness Based on Teacher Quality

Based on soon-to-be-released research from Ohio, Illinois, and Wisconsin, a report from the Education Trust finds that schools in these states with high percentages of low-income and minority students are more likely to have inexperienced teachers with lower basic academic skills. The report, *Teaching Inequality: How Poor and Minority Students Are Shortchanged on Teacher Quality*, also found “stunning differences” in students’ readiness for college, depending on the quality of teachers in their schools.

“For a very long time, we’ve allowed the public to believe that poor and minority children are performing below other children simply because they enter school behind,” said **Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust**. “As the data in this report make clear, however, much of the achievement gap is not about the kids and their families at all. Rather, we take the children who come to us with less and give them less in school, too—including less of the very resource they need the most: high-quality teachers.”

The report notes that, in high-poverty secondary schools, one in three core academic courses are taught by out-of-field teachers—meaning they have no major or minor in the subject they teach, compared to about one in five classes in low-poverty schools. In math classes, the results are even worse, with nearly half of the math classes in both high-poverty and high-minority schools being taught by teachers without a major or minor in math or a related field. In grades 5–8, about 70% of math teachers lack these credentials.

Because Illinois administers the ACT assessment to every 11th grader, it was possible for the report’s authors to examine the impact of teacher quality on college readiness. Not surprisingly, the report finds that students who took advanced levels of math were more likely to perform at college level on the ACT, but the report also identifies “stunning differences” in the levels of readiness according to the quality of teachers at a school. In schools with just -average teacher quality, “students who completed Algebra II were *more* prepared for college than their peers in schools with the lowest teacher quality who had *completed Calculus*.”

In order to “end the unfair distribution of teacher talent,” the report calls for scaling back prerogatives that allow experienced teachers to select their assignments; providing higher salaries to teachers and principals willing to work in schools with high concentrations of poor and minority students; and reserving tenure for teachers who demonstrate effectiveness at producing student learning.

<http://www2.edtrust.org/EdTrust/Press+Room/teacherquality2006.htm>

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



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