

ALLIANCE FOR  
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



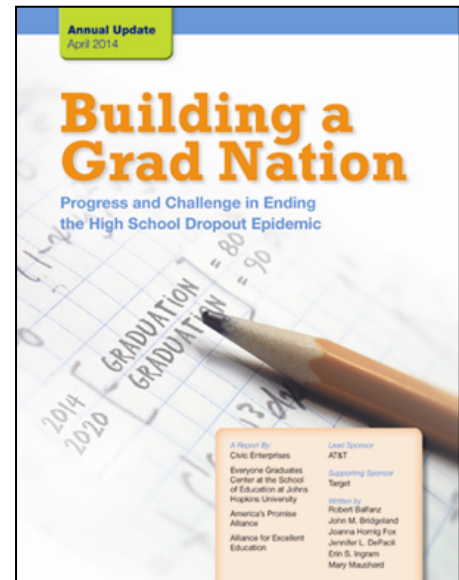
## ***BUILDING A GRAD NATION: With High School Graduation Rate Over 80 Percent, Nation on Track to Meet 90 Percent Goal by 2020, New Report Finds***

The nation's high school graduation rate is on the rise and rose above 80 percent for the first time in U.S. history while the number of "dropout factories"—schools with graduation rates lower than 60 percent—fell from 2,007 in 2002 to 1,359 in 2012, according to the 2014 *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic*, released April 28 by Civic Enterprises, the Everyone Graduates Center, America's Promise Alliance, and the Alliance for Excellent Education.

*Building a Grad Nation* is the fifth annual report on the nation's progress toward a 90 percent high school graduation rate by 2020. Since 2006, the graduation rate has increased from 73 percent to 81 percent, marking the second year in a row that the nation is on pace to meet the 90 percent goal as measured by 2012 Averaged Freshman Graduation Rates (AFGR) from the U.S. Department of Education. The report notes that the largest gains were achieved by Hispanic students, whose graduation rate increased from 61 percent in 2006 to 76 percent in 2012, and African American students, whose graduation rate grew from 59 percent in 2006 to 68 percent in 2012.

For the tremendous progress over the last several years, the report credits students and the parents, teachers, principals, and others who support them. It also credits a greater awareness of the dropout crisis among policymakers and the public, increased accountability for graduation rates brought about by the No Child Left Behind Act and subsequent regulations from the U.S. Department of Education, and high school reform efforts targeted at dropout factories.

Specifically, the report mentions federal programs such as the Smaller Learning Communities program and School Improvement Grants, efforts in New York City and elsewhere to close large comprehensive high schools and replace them with new, smaller high schools specifically designed for students from high-poverty neighborhoods, and research identifying the key on-and-off-track-to-graduation indicators for ninth graders and middle-grades students that led to the "rapid diffusion of early-warning systems at the school, district, and state levels."



“Our progress is amazing. Close to 400,000 more students per high school class are graduating now than in 2001 and more than 1 million fewer students attend dropout factories,” said **Robert Balfanz, research scientist and codirector of the Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education**. “The work that remains, however, is also stunning. In a significant number of states, one-third of students from low-income families are not graduating. Likewise, about 40 percent of young men of color and large numbers of students with disabilities do not receive diplomas. This, at a time when a high school diploma is a necessary gateway to adult success.”

According to the report, which cites adjusted cohort graduation rates (ACGR) for the Class of 2012, only five states have a graduation rate gap of less than 10 percentage points between their low-income students and non-low-income students. In ten states, the graduation rates for non-low-income students are at least 20 percentage points higher than the graduation rates for low-income students. States with the smallest and largest graduation rate gaps between their non-low-income and low-income students are shown in the table below.

States with the Smallest Graduation Gaps by Income Level				States with the Largest Graduation Gaps by Income Level			
State	Non-Low-Income Grad Rate	Low-Income Grad Rate	Difference	State	Non-Low-Income Grad Rate	Low-Income Grad Rate	Difference
Indiana	86%	85%	1	Minnesota	87%	59%	28
Hawaii	84%	80%	4	Connecticut	94%	70%	24
Texas	91%	85%	6	Colorado	85%	61%	24
Arizona	79%	71%	8	Rhode Island	89%	66%	23
North Carolina	84%	75%	9	Massachusetts	94%	72%	22
				South Dakota	89%	67%	22
				Wyoming	87%	65%	22

Closing this graduation rate gap between non-low-income and low-income students is one of five key demographic and geographic areas identified in the report that must be addressed if the nation is to reach its 90 percent graduation rate goal. The other four areas are

- **Big cities:** More than half of the 1,300 remaining dropout factories are located in large urban areas.
- **Special education:** Students with disabilities account for 13 percent of all students nationally, and the national average graduation rate for these students is 20 points lower than the average graduation rate for all students.
- **California:** Thirteen percent of the country’s students live in California, which the report calls a “laboratory for innovation and entrepreneurship.” At the same time, however, it faces significant challenges, including large percentages of low-income students, student diversity, and decreased state education funding, among others.
- **Graduation rates for young men of color in key states:** Despite the progress made in raising graduation rates and decreasing the percentage of African American and Hispanic students attending dropout factories, young men of color still have unacceptably low graduation rates.

“Reaching the *Grad Nation* 90 percent graduation rate goal would make a dramatic improvement in the lives of individual students while giving a tremendous boost to the nation’s economy,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Increasing the national high school graduation rate to 90 percent for just one high school class would create as many as 65,700 new jobs and boost the national economy by as much as \$10.9 billion. That’s why the best economic stimulus is a high school diploma.”

*Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic* is available at <http://gradnation.org/resource/building-gradnation-progress-and-challenge-ending-high-school-dropout-epidemic-2014>.



**PREVENTABLE FAILURE: New Report Demonstrates How a Focus on Ninth-Grade “On-Track” Rates Has Led to Substantial Increases in Graduation Rates in Chicago High Schools**

“System shifts—large, consistent improvements that create lasting change across subgroups and considerably reduce variation in outcomes across schools—are rare in education. This is one of those rare cases.”

That’s a key takeaway from *Preventable Failure: Improvements in Long-Term Outcomes when High Schools Focused on the Ninth Grade Year*, a forthcoming research report from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago CCSR) examining how a focus on ninth-grade “on-track” rates lead to dramatic improvements in high school graduation rates across all subgroups, including race, gender, and achievement levels, in twenty Chicago public high schools.<sup>1</sup>

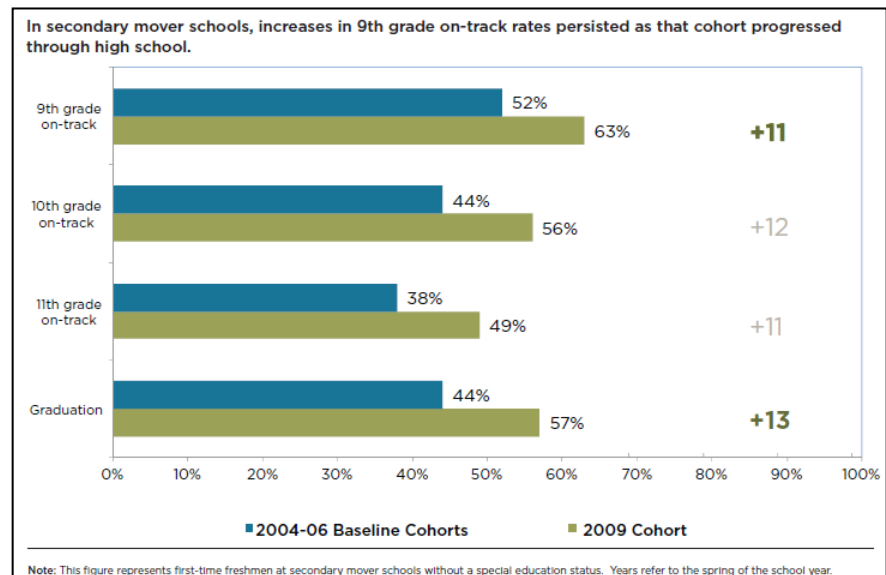
In 2007, UChicago CCSR released research demonstrating that the transition between eighth and ninth grade played a critical role in shaping students’ long-term outcomes. Specifically, it found that attendance and course performance in ninth grade were highly predictive of whether a student would drop out of high school. Encouraged by the UChicago CCSR research, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) began a targeted approach in 2007 to improve the transition between eighth and ninth grade and reduce course failure in the ninth grade. *Preventable Failure* summarizes the new strategies that CPS undertook, including new data reports for monitoring and supporting students in real time, ninth-grade coordinators, and summer transition programs. The results were dramatic: between 2007 and 2013 the CPS on-track rate rose 25 percentage points, from 57 percent to 82 percent, across all racial/ethnic groups, among males and females, and across all levels of incoming achievement.

The report focuses on twenty schools from two different groups: three “primary mover” schools that showed large improvements in on-track rates in 2008; and seventeen “secondary mover” schools that showed improvements in 2009.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the report, the on-track indicator measures whether ninth graders are making adequate progress to graduation based on their credit completion and course failures. Students are considered “on track” if they have enough credits to be promoted to tenth grade and earned no more than one semester F in a core course.

In 2011, after students were in school for four years, graduation rates jumped at all three primary-mover schools from 8 to 20 percentage points. Among secondary-mover schools, graduation rates jumped by an average of 13 percentage points from 2009 to 2012, as shown in the graph to the right.



Improvements in ninth-grade on-track rates continued to improve among subsequent cohorts in all but one early-mover school. By 2013, only a handful of schools had on-track rates below 70 percent. Additionally, grades improved at all ends of the achievement spectrum, with a 10 percentage point increase in freshmen with B's or better and a 12 percentage point increase in freshmen with no F's. The report also notes that high schools' average ACT scores were not negatively affected, even though more students with weaker incoming skills made it to their junior year to take the test.

The report notes that the characteristics of incoming ninth graders were not significantly better than in prior years and instead credits the improvements to the increase in ninth-grade on-track rates. "Students who end their ninth-grade year on-track are almost four times more likely to graduate from high school than those who are off-track," the report notes. "In fact, a student's on-track status is more predictive of high school graduation than their race/ethnicity, level of poverty, or test scores. The on-track indicator focused attention on a key developmental transition with a quantitative measure that could be easily calculated, monitored, and ultimately acted and improved upon."

"Ninth grade is a pivotal year that provides a unique intervention point to prevent school dropout," the report concludes. "What is clear is that no matter how a school increases on-track rates in ninth grade, graduation rates improve three years later."

More information on *Preventable Failure*, including a PDF of the summary report, is available at <http://ontrack.uchicago.edu/>.



## WAIVE GOODBYE: Washington Becomes First State to Lose ESEA Waiver

When the U.S. Department of Education announced a new "streamlined" process for how states could request a renewal to extend their waivers from certain requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in November, some observers said the new streamlined process made it highly unlikely that a state would lose its waiver. **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne**

**Duncan**, however, was of a different mind and [warned](#) that the department would likely revoke “a waiver or two or three.” Duncan made good on his warning on April 24 when he pulled the state of Washington’s waiver for failing to tie teacher and principal evaluations to student learning growth on state assessments.

“As you know, Washington’s request for ESEA flexibility was approved based on Washington’s commitments to carry out certain actions in support of key education reforms,” Duncan wrote in a [letter to Washington Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn](#). “In return for those commitments, we granted your state and your local school districts significant flexibility. However, Washington has not been able to keep all of its commitments. Thus, although Washington has benefitted from ESEA flexibility, I regret that Washington’s flexibility will end with the 2013–2014 school year.”

Without a waiver, Washington and its school districts must resume implementing the Title I requirements outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act, including setting aside 20 percent of Title I funds for public school choice and supplemental educational services. The state will also have to revert to measuring schools based on Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

In a [statement](#), **Washington Governor Jay Inslee (D)** blamed the state legislature for not taking action to save the state’s waiver. “The loss of this waiver could have been avoided if the state legislature had acted last session,” Inslee said. “The waiver provided districts flexibility to use nearly \$40 million in federal funds to support struggling students. Loss of that funding means those districts now face potential impacts that could include laying off some of Washington’s tremendous teachers or cutting back on programs that serve at-risk students.”

Duncan left open the possibility of renewing Washington’s waiver in the future. “Should Washington obtain the requisite authority to resolve its condition, I would be pleased to reconsider Washington’s request to implement ESEA flexibility at any time,” Duncan wrote.



### **E-RATE EXPANSION: Nearly 3,000 Individuals Sign Alliance for Excellent Education’s Digital Petition to Permanently Expand High-Speed Internet in Nation’s Schools and Libraries**

On April 22, the Alliance for Excellent Education submitted to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) names of nearly 3,000 educators, students, and citizens who support the continued expansion and modernization of high-speed broadband connections in schools and libraries across the nation. These signatures demonstrate the need for the FCC to act to reach the goal of connecting 99 percent of students to high-speed internet in five years.

“The FCC is poised to take action that would connect millions of students to high-speed internet in their schools and libraries across the country. Access to high-speed internet has the power to transform and equalize education—particularly in the lowest-performing schools—by connecting students everywhere with high-quality curriculum facilitated by high-quality teaching,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Through this petition, the voices of thousands will be heard.”

The FCC administers the federal E-rate program, which provides discounts to schools and libraries on internet and telephone services. Created in 1996, E-rate has increased the percentage of America's schools with internet access from 14 percent to 94 percent. While this is a significant accomplishment, the program has not been updated to meet modern high-speed demands—until now.

On February 5, Digital Learning Day, [FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler announced an additional \\$2 billion in funding to support access to high-speed broadband](#). This summer the FCC is expected to vote to modernize the program by making it more efficient and focusing on twenty-first-century technology like high-speed broadband and wireless internet connections.

The Alliance-generated petition supports the FCC's current effort as an important first step, but also calls for further action from the commission to increase permanently the size of the program in order to achieve the goal of connecting 99 percent of students to high-speed broadband in five years. The petition represents numerous educators, students, and members of the public who support additional FCC action to strengthen E-rate.

"For the first time in nearly two decades, the FCC is poised to bring major reform that has the potential to dramatically improve learning and outcomes in our nation's schools. Now is the time for the FCC to take permanent action to make that goal a reality," said Wise.

Visit <http://www.99in5.org> to learn more about the need to expand and modernize E-rate.



**PARTNERSHIPS, NOT PUSHOUTS: Alliance Joins Education Organizations in Releasing Policy Guide for School Board Members on How to Engage Community Partners to Better Prepare Students for Success**

A new policy guide, developed by nine national education organizations, explores the many roles school board members can play in ensuring that every student in their district receives a comprehensive, high-quality education. The report, *Partnerships, Not Pushouts: A Guide for School Board Members on Community Partnerships for Student Success*, offers policy recommendations and highlights districts around the nation that have embraced a "whole-child" method of teaching and learning that engages community members to meet students where they are emotionally, physically, and academically to ensure that every student is prepared to succeed.

"Today half of our children in public school are poor. At the same time, many schools lack the resources to help meet the needs of children who are struggling," said **Francine Lawrence, executive vice president of the American Federation of Teachers**. "The American Federation of Teachers believes in an approach that helps to address the needs of the whole child by collaborating with community partners to focus on academic as well as social, emotional, and health needs."

The report presents a framework for student-centered supports aimed at keeping at-risk students in the classroom and on a path to success by engaging the community in their educational journey. Through collaborating with community members, organizations, and businesses, districts can narrow achievement and opportunity gaps by leveling the field for all students.



The primary means of achieving whole-child success in school is through Personal Opportunity Plans (POP), the report finds. These student-centered and -directed plans are designed to help every student meet his or her academic, social, emotional, and college and career potential, while also preparing them for success in life. These plans are derived from school-community partnerships and serve as a vehicle for staff, teachers, and outside partners to collaborate to support each student.

Educators, families, and community play a role in supporting a student's POP. Teachers use this plan as a vehicle for personalizing learning to meet the student's needs. Parents engage with teachers more frequently and build a stronger relationship with the school system. Community partners link the student to businesses, youth organizations, and colleges to enhance student exploration of college- and career-based opportunities.

The report highlights multiple school districts and classrooms that are engaging the community school method to improve student learning and outcomes. For example, Roy Clark Elementary School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is part of the Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative (TACSI), which personalizes learning and develops student supports such as monthly well-being reviews and individualized learning plans.

Finally, the report gives practical guidance to school board members on what they need to know to transition to student-centered environments. The guide breaks down four key areas for board members to assess in their own district—school capacity, climate, community, and cohesion—with specific recommendations and questions in each one. Primarily, school board members need to know the needs of their students and the resources of the district and community, the report notes.

*“Partnerships, Not Pushouts* lays the groundwork for policy recommendations, including using community school resource coordinators to facilitate the development of Personal Opportunity Plans for each student. It also outlines how to implement whole-child strategies to ensure all children can succeed,” Lawrence said.

The report was developed by the Alliance for Excellent Education, American Federation of Teachers, CASEL, Coalition for Community Schools, National Education Association, National School Boards Association, Opportunity Action, Opportunity to Learn Campaign, and the Rural School and Community Trust.

Read the full report at [http://www.otlcampaign.org/sites/default/files/2014-122\\_POPGuide\\_DIGITAL.PDF](http://www.otlcampaign.org/sites/default/files/2014-122_POPGuide_DIGITAL.PDF).

***Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress*** is a free 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 Washington, DC-based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. For more information, visit [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org). Follow the Alliance on Twitter ([www.twitter.com/all4ed](https://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)).