



ACCOUNTABILITY RESULTS

WHEN EQUITY IS OPTIONAL

Low-Graduation-Rate High Schools and the 67% Threshold

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gives states significant flexibility in identifying low-performing schools for support, but there is an exception: States must identify for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) all high schools where fewer than 67% of students graduate.¹ This might seem like a simple, bright-line rule that would affect schools similarly across the country. However, this All4Ed analysis reveals that is not the case. We examine the first year of results from ESSA accountability systems in 10 states (see "[About Our Data](#)" for more information) and find **dramatic differences in the proportion of high schools identified for CSI due to low graduation rates**. Differences in graduation rates among states account for most of the variation.

To a lesser extent, state-selected methodologies used to identify schools (for example, whether a state uses a four-, five-, or six-year graduation rate or averages rates across multiple years) and the types of high schools included in each state's accountability system also drive variation. Those methodological choices are significant; in several states, **substantial numbers of high schools with four-year graduation rates below 67% were not identified for CSI**.

Our analysis shows that a uniform rule can have nonuniform implications for states and the students they serve, as well as the importance of state policy choices in the implementation of a seemingly clear-cut federal requirement.



About Us • The Alliance for Excellent Education (All4Ed) is a Washington, DC-based national policy, practice, and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those underperforming and those historically underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship.

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Images of Teachers and Students in Action*

FINDING 1 | The 67% threshold affected states differently.

Under ESSA, states must identify for CSI any high school where fewer than one-third of students graduate. This requirement affects states differently in large part because graduation rates vary widely (see Figure 1). For example, among the 10 states in our data set, **the median four-year graduation rate across high schools ranged from 74% in New Mexico to 95% in Connecticut** in the first year of ESSA implementation. Graduation rates varied even more considerably on the low end of the distribution. The graduation rate of high schools in the bottom 10th percentile was above 70% in Connecticut and Mississippi, but below 30% in Arizona, Florida, Michigan, and Washington.

The wide variation in high school graduation rates across states resulted in similar variation in the percentage of schools with four-year graduation rates below 67% (see Figure 2). **In Mississippi, only 3% of high schools had a graduation rate below 67%.**

FIGURE 1. HOW DID THE DISTRIBUTION OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES VARY BY STATE?

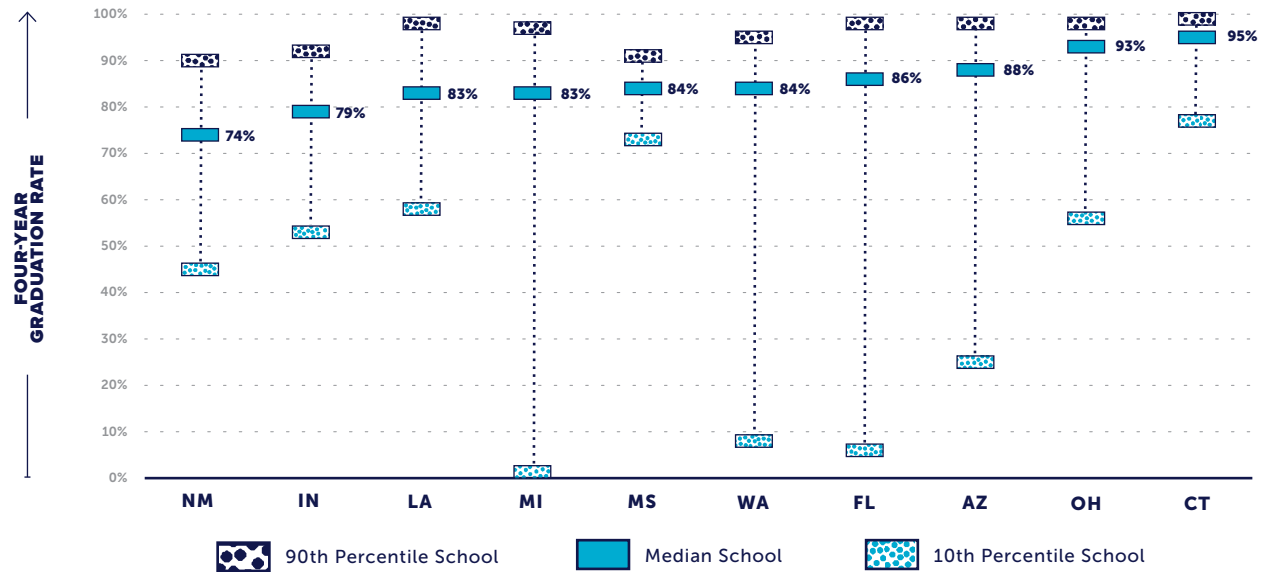
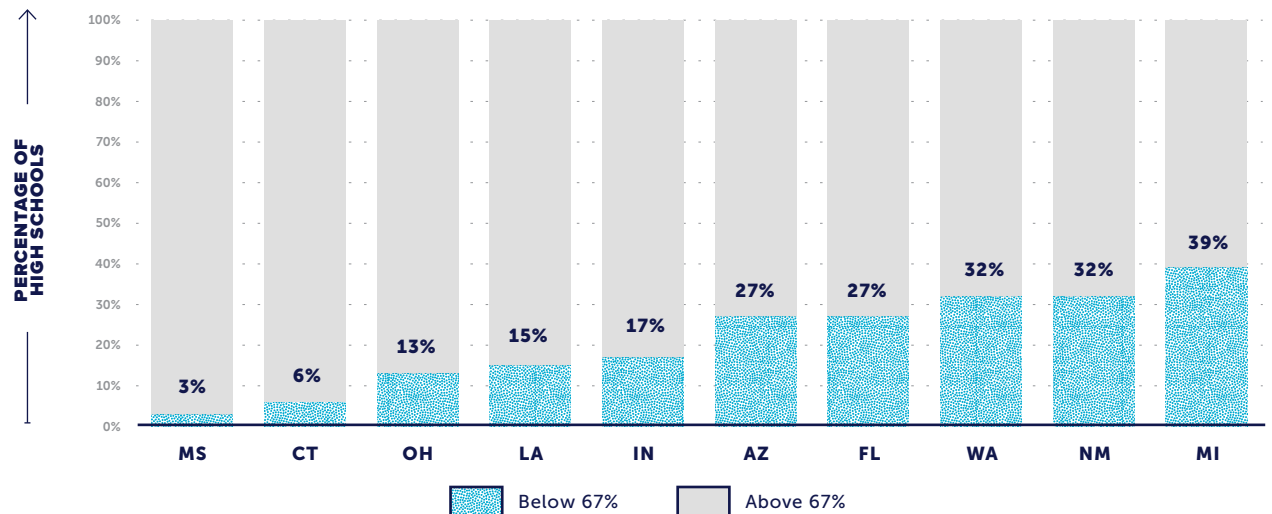


FIGURE 2. HOW MANY HIGH SCHOOLS HAD A FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATE BELOW 67%?



FINDING 2 | The share of high schools identified—and how far they were from the 67% threshold—varied by state.

FIGURE 3. WHAT PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOLS WERE IDENTIFIED FOR CSI DUE TO LOW GRADUATION RATES?

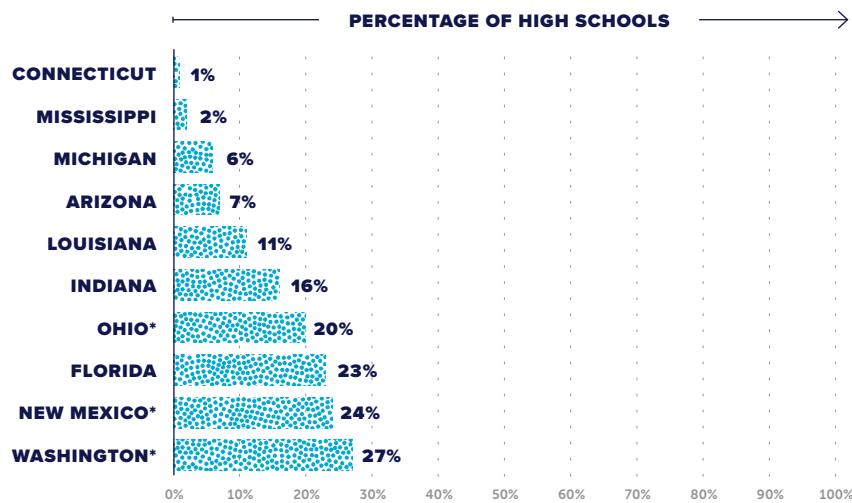
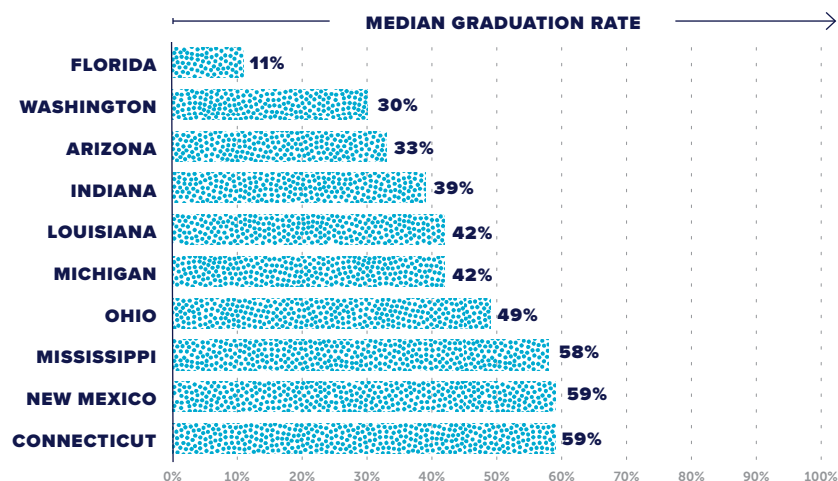


FIGURE 4. WHAT WAS THE MEDIAN GRADUATION RATE OF A HIGH SCHOOL IDENTIFIED FOR CSI DUE TO LOW GRADUATION RATES?



As a result of the differences in graduation rates, the percentage of high schools identified for CSI also varied (see Figure 3). Across the states in our analysis, **only 1% of Connecticut high schools were identified for CSI because of poor graduation rates, compared to roughly a quarter of high schools each in Florida, New Mexico, and Washington.**²

Beyond differences in the number of high schools identified, **the graduation rates of identified schools also varied widely; in some states, they fell just shy of the 67% threshold, while in others they were far below** (see Figure 4). For example, New Mexico and Florida identified roughly the same share of their high schools for CSI due to low graduation rates. However, half of the high schools identified in New Mexico had a four-year graduation rate above 59%, while half of the high schools identified in Florida had a four-year graduation rate below 11%. States with very low median graduation rates among identified high schools, like Florida and Washington, face a significantly larger challenge—and will have to deploy more resources and targeted strategies—to support those schools to raise their graduation rates above 67%.

DISPARATE IMPACT, UNIFORM RESOURCES

Variation in the number of high schools affected by the 67% threshold—and the degree to which high schools must improve to reach the threshold—has profound implications for state strategies and distribution of resources. ESSA specifies that states spend 7% of their Title I funds on school improvement.³ However, the amount states receive in Title I resources (determined predominantly by the proportion of students from low-income families in each school district) is not affected by the number of high schools with low graduation rates under ESSA. **In other words, states do not receive any additional funds to support and improve high schools that graduate fewer than 67% of their students, whether they identify hundreds of these schools or only a few.**

FINDING 3 | Reporting a graduation rate below the 67% threshold did not guarantee that a high school would be identified.

Given the straightforward nature of ESSA's requirement, one might expect the percentage of high schools with a four-year graduation rate below 67% and the percentage of high schools identified to track closely. **However, in every state, there were variations between the percentage of schools reporting four-year graduation rates below the 67% threshold and the percentage of schools identified for low graduation rates** (see Figure 5).⁴ Some states were expansive in identifying low-graduation-rate high schools. In Ohio, 20% of high schools were identified for CSI due to low graduation rates, but only 13% of high schools reported a four-year graduation rate below 67%. In other states, the reverse was true. In Connecticut, 6% of high schools had four-year graduation rates below 67%, but only 1% of high schools were identified.

The discrepancy between high schools reporting low graduation rates and CSI identification can be explained by state policy choices (see "[State Methodologies Used to Identify Low-Graduation-Rate High Schools for CSI](#)" for more information). Despite appearing to provide a clear-cut 67% threshold, ESSA does not require states to use the four-year graduation rate

for CSI identification. States can also use graduation rate data from multiple years to identify schools. Thus, states have more flexibility than advertised regarding how they identify low-graduation-rate high schools. For example, Connecticut required schools to have a six-year graduation rate below 70% for three consecutive years in order to be identified.

States' choices about which schools to include, and how, in accountability systems also affected results. While ESSA requires all public schools to be included in school ratings and identification, states can use different methodologies for certain types of schools. Several states have crafted unique approaches to accountability for alternative high schools—typically those serving overage, under-credited, and other disconnected youth. As a result, some states exclude alternative schools from most accountability data. Other states include a significant number of nontraditional high schools in the same rating and identification methods they apply to all schools. In those states, the number of high schools reporting low four-year graduation rates is likely much higher than in those states that used a different accountability system for alternative schools. In Michigan,

FIGURE 5. WHAT WAS THE MISMATCH BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOLS REPORTING LOW GRADUATION RATES AND HIGH SCHOOLS IDENTIFIED DUE TO LOW GRADUATION RATES?

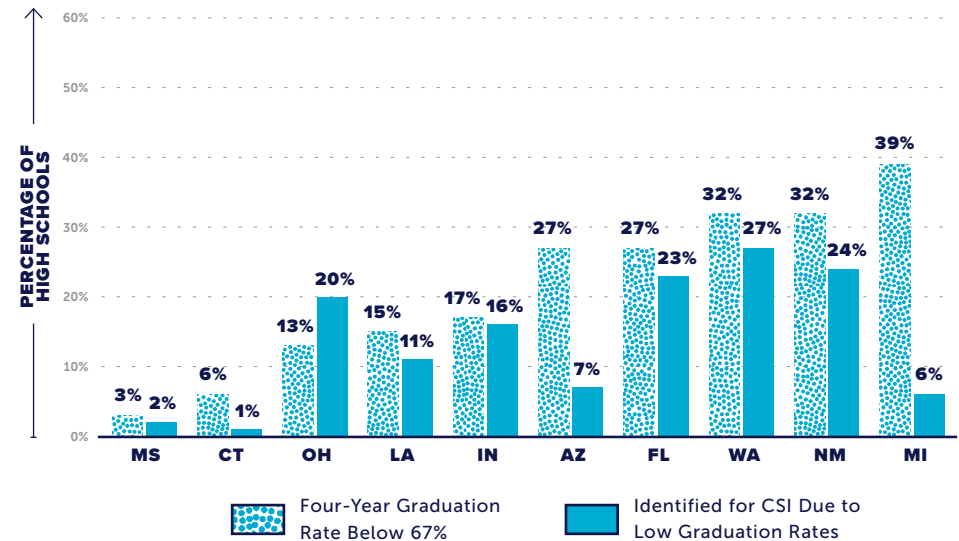
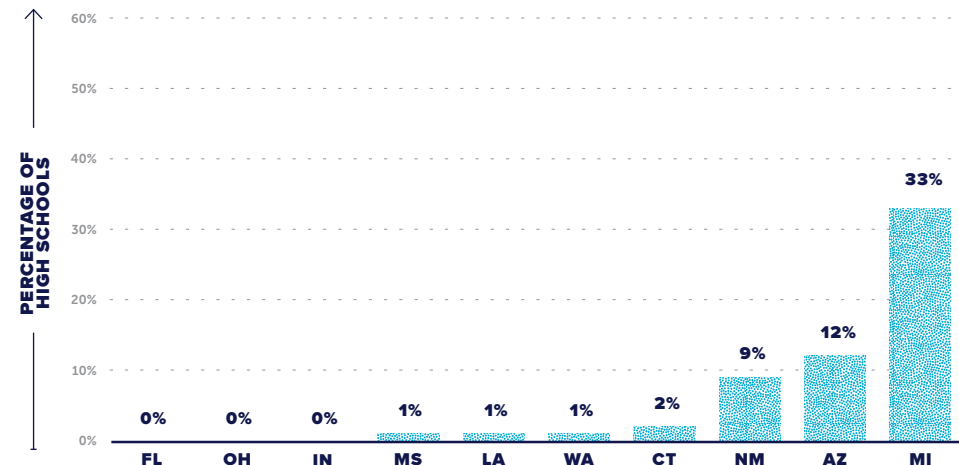


FIGURE 6. HOW MANY HIGH SCHOOLS WITH FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES BELOW 67% WERE NOT IDENTIFIED FOR CSI?



26.8% of high schools in our data set were labeled as alternative schools, which may explain why Michigan had the highest percentage of high schools with graduation rates below 67% among our 10 states.⁵

As a result of these choices, some schools with four-year graduation rates below 67% were not identified for CSI—either due to low graduation rates or low overall performance (see Figure 6). For example, in three states at least 1 out of 10 high schools with low graduation rates was overlooked for CSI.

Michigan had the highest percentage of high schools (33%) with a four-year graduation rate below 67% that were overlooked for CSI identification—even though the state used the four-year graduation rate to identify high schools. This occurred because the state excluded certain high schools that received a score in the Michigan School Index from eligibility for CSI identification.⁶

The two states with the next-largest percentage of overlooked high schools—12% in Arizona and 9% in New Mexico—made methodological choices that help explain the result. Arizona used the five-year graduation rate to identify low-graduation-rate high schools. Meanwhile, New Mexico required schools to have a four-year graduation rate below 67% for two of the prior three consecutive years. Contrast Michigan, Arizona, and New Mexico with Florida and Ohio, where all high schools reporting four-year graduation rates below 67% were identified.⁷ Florida and Ohio used methods for identifying high schools that considered whether a school’s four-year graduation rate was below 67% over a single year. In both states, no low-graduation-rate high schools were overlooked for identification.

Note: *Some states have amended their original ESSA plans; this analysis is based on plans in effect during year one of ESSA implementation.

STATE METHODOLOGIES USED TO IDENTIFY LOW-GRADUATION-RATE HIGH SCHOOLS FOR CSI

STATE	METHODOLOGY*
ARIZONA	Five-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for all students below 67%
CONNECTICUT	Six-year ACGR for all students below 70% for three consecutive years
FLORIDA	Four-year ACGR for all students below 67%
INDIANA	Four-year ACGR ⁸ for all students below 67% averaged over three years
LOUISIANA	Four-year ACGR for all students below 67%
MICHIGAN	Four-year ACGR for all students below 67%
MISSISSIPPI	Four-year ACGR for all students below 67%
NEW MEXICO	Four-year ACGR for all students below 67% for two of three prior years
OHIO	Four-year ACGR for all students below 67%
WASHINGTON	Four-year ACGR for all students averaged over three years below 67%

CONCLUSION

Our analysis shows that ESSA’s seemingly uniform, straightforward requirement for states to identify low-graduation-rate high schools yielded uneven and inequitable results. Our greatest concern is that substantial numbers of schools with four-year graduation rates below 67% were not identified for CSI. In other words, hundreds of high schools where students regularly fail to graduate on time lack access to federal resources and enhanced support. Despite ESSA’s focus on improving graduation rates, the reality is that students’ access to a diploma depends substantially on the state in which they live.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act, section 1111(c)(4)(D)(i)(II).
- 2 In three states (New Mexico, Ohio, and Washington), high schools were identified for CSI due either to low performance or low graduation rates, but not both. Because of the mutually exclusive CSI categories, our data may undercount the number of low-graduation-rate high schools in these states. Specifically, high schools with low graduation rates may be identified as such only if they do not meet the criteria for low performance based on all of the state’s accountability indicators. In addition, 20 Washington high schools are included in analyses of graduation rates in Finding 1 but omitted from analyses of schools identified for support in Findings 2 and 3, including 16 schools that closed prior to the first identification of schools and 4 tribal schools that were ineligible to receive supports.
- 3 See Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act, section 1003(a).
- 4 In Figure 5, our calculations of the percentage of high schools in each state reporting a four-year graduation rate below 67% exclude high schools with missing graduation rate data. See “About Our Data” to compare a state’s number of high schools reporting graduation rate data with its total number of high schools, which we used to calculate the percentage of high schools identified for CSI due to low graduation rates in each state.
- 5 In addition to 26.8% in Michigan, 18.4% of high schools in Florida and 24.4% of high schools in Washington were labeled as alternative schools in our data set. In Ohio, 8.8% were labeled as “dropout recovery.” We do not have information on school type for the other six states.
- 6 Michigan excluded all high schools from identification that did not have at least 30 students in the four-year graduating cohort, as well as schools that exclusively served students with disabilities. The complete list of Michigan’s business rules for the state accountability system is available here: http://www.mi.gov/documents/mde/MI_School_Index_Business_Rules_614410_7.pdf.
- 7 One Indiana high school with a graduation rate below 67% was not identified for CSI because it was ineligible due to the small size of its graduating cohort. The percentage of Indiana high schools reporting low graduation rates that was not identified for CSI is rounded to 0% in Figure 6.
- 8 The federal ACGR data Indiana used for CSI identification in the first year of ESSA implementation, and that we rely on in this analysis, were lower than in prior years, because the state could not count students who received a general diploma as graduates. After year one of ESSA implementation, Indiana amended its ESSA plan and will include general diploma recipients in future ACGR calculations.

ABOUT OUR DATA

We analyzed school-level accountability and graduation rate data from 10 states: Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico, Ohio, and Washington. Four of the 10 states we selected are “priority places” of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, whose support made this data collection possible: Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, and New Mexico. The remaining states were selected based on several factors, including geographic diversity, size, and availability of data. For each state, our data set included all schools that received a rating in the state’s ESSA accountability system or were identified for comprehensive, additional targeted, or targeted support and improvement by the state during the first year of ESSA implementation (typically, results reported in the 2018–19 school year using data collected during the 2017–18 school year). We then limited our data set to high schools by eliminating any schools that did not meet one of the following criteria: (1) the school was labeled or treated by the state as a high school in the state’s ESSA accountability data; (2) the school was identified for CSI due to low graduation rates; (3) the highest grade of students served by the school was listed as 10, 11, or 12 in the state’s enrollment data; (4) the school reported a graduation rate; or (5) the school reported SAT data. The table below provides an overview of the resulting number of high schools in each state and the number of those schools reporting graduation rate data for all students.

STATE	NUMBER OF HIGH SCHOOLS IN OUR DATA SET	NUMBER OF HIGH SCHOOLS REPORTING GRADUATION RATES FOR ALL STUDENTS
ARIZONA	439	395
CONNECTICUT	228	208
FLORIDA	879	752
INDIANA	409	399
LOUISIANA	360	328
MICHIGAN	1,193	1,084
MISSISSIPPI	244	243
NEW MEXICO	218	200
OHIO	873	814
WASHINGTON	590	512

