



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



GRAD RATES ON THE RISE: New Data Shows Increases in High School Graduation Rates in Majority of States

Preliminary data released by the U.S. Department of Education on October 19 shows that states are continuing to improve high school graduation rates and also narrow the gap for underserved students. The release is a first look at the preliminary graduation rates and will be followed by final data, including the national high school graduation rate in the next few months.

“The hard work of America’s educators, families, communities, and students is paying off, particularly after several years of intense work by educators transitioning to new, higher standards,” said **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** in a [statement](#). “This is a vital step toward readiness for success in college and careers for every student in this country.”

The below chart shows the states with the highest and lowest high school graduation rates for School Year (SY) 2013–14, using the adjusted cohort graduation rate, which is a newer, common metric that all fifty states were required to use beginning in SY 2010–11.

Highest and Lowest High School Graduation Rates by State: SY 2013–14

State	Graduation Rate	State	Graduation Rate
Iowa	90.5%	District of Columbia	61.4%
Nebraska	89.7%	New Mexico	68.5%
Wisconsin	88.6%	Nevada	70.0%
New Jersey	88.6%	Alaska	71.1%
Texas	88.3%	Oregon	72.0%
New Hampshire	88.1%	Georgia	72.5%
Indiana	87.9%	Louisiana	74.6%
Vermont	87.8%	Arizona	75.7%
Kentucky	87.5%	Florida	76.1%
Missouri	87.3%	Idaho	77.3%

“When it comes to high school graduation rate policy, federal and state efforts are working; data and dedication are making diplomas,” [said Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise in a statement](#). “After years of many different calculations, states have begun using a common, reliable method to determine high school graduation rates. More important, states, districts, and schools are acting in response to this information.”

Thirty-six states saw an increase in overall graduation rates. As shown the table below, states with the biggest gains were Delaware, Alabama, Oregon, West Virginia, and Illinois.

Largest Gains in High School Graduation Rates

State	2012–13 Graduation Rate	2013–14 Graduation Rate	Change
Delaware	80.4%	87.0%	+6.6 percentage points
Alabama	80.0%	86.3%	+6.3 percentage points
Oregon	68.7%	72.0%	+3.3 percentage points
West Virginia	81.4%	84.5%	+3.1 percentage points
Illinois	83.2%	86.0%	+2.8 percentage points

The District of Columbia and eight states saw year-over-year declines in their graduation rates, with the biggest drops in Oklahoma (-2.1 percentage points), New Mexico (-1.8 percentage points), and Nevada (-1.0 percentage points).

The new rates show that the achievement gap shrank in the majority of states for African American and Latino students, low-income students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. The gap between African American and white students decreased in twenty-eight states; the Latino-white gap decreased in thirty-two states; and the gap between low-income students and their peers decreased in twenty-three states. However, some states saw increases in these gaps or no change, showing that there is still a need to focus on these key student groups in need.

Even with the gains, white students posted a high school graduation rate that was, on average, 13.1 percentage points higher than African American students. In the District of Columbia and six states (California, Minnesota, Nevada, New York, Ohio, and Wisconsin), the graduation rate gap between white students and African American students was greater than 20 percentage points. The graduation rate for white students compared to Latino students, was, on average, 11.3 percentage points higher while the District of Columbia and three states (Massachusetts, Minnesota, and New York) have white-Latino graduation gaps larger than 20 percentage points.

Wise cautioned that “Today is a day to celebrate, but it is also a day to recognize additional challenges. Students of color and students from low-income families continue to graduate from high school at much lower rates than white students. Nationwide, there are 1,235 high schools where at least one-third of students do not make it to graduation day.”

Secretary Duncan echoed these sentiments, saying, “While these gains are promising, we know that we have a long way to go in improving educational opportunities for every student—no matter their zip code—for the sake of our young people and our nation’s economic strength.”

Wise urged Congress to keep these disparities in mind as it works to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as No Child Left Behind. “The U.S. Congress must require states to target resources and focus reform on the lowest-performing high schools,” Wise said. “Great discretion should be left to states, districts, and schools about how they respond; however, no discretion should exist about whether to respond. Additionally, federal policy should ensure that states intervene in high schools where students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and other groups of students fail to meet the state’s graduation rate goal for two years in a row.”

State-by-state high school graduation rates, including graduation rates for various subgroups of students, are available at <http://1.usa.gov/206APuL>.



NEXT GEN HIGH SCHOOL SUMMIT: White House to Hold November Convening on Transforming High Schools

This November, the White House will host a national convening on transforming high schools to better serve all students. The “Next Gen High School Summit” will highlight new resources and investments—from the federal government and others—focused on advancing high school redesign and will feature educators, administrators, education researchers, industry and foundation leaders, and others working to create a more equitable education system that improves learning outcomes for all students.

“When high schools are designed for the twenty-first century, they are a springboard into opportunity,” reads an [October 21 blog post by Roberto J. Rodríguez, deputy assistant to the president for education](#), announcing the summit. “And in today’s innovation economy, with rapid growth in high-wage fields of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), the role of high schools is more important than ever. ... However, for too many American students, high school is a time of disengagement that fails to put them on a path to college and career success.”

Rodríguez lists several ways that “next-gen” high schools are changing their approach to student learning, including personalized learning for all students; learning assessments that allow students to demonstrate mastery, creativity, and critical thinking; high-quality and continuous professional development; and a more flexible use of time during the school day.

President Obama has visited some of these schools, including [P-Tech, an early college high school in Brooklyn](#), where students graduate with both a diploma and an associate’s degree in a field related to computers or engineering, and [Manor New Technology High School in Austin, Texas](#).

“Our economy can’t succeed unless our young people have the skills that they need to succeed,” [Obama said during a 2013 visit to Manor](#). “And that’s what’s happening here, right at Manor New Tech. There’s a reason why teachers and principals from all over the country are coming down to see what you’re up to. Because every day, this school is proving that every child has the potential to learn the real-world skills they need to succeed in college and beyond.”

“Still, a handful of exceptional schools on their own won’t reach the millions of students across the country who do not have access to the rigorous content they need to be successful, including basic STEM courses and opportunities, and a greater effort is needed to bring next generation learning innovations to all students,” Rodríguez writes.

Earlier this year, President Obama [proposed a new \\$125 million competitive grant program](#) that would promote the redesign of America’s high schools in his Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 budget. The Next Generation High Schools program would integrate student-centered instruction and “deeper learning,” which delivers rich core content to students in innovative ways that allows them to learn and then apply what they have learned. The program would have a particular focus on STEM-themed high schools that expand opportunities for girls and other groups of students who are underrepresented in STEM fields.

Final funding decisions for FY16 have yet to be made—the federal government is currently operating under a short-term measure that will keep the government open through December 11—but funding for the president’s Next Generation High Schools program was not included in FY16 appropriations bills passed by the House Appropriations Committee and the Senate Appropriations Committee, meaning the program is unlikely to be funded this fiscal year.

The Next Gen High School Summit will highlight examples of strong collaborations that are benefitting low-income and under-represented students, as well as commitments from leaders in philanthropy and industry who are re-thinking the way that high school education is delivered.

Individuals involved in work that supports next generation high schools are encouraged to submit their information to the White House to be considered for use during the summit. The submission deadline is Friday, October 30.

More information, including a submissions form, is available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/webform/white-house-summit-next-generation-high-schools>.



“TICKETS TO NOWHERE”: New Report Exposes Lack of Alignment Between State Diplomas and College- and Career-Ready Standards

Even though the national high school graduation rate is at an all-time high of 81 percent, the diplomas those graduates received do not necessarily guarantee a bright future, according to new report from Achieve, a nonprofit education reform organization that works with states to raise academic standards and graduation requirements, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability. The report, *How the States Got Their Rates* analyzes the various diploma options states offered students from the Class of 2014 and finds that the vast majority of programs did not prepare students for success in college and a career.

“When students walk across the graduation stage and are handed a high school diploma, they (and their parents) believe they’ve earned a passport to future learning,” the report says. “Yet in too many states, for too many students, the diploma is not an indication of college and career readiness—a fact that students may not know until they try to pursue their next steps.”

Only four states—Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee—and the District of Columbia require all students to pursue a diploma aligned with college- and career-ready (CCR) requirements. (Achieve considers a diploma aligned with CCR standards if the course of study requires students to complete at least three years of math (through Algebra II) and four years of grade-level English.)

Meanwhile, twenty-six states offer students multiple options for earning a diploma, but all of these states include at least one option that does not meet CCR standards, according to the report. In fourteen of those states, students pursue the CCR diploma as the default course of study, but students can choose to pursue a less rigorous diploma or opt out of individual courses required to earn the CCR diploma. In the twelve other states, students pursue a “minimum” diploma as the default option and must opt in to the CCR diploma program.

The remaining twenty states each offer a single diploma option and do not require students to meet CCR standards to earn a diploma.

“All states have CCR standards in mathematics and English language arts but not all states require that ALL students take courses aligned to those standards before graduation—until they do, too many students will be underprepared for postsecondary success,” the report notes.

More importantly, most states do not report the percentage of students within the entire graduating class and within subgroups of students who earn each diploma type, the report notes. Consequently, a state’s reported graduation rate “may mask which students earned which diploma options in the state,” the report notes. Among states that offer multiple diplomas, only nine publicly report the percentage of students who earn diplomas aligned with CCR standards, the report says. (The report’s state-by-state tables include specific details about each diploma offered by each state and the associated course requirements. The tables also highlight each state’s overall high school graduation rate and include notes about the extent to which each state publicly reports the percentage of students earning each diploma type.)

“The high school diploma landscape across the states has become incredibly complex,” **Michael Cohen, president of Achieve**, says in a [statement](#). “When states offer options for students to reach high school graduation, we owe it to those students to ensure that whichever option they choose will leave them prepared for success in the future. Unfortunately, the lack of transparent reporting on student outcomes means that we have more questions than answers. ... For many kids, these diplomas are tickets to nowhere that provide false assurances of academic readiness for success in college and career.”

How the States Got Their Rates is available at <http://www.achieve.org/how-the-states-got-their-rates>.



BRIDGING THE “OPPORTUNITY GAP”: Two New Reports Assess the Educational and Economic Inequalities Between Communities

To succeed in college and a career, students need access to high-quality teachers, challenging curriculum, and safe and supportive learning environments. But too often, the opportunity to access such valuable education resources falls beyond the reach of students of color and those from low-income families simply because of where they live. Two new reports attempt to quantify this growing “opportunity gap,” illuminating the disparities that exist in the quality of education and public resources between communities.

In the first report, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) examines the school systems of fifty cities to determine how urban public school systems compare on various indicators of school performance. The report, *Measuring Up: Educational Improvement and Opportunity in 50 Cities*, focuses specifically on city school systems with the largest student enrollments that cross multiple school types, including traditional public schools and charter schools.

“[C]ivic and education leaders need to start viewing public education as a citywide concern, just as they do related issues like public health, economic development, and public safety,” the report notes. “As urban public education becomes more diverse and complex ... city leaders need a handle on how all public schools are doing if they want to mobilize political action to address cross-cutting challenges that affect families and schools, from uneven school quality to unequal access to high-performing schools.”

Measuring Up finds wide variations in the academic performance of city school systems and in the students attending top-performing schools. Less than one-third of cities made gains in either students’ math or reading proficiency, relative to their state’s performance, during the most recent three years of available data; only eight cities made proficiency gains in both subject areas. Additionally, among city schools that ranked in the bottom 5 percent of their state based on students’ math and reading proficiency rates, 40 percent of those schools remained in the bottom for three consecutive years, the report says. Furthermore, in most cities, students of color and those from low-income families were more likely to attend the lowest-performing schools. For instance, Latino students were nearly seven times more likely than white students to attend elementary or middle schools with low math performance in Los Angeles and four times more likely to attend such schools in Phoenix. Meanwhile, in Newark (NJ), only 6 percent of African American students attended an elementary or middle school with top math scores, compared to 85 percent of white students, the report says.

Students’ preparation for college and a career also varied widely across urban school systems. Although the national high school graduation rate for the Class of 2013 reached 81 percent, the high school graduation rates for the fifty cities covered a much broader range. In 2013, 90 percent of students graduated from high school in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Santa Ana, California, compared to less than 50 percent in Minneapolis.

Meanwhile, in twenty-nine of the fifty cities, fewer than 10 percent of high school students enrolled in advanced math classes, while in thirty cities, fewer than 15 percent of high school students took the SAT or ACT, the report notes. Although participation of students of color generally lagged behind participation of white students on both indicators, a few cities showed promising results. In Newark, Philadelphia, Memphis, Albuquerque, Cleveland, Detroit, and Washington, DC, African American high school students enrolled in advanced math classes at *higher* rates than white students, the report notes. Meanwhile, in Atlanta, Cincinnati, Columbus (OH), Nashville, Baltimore, and Minneapolis, Latino high schoolers took advanced math at *higher* rates than their white peers.

However, across all fifty cities, achievement gaps persisted between students from low-income families and their affluent peers, although some cities had smaller gaps than others. In Santa Ana, students from low-income families lagged behind their peers by less than 5 percentage points in both math and reading performance, the report says. In Denver, meanwhile, proficiency rates for students from low-income families were 30 and 40 percentage points lower in math and reading, respectively, than those rates of other students. (The report notes that the researchers encountered problems with missing data for several cities and could calculate the achievements gaps for only thirty-seven of the fifty cities featured in the complete report.)

“[W]e should acknowledge and address the systemic reasons that academic segregation occurs so blatantly in our urban public schools,” the report says. “[O]ur city school system leaders need to aggressively hunt for and be open to new solutions, and respond quickly and meaningfully to shifting demographics and other challenges.”

The second report, *2015 Opportunity Index: Summary of Findings for States and Counties*, from Opportunity Nation and Measure of America, focuses on the economic, educational, and civic conditions that promote or inhibit the upward mobility of individuals within their local communities and states. This annual report examines sixteen state-level indicators—including unemployment and poverty rates, the on-time high school graduation rate, and percentage of young people not in school or working—to develop an “opportunity index” for each state, 2,673 counties, and the nation as a whole. The overall composite score attempts to quantify the level of “opportunity” for economic mobility different communities offer their residents.

“Opportunity can be defined in many ways, but typically the term encompasses the range of circumstances that open doors to economic mobility and human progress,” according to the report. “In a free society, some inequality is unavoidable. But inequality without the chance for mobility is economically inefficient and unjust.”

Since 2011, overall opportunity has increased by nearly 9 percent in the United States, the report says. But despite this general improvement, wide opportunity gaps still exist in the nation. Income inequality has increased 3.4 percent as the median household income has declined by 4.2 percent and the poverty rate has increased 10.5 percent. And even though the percentage of disconnected youth has declined by 4.8 percent, there still are 5.5 million young adults ages 16–24 years who are neither working nor in school, according to the report.

At the state level, meanwhile, opportunity improved in all fifty states and the District of Columbia in 2015 and Vermont had the top state score for the second year in a row. On the education dimension specifically, which measures preschool enrollment rates, high school graduation rates, and rates of college completion, New Jersey earned the highest score overall. By contrast, Nevada had the lowest education score, despite showing the greatest improvement in its on-time high school graduation rate, which increased 14.4 percentage points in the past five years. Iowa, meanwhile, had the overall highest high school graduation rate at 89.7 percent.

Measuring Up is available at <http://www.crpe.org/publications/measuring-educational-improvement-and-opportunity-50-cities> and *2015 Opportunity Index* is available at <http://opportunityindex.org/app/uploads/2015/10/2015-Opportunity-Index-Report.pdf>.

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