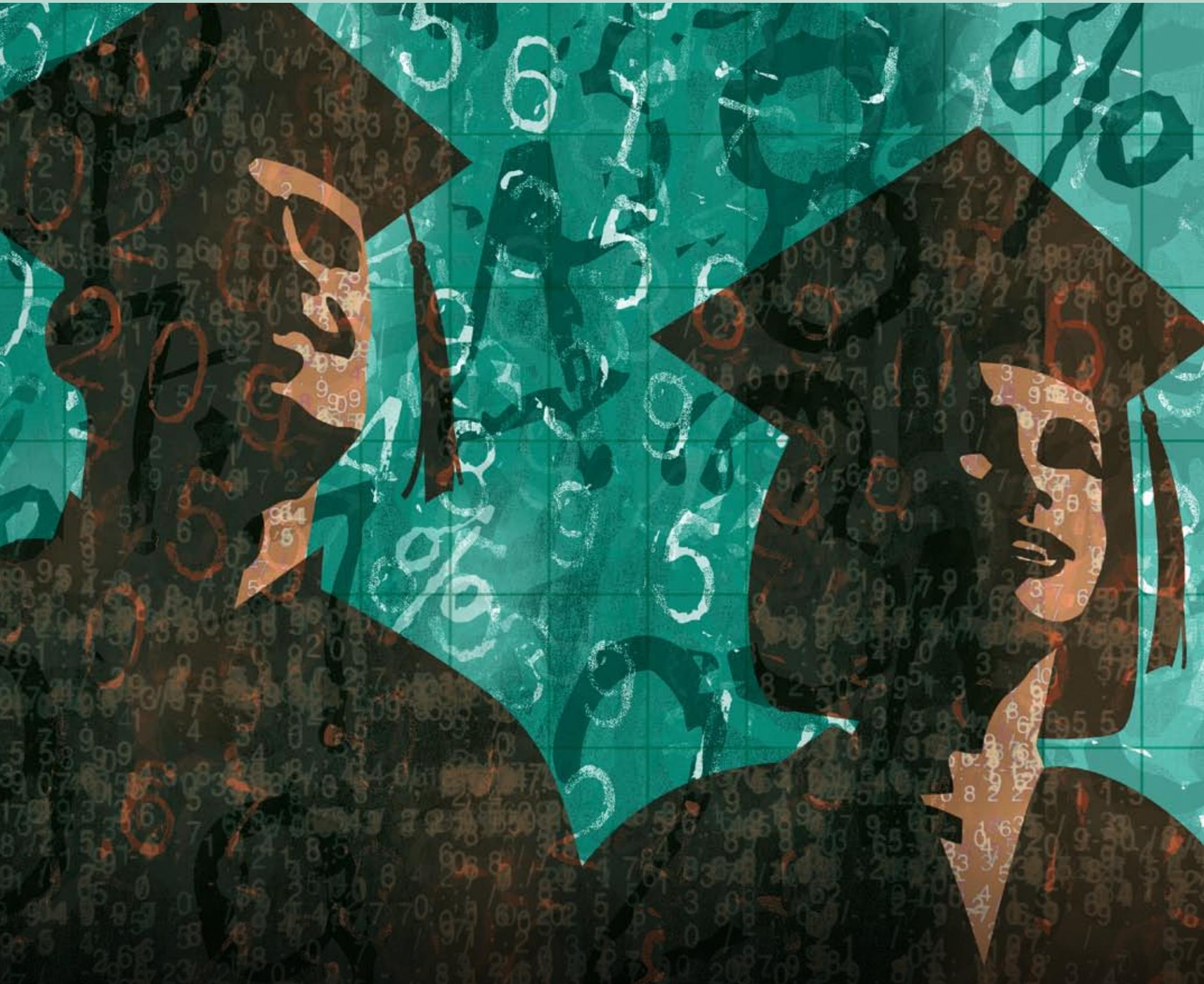


EDUCATION WEEK

2010 DIPLOMAS COUNT

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Executive Summary

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The Editors

Perhaps it's a cliché, but it's also true: Knowledge is power.

When the public considers schools, the focus is usually on how they build knowledge in children. The attention is on outcomes: subjects learned, books read, math problems solved, historical facts memorized, diplomas granted. But there is another side to the schools-and-knowledge relationship. And that is how schools come to know their students—their strengths, their weaknesses, and, when it turns to high school, their likelihood of someday graduating.

Every year, *Diplomas Count* takes a careful look at nationwide trends related to high school graduation. This year, we have titled our report *Graduation by the Numbers—Putting Data to Work for Student Success*. As one of the stories in *Diplomas Count 2010* is headlined, our goal here is to chronicle “data in action.”

We pair our reporting with new, original analysis on high school completion from the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. Unhappily for schools, this year's research shows that today's graduation climate is a tough one, particularly for minority students and those growing up in about two dozen hardscrabble communities where the odds seem stacked against graduating.

Today, more school districts than ever are collecting a variety of student-performance data, many with an eye toward predicting who

is most likely to drop out and what will work to keep those students in school. The school systems featured in this report tackle data collection in different ways, but they share a desire to go beyond numbers alone and a thoughtfulness in the ways they've been able to do so. In this way, “graduation by the numbers” becomes the story of using numbers—data, statistics—to plot a real, practical course of action that will help put students now at risk of dropping out on track to earn diplomas and, if all goes well, to continue their educations in college.

Further Decline

Much of the information in this report is sobering.

According to the EPE Research Center's latest analysis of high school completion for *Diplomas Count*, the national graduation rate stands at 68.8 percent for the class of 2007, the most recent year for which data are available. That represents a slight drop, four-tenths of a percentage point, from 69.2 percent for the previous high school class; it also marks the second consecutive year of declines in the national graduation rate, following a decade of mostly solid improvement.

The latest decrease is considerably smaller than the nearly point-and-a-half drop from 2005 to 2006. Even so, a 0.4-percentage-point decline in the graduation rate means diplomas for 11,000 fewer students nationally in the class of 2007, compared with the previous year.

Perhaps more troubling are the

persistent graduation gaps between students in different demographic groups.

Although more than three-quarters of white and Asian students in the United States earn diplomas, high school outcomes are much worse for others. Among Latinos, 56 percent successfully finish high school, while 54 percent of African-Americans and 51 percent of Native Americans graduate. On average, only two-thirds of male students earn a diploma, a rate 7 percentage points lower than the rate for female students. Rates of high school completion for males from historically disadvantaged minority groups consistently fall at or below the 50 percent mark.

Across all urban school systems, the data show six out of every 10 students from the class of 2007 graduating. In districts characterized by high levels of racial or socioeconomic segregation and those serving communities with high rates of poverty, graduation rates typically range from 55 percent to 60 percent. At the other end of the spectrum, the EPE Research Center identifies 21 “urban overachievers,” big-city districts where the actual 2007 graduation rate is 10 percentage points higher than expected based on their circumstances.

Concentrated Crisis

In digging more deeply into the numbers, a few other revelations stand out. For example, a closer look at the national graduation statistics shows that each major racial and ethnic group post at

least a marginal gain in graduation rates from year to year. That finding, seemingly contradictory with the national graduation-rate decline, prompts the question: How can that be?

The answer: shifting demographic patterns. Over time, the public school population has come to consist of proportionately fewer traditionally higher-performing white students and of more members of historically underserved groups, most notably Latinos. All else being equal, population growth among groups with low average graduation rates will tend to depress improvements in the overall graduation trend.

The *Diplomas Count 2010* analysis also reveals a surprisingly concentrated dropout crisis. There are 11,000 school systems nationwide that enroll students at the secondary level, but a mere 25 districts account for one in every five non-graduates for the entire nation, or more than a quarter-million students who failed to graduate.

Those epicenters of the dropout crisis are a combination of traditional big-city districts and large countywide school systems. The New York City school system, the nation's largest district, serves 1.1 million students and emerges as the leading source of nongraduates, with nearly 44,000 students lost each year. But the 678,000-student Los Angeles Unified district, despite its smaller size, generates a comparable number of dropouts, owing to a graduation rate 14 points lower than in New York.

Former Gov. Bob Wise of West Virginia told *Diplomas Count* that

using data is not a luxury, but a necessity for schools today. Wise, who is the president of the Washington-based Alliance for Excellent Education, says schools need to draw on data-driven strategies. Comprehensive, careful analysis is critical to progress.

Putting Data to Work

“Every decision needs to have data showing why it works and helping teachers inform their decisions with data that helps improve student learning,” he says. Comprehensive data systems “can immediately capture what is happening in a student's life and sound the warning so you can intervene.”

The school officials interviewed for this report illustrate what can happen when educators keep a close watch on their students and the different strands of relevant information about their academic performance, school attendance, and home lives.

And, while there are places where the dropout problem is concentrated, there are also cities, towns, and counties where educators are working hard to reverse negative trends. In Minneapolis, electronic “dashboards” appear on school principals' computer monitors the moment they log on in the morning. Those dashboards summarize student and teacher attendance, as well as daily student-suspension numbers, and some achievement data.

In addition, secondary school principals can access an early-warning system that tracks stu-

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Graduation by the Numbers

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dent attendance, behavior, GPA, credits earned, and state test data, along with other indicators. The aim is to enable school leaders to intervene before a problem becomes a crisis.

Meanwhile, in Nashville, Tenn., the district has opened small alternative high schools to help harried students continue to learn. Data pointed district leaders to the realization that certain students were more likely to drop out because of pressures they felt at home to work to support their families. School officials have tried to create “flexible, alternative structures,” says Nashville Superintendent Jesse Register. The alternatives “are very centered on those young people who have great family demands that prevent them from attending a regular school schedule,” he says.

In Fall River, Mass., school officials used data to confirm their observations about high school students. The outcome has been solutions with a practical focus that are keeping more students on pace for graduation. Those steps range from subsidized public-transportation fees to a high school program in nontraditional hours similar to Nashville’s approach.

Across the country in Stockton, Calif., the focus has been on cleaning up inaccurate data on dropouts and then finding the real dropouts in hopes of luring them back to the classroom. Finally, in rural Oconee County, S.C., educators are turning to graduation coaches who can use statistical information to identify potential dropouts early and work with them to keep them in school.

The goal everywhere is action—well-informed action. Or, as Wise puts it: “GM can’t make cars anymore just on good feelings, and we can’t continue to educate kids the same way.” ■

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Data in Action

Schools Innovate to Keep Students on Graduation Track

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By Dakarai I. Aarons

Drawing on an expanding universe of academic and nonacademic data, school administrators across the nation are crafting tactics they hope will raise the number of high school students who earn diplomas on graduation day.

Thanks to advances in technology and accountability requirements in the federal No Child Left Behind Act, many schools have more student-performance data at their disposal than ever before. That means they can more closely track how well students are, or aren't, progressing through high school and which students are dropping out—and, ideally, catch potential dropouts before they leave school.

Today, for example, using the Minneapolis district's data "dashboard," school administrators can monitor student progress on state and local assessments to help target students' weaknesses and strengths, says Bernadeia Johnson, the deputy superintendent for the 32,000-student school district.

"Data is a big part of trying to be clear about where students need to be placed and what their needs are," she says.

At the high school level, Minneapolis administrators are

monitoring whether students pass their courses, as well as the state exams required for graduation. Meanwhile, the district has made a push to ensure all students have access to more-challenging classes, by placing Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses in all its high schools. The emphasis on keeping students in school and graduating them prepared for college and careers has also forced the district to take a deeper look at how it delivers instruction from school to school.

"We have to make sure we have consistent course codes and we are consistently teaching the standards and curriculum," Johnson says. "If you are passing the course and not the state exam, where is the coherence in all of that?"

More Than Academic

In the 10,000-student Fall River, Mass., school district, administrators have found that focusing on the practical as well as the academic has helped improve graduation rates. (See Page 19.)

That focus includes addressing something as seemingly straightforward as making sure students can get to school.

Signs congratulating B.M.C. Durfee High School seniors on their acceptance into colleges adorn the school's hallways.

For instance, the district's B.M.C. Durfee High School is located at the north end of Fall River, but many of its disadvantaged students live in the south end of town, nearly seven miles away. The Fall River district lacks its own bus service, and students rely on public buses for transportation.

But even discounted bus fares weren't enough to keep all students attending regularly. While watching the loading zone across the street from school, Durfee Principal Paul Marshall and other administrators noticed that students were getting free rides to school whenever they could.

"You'd see these clown cars pull up with 10 to 15 kids in them," Marshall recalls. "Some parents were making the decision about whether to send kids to school or to buy food. And we found that faculty who had been at the school for

data from the state's value-added assessment system. A closer look at data in the 76,000-student Metropolitan Nashville district found higher rates of dropouts among English-language-learners, students who are parents, and those who have single parents—all of whom are more likely to work to help support their families. In response, the district created two high school academies to provide those students a no-frills finish to work toward their diplomas on a

more flexible school-day calendar. "[The academies] are very centered on those young people who have great family demands that prevent them from attending a regular school schedule," says Jesse Register, Nashville's superintendent. (See Page 10.)

Early Warning

Bob Wise, the president of the Washington-based Alliance for Excellent Education, says such data-driven strategies must be embedded in the culture of schools and school districts, not seen simply as an add-on.

"GM can't make cars anymore

just on good feelings, and we can't continue to educate kids the same way," says Wise, a former Democratic governor of West Virginia. "Every decision needs to have data showing why it works and helping teachers inform their decisions with data that helps improve student learning."

Individual teachers often have information that is crucial to understanding what's happening with a student, but in the absence of a data system, it doesn't get shared, he says.

"If it is not in a comprehensive data system that someone is monitoring on a regular basis, all of that tends to slip through the cracks,"

Wise says. "That's why data is important. It can immediately capture what is happening in a student's life and sound the warning so you can intervene."

Making sure usable data ends up in the hands of those who need it the most—those in the classroom—is a constant challenge, says Johnson of Minneapolis.

"We have to get the right type of information to teachers about interventions and strategies," she says. "We do push out a lot of data. The challenge is it being the right data that informs instruction."

Having more adults focused on looking at the data and reaching



We have to get the right type of information to teachers about interventions and strategies. We do push out a lot of data. The challenge is it being the right data that informs instruction."

—BERNADEIA JOHNSON
Deputy Superintendent
Minneapolis Schools

20 to 30 years weren't even aware that kids were going through this obstacle."

Attendance data confirmed the pattern, and the district ultimately managed to supplement bus fare for students receiving federally subsidized school meals. The change helped raise expectations for parents, too.

"Now, we say to parents that transportation can no longer be an excuse if their child isn't coming to school," says Meg Mayo-Brown, Fall River's superintendent.

For nearly two decades, Tennessee educators have been able to use



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Teacher Jay Chatterton helps freshman Jose Soares draw straight lines in a general shop class at B.M.C. Durfee High School in Fall River, Mass.

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

out to students in need makes a difference, school administrators say. Using federal economic-stimulus funding, the 10,400-student Oconee County, S.C., school district has hired graduation coaches who give individual attention to students flagged as unlikely to graduate because of poor attendance and test scores. (See Page 16.)

Jose A. Torres, the superintendent of the 40,000-student U-46 school district in Elgin, Ill., says his district homes in on individual students to figure out how best to intervene with those most likely to drop out.

A data set tells him the grade level, grade point average, and number of suspensions and absences for students who are at risk of leaving.

“When I look at this list, we are

trying to determine, for example, how do we help a kid in 9th grade who has two credits and 15 absences?” Torres says.

To create an early-warning system, the Milwaukee district has been working with the Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

The new system will record not only how many credits students are earning, but also the grades the students receive, in an attempt

to make sure the district is graduating students who have viable options after high school.

“Whether or not you have passed a course is insufficient,” says Deborah L. Lindsey, the director of research and assessment for the Milwaukee schools. “We graduate a lot of kids with D averages. We wanted to better discriminate.”

Teachers and administrators will load information, along with

other data points, into Milwaukee’s data dashboard as part of an early-warning system in the 2010-11 school year. Data dashboards are computer programs that pull together a variety of information, such as attendance, test scores, and behavior data, in one place so educators have a full picture when making decisions.

“High schools are interested in it,” Lindsey says. “They get that they are not just supposed to be preparing kids to get a diploma, but preparing them to be successful in the next place.”

The signs that students may not last until graduation often show up in the data teachers have collected in elementary and middle school, says Manuel J. Rivera, a former Rochester, N.Y., superintendent who is now the chief executive officer of the New York City-based Global Partnership Schools.

“You begin to see signs long before 9th grade—kids who don’t have interest, and that begins to impact their attendance,” he says. “You see kids who test quite well, but who are completely not engaged in learning.”

They include some students, Rivera says, who are “inappropriately and incorrectly” labeled as having disabilities and end up languishing in special education classes.

Rivera’s organization is working to launch a graduation advancement program that will work with

Q&A:

Deputy Superintendent BERNADEIA JOHNSON Minneapolis Public Schools

Q The Minneapolis public schools have launched a “We Want You Back” campaign to bring back students who have dropped out. How did you identify these students, and how do you plan to bring them back?

We used a two-tiered approach in our “We Want You Back” campaign. For outreach during the 2009-10 school year, our student-accounting department provided us with data about all students who had been coded as “dropouts” the previous year because they stopped coming to school. We examined that data and targeted students who had already earned 40 credits toward graduation with an outreach campaign



that involved telephone calls, posters, and mailings.

Our plans for the 2010-11 school year involve a broader approach. In partnership with governmental and community organizations, we will be mobilizing hundreds of volunteers to blanket the city of Minneapolis, going door to door to contact young people who have dropped out over the last five years and let them know we are here to support them and get them back into school. Staff and volunteers will be conducting weekly check-ins with these young people to help them enroll in school or a program and complete their high school education.

Q How has the Advancement Via Individual

Determination (AVID) program helped your efforts to keep students in school and engaged?

We have placed AVID in all our middle and high schools to help our students realize their potential and gain the confidence to believe that they can take rigorous courses and go to college. AVID targets students in the academic middle who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and would be the first in their family to go to college. AVID fosters a college-going mind-set, teaching skills such as note-taking, organization, and time management.

Q You’ve made efforts to make sure principals have the right data at their fingertips. What do their dashboards tell them?

Electronic “dashboards” immediately appear on our principals’ computer screens when they log in each day. The dashboards summarize student attendance, teacher attendance, and [the] number of suspensions for the day and week, and give principals access to other achievement data as well. Secondary principals also have another data tool, called the “hotlist,” an early-warning system that allows principals to easily access and compare specific data fields such as attendance, behavior, GPA, credits earned, state test data, ACT scores, and failing grades. They can choose to slice this data by any

demographic category and then share the early-warning lists with their site student-support team to provide timely interventions.

Q Expanding access to advanced coursework has been part of your push to challenge high school students and prepare them for college and beyond. How do you get students to take advantage of the courses?

As we moved to three attendance zones for our city as part of our overall strategic direction as a district, we implemented an equity framework for our comprehensive high schools. Under this framework, we offer four pathways to rigor that students can access: College in the Schools, Advanced Placement courses, the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma program, and expanded postsecondary certification in career and technical education.

Three years ago, we eliminated entrance criteria for our advanced coursework and programs. This has helped us recruit students into higher-level courses and shift beliefs about who these classes are intended to serve. We believe that offering IB at six high schools—four more than in previous years—and increasing AVID supports will propel our efforts at providing more access to rigor and ultimately raise achievement. ■

—DAKARAI I. AARONS

7th, 8th, and 9th graders in participating districts who are overage for their grades and behind in course credits—prime candidates for dropping out.

“There are so many young people who are in that stage,” Rivera says. “If you leave them that way, the system is going to fail them.”

To help bridge the gap, Milwaukee and other districts, including the 34,600-student Cincinnati school system, have instituted summer programs to help students make the transition from middle school to high school. Research shows 9th grade is the point when many districts see the steepest loss in students.

Middle school “is a different environment that looks at the whole child,” says Mary Ronan, Cincinnati’s superintendent. “Suddenly, [students] hit high school, and every 45 minutes, they change classes. They have six teachers with six different sets of expectations. You really have to have those management skills. Youngsters aren’t prepared to keep track of everything daily.”

Meeting the Challenge

Even when districts put programs in place, figuring out which students to target can be tricky. Technology and geographic limitations can get in the way.

Ronan says Cincinnati’s location creates special challenges for the district when staff members try to determine which students are, in fact, dropouts, and which students are simply enrolled elsewhere.

“Our kids cross the bridge and go into Kentucky. Indiana is 30 minutes away. We have youngsters in three different states, so that adds to the complexity,” she explains.

“They leave us, go to Kentucky, and come back. The child enrolls with a slightly different name, and all of the sudden the person who inputs it creates a new student ID number,” Ronan continues. “The ‘old’ child is a dropout, and we now have a new child. It’s not as easy as we all thought it would be.”

Officials in the Stockton, Calif., district have been able to reduce their dropout numbers in the past two school years through a major district-led campaign to identify students who have left high school, locate them, and lure them back, or, in some cases, to mark them off the dropout rolls after confirming that they’ve enrolled someplace else. (See Page 13.)

In Cincinnati, Ronan says, a small-schools initiative funded by the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was key in helping the district raise its graduation rate from 51 percent in 2000 to 80.5 percent in 2009. Another factor, Ronan says, is the school choice program the district put in place at the high school level.

Rather than being assigned to the nearest high school, Cincinnati students choose from a list of schools based on their career interests.

The process, managed electronically, places about 90 percent of students in one of their top two choices.

“I think that helps keep young-

sters in school, too,” Ronan says. “If you were assigned to the high school down the street and it didn’t offer things you were interested in, there was no hope to keep you in school.”

Hoping not all dropouts are lost to them forever, some districts are working to bring those young people back.

The Minneapolis district, for example, launched a “We Want You Back” campaign last fall, says Johnson, who will become Minneapolis’ superintendent next month.

The district, working with local organizations, held community meetings in which former students could connect with high school counselors to help them figure out

their best options, whether it was returning to high school to finish work for a diploma or pursuing a General Educational Development credential, even though GED recipients don’t count as district graduates.

In fall 2010, the district plans to expand its effort, with a door-to-door campaign to recruit more students.

“We want people to drop back in to Minneapolis [schools],” Johnson says. “The key to this is not just to connect with people, but to identify the supports to help them.” ■

Senior Writer Stephen Sawchuk contributed to this story.



You begin to see signs long before 9th grade—kids who don’t have interest, and that begins to impact their attendance.”

—MANUEL J. RIVERA
CEO, Global Partnership Schools

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Guiding Students on Nontraditional Paths

Nashville Schools Find Alternatives For Students In Need

By Dakarai I. Aarons

School leaders in Nashville, Tenn., quickly saw a pattern when they began reviewing data on students who dropped out of school there. Many were English-language learners or young parents, or were being raised by single parents, and most were working full or part time to help make ends meet.

Jesse Register, the superintendent of the 76,000-student Metropolitan Nashville school district, says administrators realized they needed new and different systems in place to make sure more of those students graduated.

In 2008, Nashville's graduation rate was 72.6 percent, and Register says that's not high enough. (Graduation data from 2008 were the most recent available from the Tennessee Department of Education.)

One solution: nontraditional high schools.

The Academy at Old Cockrill and the Academy at Opry Mills are high schools that meet on modified schedules to help students who need more flexibility to complete their studies and earn their diplomas. The schools opened last fall and graduated their first group of students in December

2009. Another group graduated last month.

"What we've done is try to create flexible, alternative structures," Register says. "They are very centered on those young people who have great family demands that prevent them from attending a regular school schedule."

The principals actively recruit students for the schools; many of the students dropped out during senior year or the second semester of junior year and are between the ages of 17 and 21.

Classes are offered four hours a day, five days a week, and students can earn two academic credits every nine weeks if they attend morning and afternoon sessions at the schools.

"I have the best job in town," says Elaine Fahrner, the principal of the Academy at Old Cockrill. "When you can create hopes and dreams for people, it doesn't get any better than that."

Fahrner says the school's small size allows her to interact with students on an individual basis and help them work around job schedules and transportation issues, and use a combination of both classroom and Web-based coursework to graduate. She recruited many of the students herself, going to

PAGE 12 >



George Walker IV/The Tennessean

Q&A:

Superintendent JESSE REGISTER Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

Q The district is paying close attention to the transition between middle school and high school. How are you supporting incoming 9th graders?

[The Metropolitan Nashville public schools] will begin a new summer extended-learning program for students at risk of falling behind or dropping out. Identified students will be invited to enroll in extended-learning courses throughout the summer. The goal is to provide ongoing support to students and provide additional support to those who may need it prior to 9th grade.

During the 2008-09 school year, MNPS began a new course called Freshman Seminar. The course is designed to help first-time 9th graders adjust to high school, set long-term goals, and establish steps to reach those goals, explore various careers and postsecondary educational opportunities, and even learn about various clubs and programs offered at the school.



Q How do the Academies at Old Cockrill and Opry Mills fit in the district's mission to boost the city's graduation rate?

The Academies at Old Cockrill and Opry Mills are unique settings for students who have either dropped out of high school or are at risk of dropping out. These schools target students who have family and employment responsibilities, as well as those who do not thrive in a traditional high school setting. They offer the same rigorous curriculum, with more flexibility and independence to accommodate difficult schedules. The goal is simple: We want every child in Nashville to have access to the education he or she deserves. We realize that some of our youth have difficult personal circumstances. The Academies at Old Cockrill and Opry Mills allow us an opportunity to reach out to those young people and give them the education they need and deserve. By earning a high school diploma, these students will be much more successful in life and be productive contributors to our local and national economy.

Q How are teachers and principals able to tap into the value-added and other data you have to improve outcomes for students?

Our district is well into development and implementation of a data warehouse that will allow teachers and principals to view information on a district level, school level, class level, and individual student level. A student's performance on district and state assessments, attendance record, and many other pieces of information will be available to staff through this warehouse. With this information, our schools will be able to quickly identify students who are falling behind and develop appropriate interventions. We will be able to use value-added data to predict the future academic success of a student and provide whatever help is needed early on to ensure the student has the best opportunity for success. ■

—DAKARAI I. AARONS

Elizabeth Powell works on a project at the Academy at Opry Mills. The school offers flexible schedules to help students with family and work pressures.

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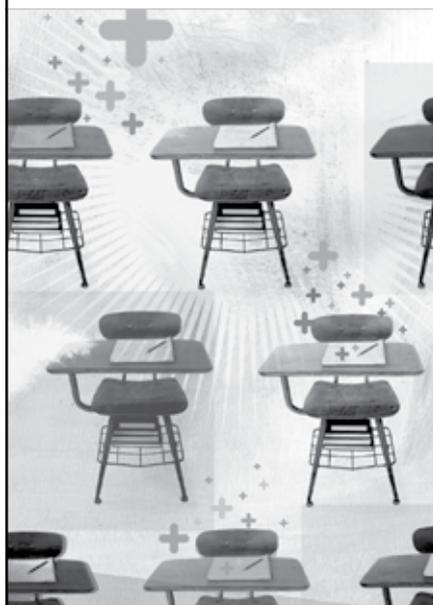
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What we've done is try to create flexible, alternative structures."

—JESSE REGISTER
Superintendent, Nashville Schools

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

local high schools and spending time talking to newspapers and television stations about the new school.

"We add that personal touch. I know everybody's name and their business," Fahrner says.

Space for the Opry Mills location was donated by the Indianapolis-based Simon Youth Foundation, which has opened 25 such centers in 12 states in partnership with school districts.

The Simon Property Group Inc. owns the Opry Mills shopping mall, where the Opry Mills high school is located; having classes in the mall allows students to work and study in the same location.

Another piece of the district's strategy to improve graduation rates is a focus on 9th grade—a critical year for many students who are at risk of dropping out.

The district has launched 9th grade academies in all of its high schools, organizing teachers into teams to make sure students are part of a community where they feel connected to one another and their teachers.

"We think focusing very carefully on what students

experience in the 9th grade year is effective," Register says. "The teaming is important. Establishing relationships between teachers and students is important."

Working with a collective that includes universities, the Nashville district is applying for funding under the federal Investing in Innovation, or i3, grant competition to help build a strong early-warning system on dropout prevention. The plan aims to help Nashville capitalize on a wealth of data available from the state's longitudinal-data system, which includes value-added-assessment information.

"We need to really look at upper-elementary and middle schools and identify those characteristics that are very closely related to dropouts at the high school level," Register says.

But, the superintendent adds, the difficult part is following through.

"Our weakness is in doing something about those issues—changing those problems so the indicators don't become true," he says. "How do we identify those younger students and flag them as high-risk, and then do something about it?" ■

Big-City Profile

Summary statistics for districts serving cities with populations greater than 250,000.

177 DISTRICTS IN THE LARGEST CITIES

17,715 MEDIAN STUDENT ENROLLMENT

22 MEDIAN NUMBER OF SCHOOLS

4 PERCENTAGE-POINT IMPROVEMENT IN GRADUATION RATE, 1997 TO 2007



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Manny Crisostomo for Education Week

Charles Daclan, a child-welfare and attendance counselor, makes notes in his car at a Stockton trailer park and motel on the status of a high school student. Motel employees told him the student's family had been deported.

District Targets Dropout Figures

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Legwork
And Clean
Data Critical
To Stockton,
Calif., Effort

By Lesli A. Maxwell

Most socioeconomic indicators in the midsize Central Valley city of Stockton, Calif., would point to a high school dropout problem more severe than it actually is.

But, for the second straight year, the dropout rate in the 38,000-student district, where roughly 70 percent of students come from poor, Latino families, is expected to shrink, thanks to an aggressive effort to identify the students who have left high school, locate them, and lure them back—or cross them off the Stockton rolls if they've enrolled elsewhere.

After district officials launched a dropout-recovery campaign in 2009—which included correcting so-called “bad data” for the previous school year—the dropout rate fell by more than half, says Scott R. Traub, the district's administrator for research, evaluation, and assessment. The dropout rate, which stood at 52.5 percent for the class that started as 9th graders in 2003 and graduated in the 2006-07 school year, fell to 17.7 percent for the graduating class of 2007-08, after the adjustments were made. (The California Department of Edu-

cation had not released dropout data for the 2008-09 school year before the deadline for this article.)

Central to that steep reduction has been the district's use of data—attendance figures, suspension numbers, dropout statistics, and student-transfer figures are among the major data points—to track down students who are unaccounted for. Launched in January 2009, the Reclaiming Our Youth Center—a critical part of the recovery campaign—began searching for students with 10 or more consecutive, unexcused absences and persuading them to return to school, as well as whittling down the number of students erroneously counted as district dropouts in the 2007-08 school year.

Using long lists of missing students, district employees—redeployed from other jobs within the school system—have put out hundreds of calls to family members in the year and a half since launching the initiative. When a missing youth is located, the unit dispatches special teams to visit the student and his or her family and make a pitch to bring the student back into the district's fold.

The center's employees also follow leads to locate students

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Q&A:

Administrator for Research, Evaluation, and Assessment **SCOTT R. TRAUB** Stockton Unified School District

Q What have been the key pieces of data that Stockton Unified has used to grapple with its dropout rate?

We begin with the codes that are identified by the state as dropout codes and “lost transfers,” which are students that indicate they are transferring to another school and never enroll. We look at attendance, suspension, grades, et cetera.

Q Were you mostly dependent on internal, district data?

Yes, we consistently use the data from our student-information system. This provides the most up-to-date demographic, academic, and behavioral data, which is critical to finding the students, as quickly as possible, to ensure they enroll in school in an appropriate program.



Q In addition to using data to locate students who were being erroneously counted as district dropouts, how else have you used data components to address the dropout issue?

Multiple sources of data have assisted us in addressing the issue. Primarily, current and past demographic information, relatives’ address data is used for location purposes, and if the student is no longer there, we then talk to neighbors in an effort to find the whereabouts. This procedure has helped locate many students where we would not have been able to without the personal visit to the home and neighborhood. We also review enrollment, attendance, and discipline trends over time, not only at the district level, but at the school and grade level as well, so we can zero in on specific, potential causes of students’ dropping out. We further expand the lens to look at what we are doing programmatically—both in and outside of

school—with students to investigate whether their academic/social needs are being met, and if they aren’t, we try to match their needs with a program that we offer here in the district.

Q How has Stockton’s strategy for driving down the dropout rate and raising the graduation rate evolved so far in the two [school] years since the district launched this initiative?

The past two years have seen an evolution of policy, procedure, and processes that are now part of the culture of the district. Cross-department collaboration is more prevalent, and that has brought a new level of shared responsibility for this that hasn’t been present. Outside of the school district, community partnerships, the city of Stockton, and local businesses are more aware of the issue and how they can help support the district and the initiatives.

Q The district went through a leadership change just a little over a year after the initiative began. How has Stockton Unified been able to sustain the efforts despite that change?

The collaborative efforts mentioned above have allowed the whole initiative to turn into institutionalized practices that are constantly being evaluated for effectiveness and modified as necessary. By moving from an “initiative” mentality to an institutionalized practice mind-set, any ramifications of leadership change, whether it be at the school site or the superintendent level, will be greatly reduced, if not absent entirely, as any new individual in those positions will understand that these efforts are part of what Stockton does. ■

—LESLI A. MAXWELL

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

who have enrolled in other school districts, a community college, or a high-school-equivalency program. Once team members verify a student’s enrollment elsewhere, they scratch that student’s name off the Stockton list. And the number of students counted as dropouts shrank and shrank.

Now, as it wraps up its second year, the center is focusing on reclaiming students at those points during the school calendar when they are most likely to go missing: at the beginning of the school year and after the district’s winter break, Traub says.

And the district has painstakingly trained attendance registrars in all 55 schools to ensure a more accurate recording of students’ whereabouts, he said.

“This is doable for next to nothing,” says Traub, who notes that the district has not had to curtail its efforts despite significant spending cuts to K-12 programs in recession-battered California.

“One of the easiest things for districts to do is to just record and track kids accurately,” he says. “Once you get that done, most districts will see a bump in reducing their dropout rate.”

By reassigning existing employees and tapping parent liaisons to help do the work of finding students, the district has not had to

hire new staff members.

Beyond using data to more carefully record who is, and who isn’t, a dropout, district officials are investing multiple resources to keep students on the path to graduation.

Last fall, the district opened a new charter high school designed to reach students who have fallen behind in credits or who want to prepare for taking the exam to obtain a General Educational Development, or GED, credential. The school is also designed to serve students for whom “school is just not a priority,” Traub says.

For students in need of more challenging and engaging high school courses, the district started an early-college program.

And it is continuing with a campaign to boost SAT and PSAT participation by covering the costs (with the help of a federal grant and fee waivers from the College Board, which owns the SAT) for sophomores and juniors to take the exams.

Enlisting the wider Stockton community—including current Mayor Ann Johnston, business leaders, and local clergy—has proved crucial to keeping the multipronged initiative going.

That’s been especially important since last fall when the school board fired Superintendent Anthony Amato, who launched much of the anti-dropout campaign, Traub notes. ■

Midsize-City Profile

Summary statistics for districts serving cities with populations from 100,000 to 250,000.

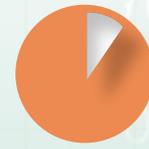
177 DISTRICTS IN MIDSIZE CITIES

19,987 MEDIAN STUDENT ENROLLMENT

34 MEDIAN NUMBER OF SCHOOLS

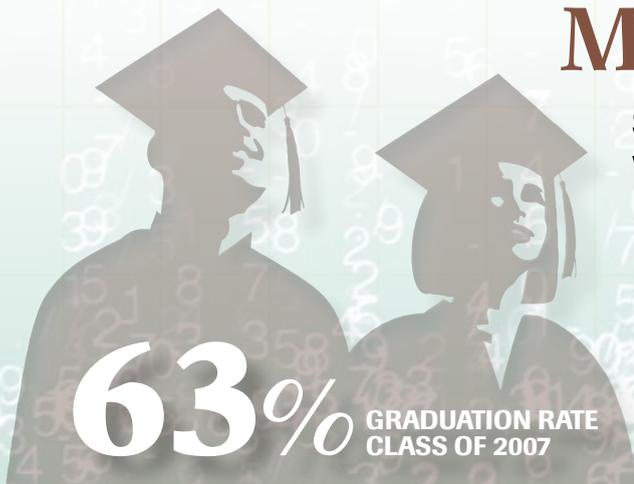
2 PERCENTAGE-POINT IMPROVEMENT IN GRADUATION RATE, 1997 TO 2007

SOURCE: EPE Research Center, 2010



7%
OF U.S.
STUDENT
POPULATION
SERVED

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63% GRADUATION RATE CLASS OF 2007



One of the easiest things for districts to do is to just record and track kids accurately."

—SCOTT R. TRAUB

Administrator for Research, Evaluation, and Assessment
Stockton Schools



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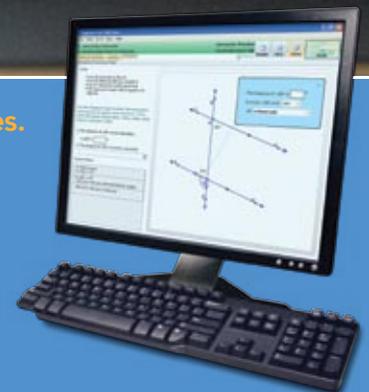
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Christopher Powers/Education Week

Matthew Hunter, 22, dropped out of West-Oak Senior High School after being injured in a car accident. He calls school “boring” and says he’s unlikely to go back. This school year, West-Oak hired a graduation coach to work with at-risk students and educate them on the importance of earning a high school diploma.

Westminster, S.C.

Coaching For Success

By Mary Ann Zehr

Rural South Carolina District Hires Graduation Coaches With Stimulus Aid

Kevin R. Burnette used to be a math teacher, but today his job is to encourage high school seniors at risk of dropping out to stick with school until they graduate. Using attendance data and standardized-test scores to identify the West-Oak Senior High School students who need extra support, Burnette is reaching out to students to find ways to help them pass their classes and earn a diploma.

West-Oak High is located in Oconee County, a rural area in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in the northwest corner of South Carolina. This school year, the 10,400-student Oconee County school district chose to use federal economic-stimulus money to pay for “adequate-yearly-progress coaches,” or graduation coaches, at the secondary school level.

Burnette is the graduation coach for West-Oak High, which has the lowest graduation rate of the four high schools in the county. In 2009, the school reported a graduation rate to the state of 71.5 percent. The rate reflects the percentage of 9th graders in a school who earn a regular high school diploma and graduate in four years or less. It also includes students who enrolled in 9th grade for the first time elsewhere and transferred to that school.

In 2008, the rate at West-Oak was 71.2 percent, and in 2007, it was 76.5 percent. Students who have special needs and earn a certificate instead of a regular diploma and those who leave school to pursue a General Educational Development credential are counted against the school’s graduation rate.

West-Oak’s principal, Scott M. Smith, says he believes having a graduation coach has helped. He expects, in fact, that the graduation rate will climb at least several percentage points higher this school year than last, which he characterizes as “a great move forward for us, but still not where we want to be.” He was expecting to give out 231 diplomas on graduation day, June 5, up from 163 last school year.

His school enrolls about 1,000 students, almost all of whom are white, and many of whom are from low-income families.

At the start of the school year, Burnette identified 76 seniors out of the 246 who started the year as being at risk of not finishing high school. Students were assigned to the list because of their previous poor attendance or having retaken or failed classes. Also on the list, Burnette says, were seniors who hadn’t passed at least one part of the state’s high school exit exam.

He says he encounters students who have “a narrow view of the world”;

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Q&A:

Graduation Coach **KEVIN R. BURNETTE** West-Oak Senior High School

Q What are some of the kinds of data you used to identify seniors in the beginning of the year who were at risk of dropping out of school?

We checked to see what students were retaking classes that they needed for graduation, attendance records, and HSAP [South Carolina High School Assessment Program] scores to see what students had not yet passed at least one part of the test.

Q In what ways did you have an influence in convincing some of those seniors to stay in school so they could graduate?

I tried to help them see that they weren't too far gone to graduate. Some of our students were behind two or three classes, and they felt overwhelmed with the amount of work they had to do. I reassured them that, with some hard work and with the help of their teachers, they could in fact get it done and get their diplomas. The second thing I talked to them about that I feel had an impact was making sure they had options. I tried to help them understand that a diploma gives them options that they wouldn't have without one.

Q What are the main reasons some seniors dropped out this school year, even when you gave them special encouragement to stick it out?

I found that there were a variety of reasons that students dropped out this year. Some already had job opportunities lined up with family members, and they didn't feel like having a diploma mattered for them. Some students had gotten into a position where they were very far behind, and they felt overwhelmed by the amount of work that they would have to do to catch up and just didn't want to do it.

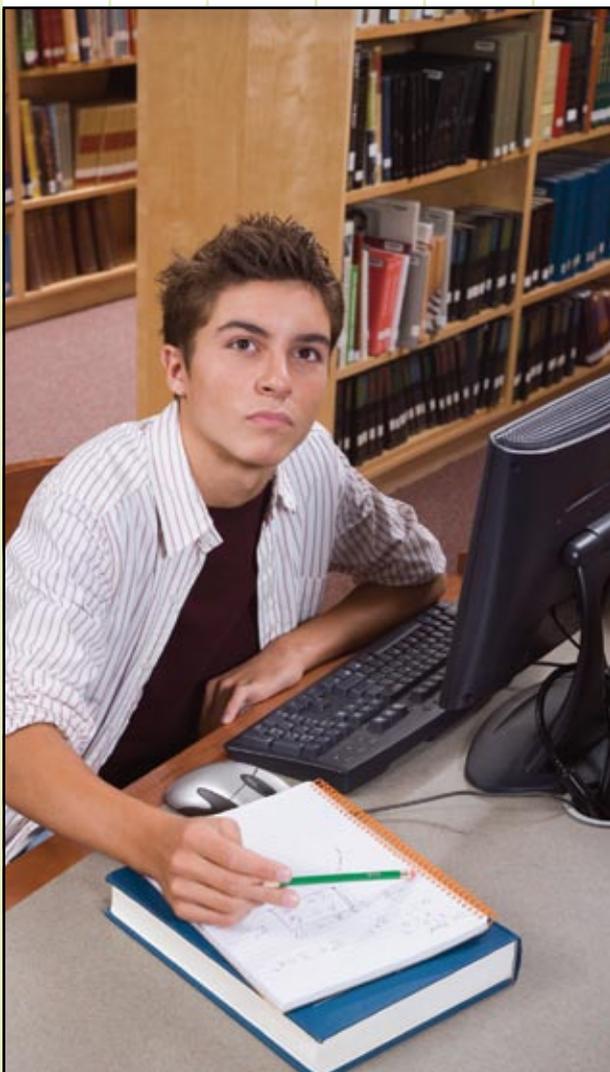
Q What are your plans for next school year to continue to use data to identify and monitor students at risk of dropping out?



I'd like to begin working more with our 9th grade students to help them understand how important a high school diploma is. I would also like to implement a new system for identifying at-risk students that our dropout-prevention team helped

develop. It assigns points to students for different categories, like not having passed the exit exam, previous behavior problems, excessive absences, being behind in coursework, et cetera. Students with higher point totals would then be considered more at risk for dropping out. ■

—MARY ANN ZEHR



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Rural Profile

Summary statistics for districts serving rural areas.



8,059 DISTRICTS IN RURAL AREAS

536 MEDIAN STUDENT ENROLLMENT

2 MEDIAN NUMBER OF SCHOOLS

3 PERCENTAGE-POINT IMPROVEMENT IN GRADUATION RATE, 1997 TO 2007



19%
OF U.S.
STUDENT
POPULATION
SERVED

SOURCE: EPE Research Center, 2010

they haven't had much exposure to the possibilities for jobs outside of Westminster, where the school is located, or the surrounding region.

To broaden their horizons, Burnette makes a point of meeting one-on-one with each of the seniors he's identified to talk about their prospects. He says some students want to go to college, but don't know the steps to take to make that happen. A good many, he says, want to get a job as soon as possible, in work such as construction or plumbing.

"I stressed to them that getting a high school diploma opens up the options," Burnette says. "Working for your dad in construction sounds good now, but five years down the road, you might like to do something else."

Burnette says he talked only once to some of the students, and they carried through with what they needed to do to get on track. He formed an ongoing relationship with about half the 76 students and met with them



I stressed to them that getting a high school diploma opens up the options."

—KEVIN R. BURNETTE
Graduation Coach
West-Oak Senior High School

throughout the school year. He estimates that he may have helped about 20 to change their minds about leaving school.

Still, 11 seniors have dropped out, Burnette says, including two whom he and the school police officer visited in their homes after they stopped coming to school. The two, who were at least 17 and old enough to decide legally to quit school, couldn't be persuaded to return.

Burnette says his goal for next school year is to start working with the freshman class. "I feel if we can get them through the first year [of high school]," he explains, "they will be less likely to drop out."

Smith, the principal, says Oconee County is working to identify struggling students by using data starting as early as middle school. When they enroll at West-Oak High, some young people are assigned to an extra math or English block intended to support them in passing 9th grade English or Algebra 1.

"We used to wait until students were not successful on their South Carolina exit exams before we tried to provide any assistance," Smith says. That has changed, he adds. ■

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Erik Jacobs for Education Week

Principal Paul Marshall helps pick up trash at the end of lunch at B.M.C. Durfee High School. Marshall and other staff members have made a significant effort to change the culture at the school.

From Analysis to Action

Fall River,
Mass., High
School Puts
Emphasis
On Doing

By Stephen Sawchuk

Four years ago, you didn't need graduation data to know that the 2,400-student comprehensive high school in Fall River, Mass., was in trouble. All you needed was one afternoon inside the school.

"You'd walk in the door, and the first thing you'd notice was the smell of cigarette smoke," says Meg Mayo-Brown, the superintendent of the 10,000-student school district. "Kids were disengaged. They had their heads down on their desks."

Paul Marshall, now the school's principal, recalls security guards who'd shoo kids out at closing time and hallways that were always devoid of teachers.

So when the Fall River district launched an effort in the 2006-07 school year to raise graduation rates at B.M.C. Durfee High School, officials looked at the usual sources of information, including attendance rates, dropout data, test scores, failure rates, and year-to-year retention statistics. But the trick, they say, was pairing that information with a close analysis of the norms and policies in the school and an effort to re-

spond to students' needs and interests.

"There's no real 'program' we put in place," says Marshall, one of three administrators hired by the district as part of its effort to raise the four-year graduation rate, which has climbed from 54.2 percent for the class of 2006 to 62.5 percent for the class of 2009. "It's basically been a lot of sweat equity, and really listening to the public and the faculty and students."

Among the earliest breakthroughs was making sure that all students could simply get to school.

Many of Durfee High School's disadvantaged students live nearly seven miles away in the south end of Fall River. Because students rely on public buses for transportation, and some families could not afford even the discounted bus fares offered their children, kids would miss school.

Fall River officials used attendance data to confirm what they had observed anecdotally: students emerging from packed cars in the loading zone or trying to catch free rides.

Ultimately, the district managed to cover bus fare

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Q&A:

Superintendent MEG MAYO-BROWN Fall River Public Schools

Q One of your strategies to improve the graduation rate was to bring in a team of three new administrators. What was your theory of action behind that decision?

We believed creating a positive, collegial, professional school community, combined with a strong culture grounded in student success, would lead to high expectations for staff and students, and create a personalized approach to student learning and engagement. In addition to their track record of success in a different community, the three new school leaders brought beliefs and values about positive school culture and built collaborative relationships with like-minded staff, parents, and community members to develop and sustain a new vision for the school.

Q You've made an effort to tailor graduation strategies to what your high school students say they need. How did you go about obtaining their feedback?

Recognizing "student voice" is a key factor in creating meaningful school experiences. School leaders and staff interact regularly with

students and parents in a variety of settings, including home visits. These informal and formal opportunities, whether at a high school basketball game, parent advisory council meeting, student government meeting, or backyard cookout, lead to insights about what works for kids. Most importantly, school leaders and staff develop personal relationships with students. It is through these sustained relationships that "student voice" is fostered and respected, leading to student-centered programming.

Q What changes have you seen in your smaller, alternative high school in the past four years?

Four years ago, our alternative high school housed 50 students and offered a very limited number of courses. Few students graduated, and many teachers and students felt the environment was unsafe. In the past four years, the school was renamed to reflect its mission; additional funding expanded available services; school governance was restructured and included teacher leadership;

community partnerships were developed; high expectations were established for staff, students, and parents; and new pathways to graduation were created. Currently, the school enrolls over 300 students with a 35 percent increase in the graduation rate.



Q You plan to continue to look at data in the middle and elementary grades to identify those kids who are at risk of dropping out in high school. Long-term, what strategies do you anticipate putting into place in those grades?

We are focusing our development efforts in three areas: (1) building and supporting student-transition programs for the middle years; (2) developing rigorous, individualized curriculum with career-learning and mentoring opportunities for elementary and middle school students; and (3) expanding early-childhood education to support cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as parent-support programs. ■

—STEPHEN SAWCHUK

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students receiving federally subsidized school meals.

Ensuring that teachers were engaged with students, both in the school halls and through extracurricular activities, also was crucial.

The school reorganized its advising system to make sure all students were on course toward academic or career goals; it replaced a system that focused primarily on transitions into and out of school.

Administrators and teachers created new extracurricular activities by surveying student interest. They formed a popular hip-hop dance club for girls, for instance, after getting the interested girls to agree to improve their grades.

Simultaneously, the district began overhauling an alternative education program that administrators said had essentially served as a dumping ground for struggling students. That program has since been transformed into the Resiliency Preparatory School and offers expanded avenues to a high school diploma. One program, for example, offers classes meeting from 3 to 7 p.m. to accommodate working students' schedules.

Parsing the district's academic data, meanwhile, helped admin-

istrators convince parents and the community of the need to raise expectations in core high school classes.

Transcripts showed that students were earning A's and B's in their Advanced Placement classes. But their average score on AP exams was just 1.4. The passing score on the exam, which is graded on a 1-to-5 scale, is a 3.

Armed with that information, Fall River secured support from the Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, a Boston-based nonprofit organization, to help math, science, and English AP teachers raise instructional rigor.

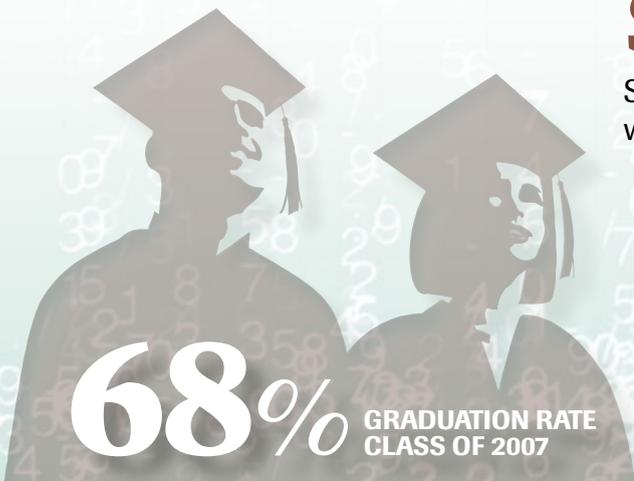
When grades dropped as a result, says Marshall, administrators had some tough conversations with parents.

"We said, 'Look, the admissions officers [at universities] are not fools; they are going to accuse us of grade inflation.' It was hard for the community to accept, but it was the truth, and if we didn't put it out there, it wasn't going to change."

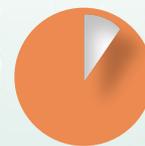
Now, the district can point to any number of changes. Participation in a dual-enrollment initiative with a local community college has boomed. Graduating students are exploring options far beyond Fall River; some are attending college as far away as

Small-City Profile

Summary statistics for districts serving cities with populations of fewer than 100,000.



- 413** DISTRICTS IN SMALL CITIES
- 7,904** MEDIAN STUDENT ENROLLMENT
- 14** MEDIAN NUMBER OF SCHOOLS
- <1** PERCENTAGE-POINT IMPROVEMENT IN GRADUATION RATE, 1997 TO 2007



8%
OF U.S.
STUDENT
POPULATION
SERVED

SOURCE: EPE Research Center, 2010



Three people cannot make change. We had to recruit more like minds and get out into the hallways. You manage by doing, not by looking at papers."

—PAUL MARSHALL
Principal
B.M.C. Durfee High School

Colorado and Alaska.

For all of the district's success, Marshall attributes the improvements to the daily work of Fall River teachers and administrators.

"It wasn't because the three of us came to the district," Marshall says of the administrators hired as part of the graduation push. "Three people cannot make change. We had to recruit more like minds and get out into the hallways. You manage by doing, not by looking at papers." ■



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Progress Postponed

Graduation Rate Continues Decline

By Christopher B. Swanson

Every school day, more than 7,200 students fall through the cracks of America's public high schools. Three out of every 10 members of this year's graduating class, 1.3 million students in all, will fail to graduate with a diploma. The effects of this graduation crisis fall disproportionately on the nation's most vulnerable youths and communities. A majority of nongraduates are members of historically disadvantaged minorities and other educationally underserved groups. They are more likely to attend school in large, urban districts. And they come disproportionately from communities challenged by severe poverty and economic hardship.

According to the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center's latest analysis of high school completion, the national graduation rate stands at 68.8 percent for the class of 2007, the most recent year for which data are available. This represents a slight drop, four-tenths of a percentage point, from 69.2 percent for the previous high school class.

The center calculates graduation rates for the nation, states, and every public school district in the country using the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) method and data from the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data (CCD). (More information on the CPI methodology can be found on Page 30 of this report.)

These findings mark the second consecutive year of declines in the national graduation rate, following a decade of mostly solid improvement. The latest decrease is considerably smaller than the nearly point-and-a-half drop from 2005 to 2006. Even so, a 0.4-percentage-point decline in the graduation rate means that, nationally, 11,000 fewer students earned diplomas in the class of 2007 compared with the previous year. The number is troubling, as those who fail to finish high school face far greater hardships on average than their graduating peers; their decisions not to finish school also hold implications for local labor markets, the national economy, and society at large.

The continued downturn in graduation is particularly concerning in light of the muscular response mounted around the dropout crisis in recent years. Transforming the American high school and ensuring that every student has a meaningful opportunity to earn a diploma that leads to a successful adult life have been explicit goals of the George W. Bush and Obama administrations. This cause has mobilized aggressive grassroots organizing and rarely seen cross-sector collaborations, driven changes in state policies, as well as aggressive local school and district interventions, and prompted billions of dollars in philanthropic investments over the past decade.

Stalled progress on a nationwide scale speaks at least as much to the deep and broad roots of the dropout crisis as it does to the strength of the collective response.

The current state of high school graduation further underscores that regaining traction will require renewed and sustained commitments from those concerned with the success of the nation's schools and the essential role of a well-educated population in weaving a strong economic and social fabric.

The Long View

A dominant theme in debates over high school reform, many of which have unfolded in the pages of *Diplomas Count* and *Education Week*, has been the need for hard, objective data on graduation rates. Such information provides needed insights on the severity of the challenges facing the schools at a given point, the groups and communities hit particularly hard by the crisis, the trajectory of change over time, and the effectiveness of efforts aimed at boosting graduation and preparing students for college and careers after high school. Yet that information has proved surprisingly hard to come by. Filling that knowledge gap and providing the public with detailed information on graduation rates and trends are among the primary goals of *Diplomas Count*.

By combining original analysis from the EPE Research Center with historical data published by the Education Department, this year we were able to follow the trajectory of high school graduation over a period of nearly 140 years, a span of time that has witnessed the birth, growth, maturity, and, some would argue, the increasing obsolescence of American second-

ary education as we now know it. Secondary schooling in the United States started as an essentially elite pursuit, with a mere 2 percent of the population acquiring the equivalent of a high school education in 1870, the earliest year for which data are available. It was not until several decades into the 20th century that Americans witnessed a quantum leap in engagement with high school, a transformation propelled by the ever-more-rapid industrialization of the U.S. economy and a continuing shift away from the nation's agrarian past.

The share of the population with a secondary education increased threefold from 1920 to 1940, when, for the first time, a slim majority of American youths graduated from high school. Finishing high school became more firmly established as a social and educational norm in postwar America, as the graduation rate rose steadily through the 1950s and 1960s. Completion rates peaked in 1969, with 77 percent of that high school class earning diplomas.

The next three decades were marked by a retreat from those historical highs; the graduation rate eroded incrementally at certain times and fell significantly at others, including a sharp drop during the first half of the 1990s. Although the nation regained some ground between the late 1990s and 2005, the graduation rate now stands at about the same level as it did in the early 1960s.

A snapshot of contemporary results for the high school class of 2007 reveals a striking pattern of

disparities that have long characterized high school completion. Reminiscent of the inequities in other fundamental outcomes such as test scores, we find stark divides in graduation along the lines of race, gender, and regional geography, as well as school and community environment.

Class Portrait

Although more than three-quarters of white and Asian students in the United States earn a diploma, the numbers are much more troubling for other demographic groups, only about half of whom graduate. Among Latinos, 56 percent successfully finish high school, while just 54 percent of African-Americans and 51 percent of Native Americans graduate. On average, only two-thirds of male students earn a diploma, a rate 7 percentage points lower than for their female peers. The rates of high school completion for males from historically disadvantaged minority groups consistently fall at or below the 50 percent mark.

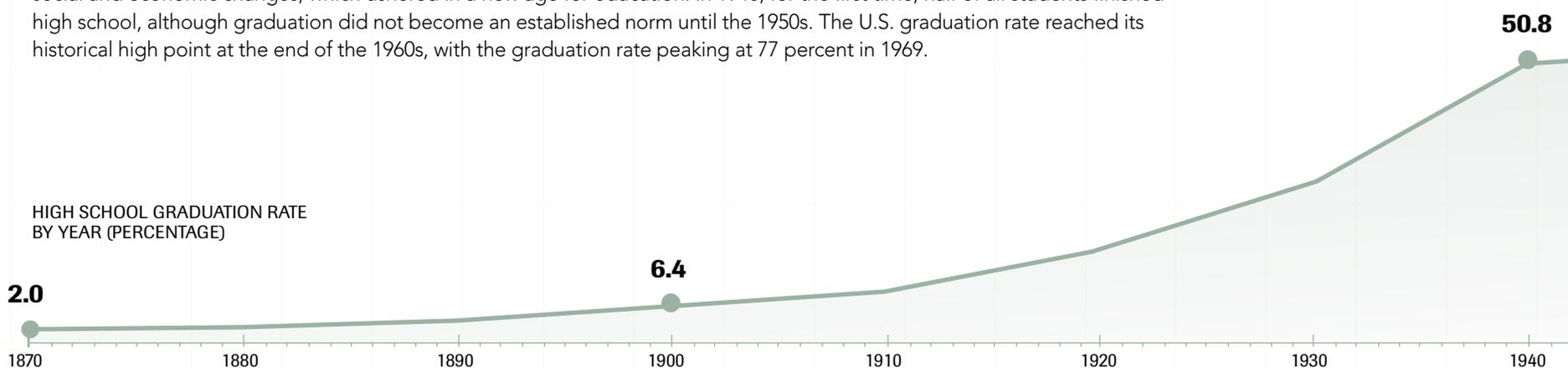
Across all urban school systems, six of every 10 students from the class of 2007 graduate. In districts characterized by high levels of racial or socioeconomic segregation and those serving communities with high rates of poverty, graduation rates typically range from 55 percent to 60 percent.

As we wrote last year, for the students who are most at risk of dropping out, the odds of earning a diploma amount to a toss of the coin.

And, the gap between high- and

The Nation's Long and Winding Path to Graduation

Historical data can be used to trace the nation's graduation rate well over a century into the past. In 1870, the earliest date on record, only 2 percent of 17-year-olds in the nation had a secondary-level education. The turn of the 20th century brought rapid social and economic changes, which ushered in a new age for education. In 1940, for the first time, half of all students finished high school, although graduation did not become an established norm until the 1950s. The U.S. graduation rate reached its historical high point at the end of the 1960s, with the graduation rate peaking at 77 percent in 1969.



low-performing states remains alarming. The national leaders—Iowa, New Jersey, North Dakota, Vermont, and Wisconsin—each graduate more than 80 percent of all high school students. At the opposite end of the spectrum, fewer than 55 percent of students finish high school in Nevada, New Mexico, and South Carolina. A gap of 42 percentage points separates the top and bottom states. Overall, about half the states have graduation rates in the 65 percent to 75 percent range for the class of 2007.

A Graduation Paradox

Though the national graduation rate dropped slightly from 2006 to 2007, the EPE Research Center's closer examination shows that each major racial and ethnic group posted at least a marginal gain in that period. This seemingly contradictory finding poses any number of questions, including: How can that be? The answer actually lends an important insight into the nature of the challenges inherent in tackling the dropout crisis. And that answer, to a large extent, is: Simpson's Paradox.

A familiar concept within statistical circles, but rarely part of mainstream discussions, Simpson's Paradox observes that there are circumstances in which disaggregated trends (such as graduation rates among minority groups) may not track closely with aggregate trends (for example, the nation's overall graduation rate). There even can be times when aggregate and disaggregated trends run counter to one another. In such cases, some initially unnoticed factor usually accounts for the non-intuitive findings.

Shifting demographic patterns are the likely explanation in the case of graduation rates. Over time, the public school population has come to consist of proportionally fewer traditionally higher-performing white students and more members of historically underserved groups, most notably Latinos.

All else being equal, population growth among groups with low average graduation rates will tend to suppress improvements in the overall graduation rate. Pertinent to the case of high school completion: The size of the Latino student population, whose graduation rate currently lags 21 percentage points behind that of

non-Hispanic whites, has grown by 50 percent in the past decade alone.

Put simply, the challenge of improving high school graduation rates is analogous to swimming upstream against a rapid and generally unfavorable demographic current. Many observers would argue that there is room for considerable improvement across the entire student population. The seemingly paradoxical findings noted here, however, would further suggest that targeting intervention efforts intensively on rapidly growing and low-performing student groups will be a precondition for driving meaningful change in the graduation rate at a national level.

Dropout Epicenters

A deeper engagement with hard data provides another important insight with implications for national reform efforts. The effects of the dropout crisis are widespread, affecting every state and corner of the country to some extent. But its most dire consequences are disproportionately concentrated in a relatively small number of places.

The EPE Research Center's series of *Cities in Crisis* reports turned a national spotlight on the challenges faced by major metropolitan areas and the large disparities in graduation rates found between the urban cores of those regions and neighboring suburban communities. Those metro areas, which serve a large share of all public school students, exert a strong influence on the state of the nation as a whole. Other researchers, most notably Robert Balfanz and his colleagues at Johns Hopkins University and the Everyone Graduates Center, have similarly noted the national significance of "dropout factories," the lowest-performing tier of American high schools.

In *Diplomas Count 2010*, we seek to identify the individual school systems at the epicenter of the dropout crisis, by leveraging the research center's comprehensive database of district graduation rates and conditions. By combining information about the graduation rate and school enrollment patterns, we can calculate the number of students failing to complete high school with a diploma for every school system in the country.

The U.S. public education system consists of roughly 14,000 regular

school districts, about 11,000 of which serve students at the secondary level and, therefore, produce graduates and dropouts. The research center ranked those 11,000 systems according to the number of dropouts they produce.

The analysis reveals a surprisingly concentrated dropout crisis. Among those school systems, a mere 25 districts account for one in every five nongraduates for the entire nation, or more than a quarter-million students who fail to graduate. Put another way, those 25 top-ranked systems, in terms of dropouts produced, account for as many nongraduates as the 8,400 lowest-ranked districts combined.

Those epicenters of the dropout crisis are made up of a combination of traditional big-city districts and large countywide school systems. Many of the latter are home to major urban centers. The New York City public school system, the nation's largest district, serves 1.1 million students and predictably emerges as the leading source of nongraduates, with nearly 44,000 students slipping away each year. Despite its smaller size, the 678,000-student Los Angeles Unified generates a comparable number of dropouts, owing to a graduation rate 14 points lower than in New York City. Ranked third in the nation is Clark County, Nev., which includes Las Vegas. Chicago and Miami-Dade County, Fla., round out the top five.

Two factors account for the number of nongraduates, and graduates, that a district produces. The first is sheer size. Accordingly, New York City is the nation's leading source of both graduates and dropouts. An equally important factor, however, is a district's effectiveness in providing a high-quality high school education that leads to a diploma. In that respect, graduation rates in all the major dropout sites lag behind the national average, by anywhere from a few percentage points to more than 30 points.

Reasons for Optimism

The breadth of the dropout crisis, its severity, and, particularly, the extent to which it hurts schools and communities in the largest cities have all rightly been cause for alarm. Two often-overlooked

dynamics, though, offer hope that strategically designed and targeted interventions hold the potential to drive measurable improvements in graduation.

The first relates to the highly concentrated nature of the crisis. As noted earlier, a large share of all the nation's dropouts can be traced to about two dozen large, low-performing districts. Turning around those school systems will not be easy, but making substantial improvements in just that handful of districts would greatly improve the educational, career, and life prospects of tens of thousands of American youths and, by extension, strengthen the communities in which they live.

By the same token, real gains in just 25 districts could appreciably move the dial on graduation for the United States as a whole and help restore some of the momentum that has been lost over the past several years. Cutting the dropout rate by half in just the 25 leading centers of the crisis would yield 128,000 additional graduates and raise the nationwide graduation rate by more than 3 percentage points.

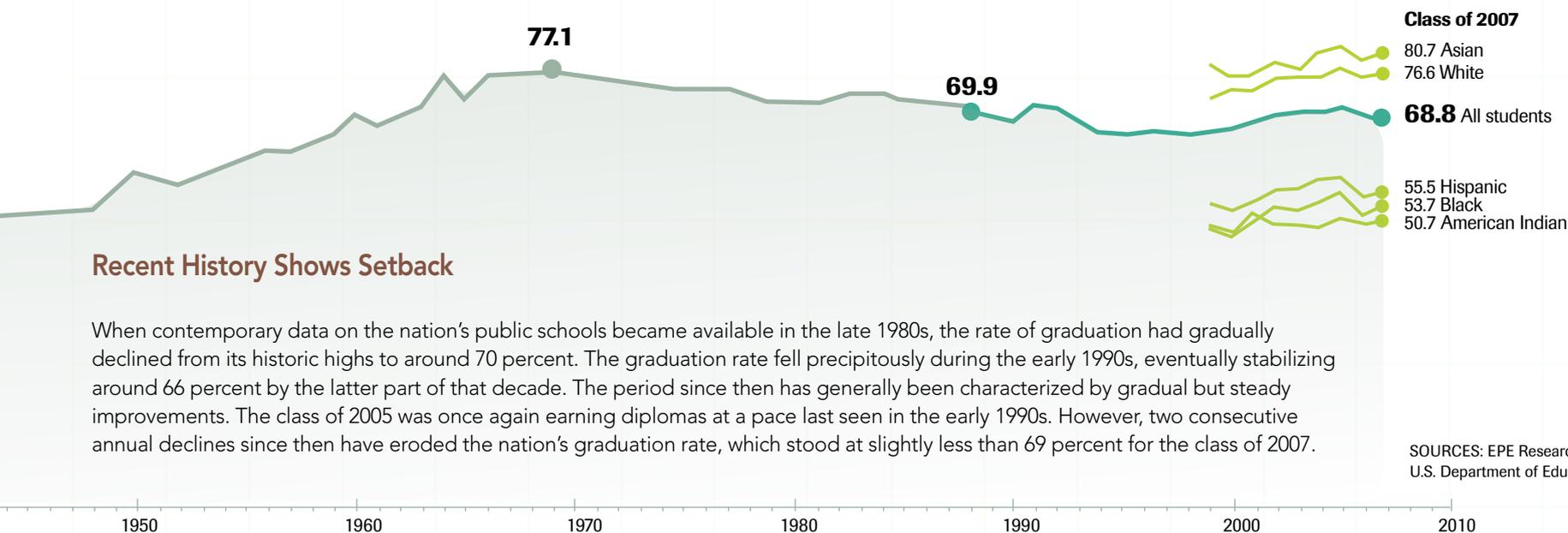
Another underappreciated layer of the graduation story is that, despite faltering progress at the national level, many local districts continue to make significant strides toward improving their graduation rates. Among those exceeding expectations are some of the country's largest and most highly urbanized school systems.

Building on a special study conducted for last year's edition of *Diplomas Count*, the EPE Research Center calculated the expected graduation rate for each district in the country. This prediction or expectation was based on a statistical model that took into account 10 distinct district characteristics consistently shown to be related to the graduation rate. These predicted graduation rates allow us to gauge a district's performance relative to what would be expected for another district comparable in size, location, poverty level, and the other factors captured in the statistical analysis.

To focus more specifically on communities likely to be at the center of the crisis, we developed a matching algorithm to further narrow the results to a set of districts that closely fit the structural and demo-

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The effects of the dropout crisis are widespread, affecting every state and corner of the country to some extent. But its most dire consequences are heavily concentrated in a relatively small number of places.



SOURCES: EPE Research Center, 2010; U.S. Department of Education

Graduation in the United States

Progress on Graduation Rate Stalls

Slightly fewer than 69 percent of all public school students in the nation graduated from high school with a regular diploma in the class of 2007, representing a small decline from the previous year. Graduation rates also dropped in the majority of states. This finding signals the continuation of an emerging trend noted in last year's report, which found the first notable annual decline in graduation in more than a decade.

When viewed over the longer term, graduation improved by 3.1 percentage points from 1997 to 2007, although progress made earlier in this period has eroded somewhat during the past several years. All racial and ethnic groups have seen improvements in the past decade, with the largest gains found among black and white students. However, large racial gaps persist nationwide, with a 30-percentage-point gap dividing Asian-American and Native American students, the groups with the highest and lowest graduation rates, respectively.

	10-YEAR GRADUATION TREND (ALL STUDENTS)			GRADUATION RATES FOR STUDENT SUBGROUPS, CLASS OF 2007						
	Class of 2007	Class of 1997	Change 1997 to 2007 (percentage point)	Male	Female	American Indian	Asian	Hispanic	Black	White
ALABAMA	62.5%	56.9%	+5.7	58.4%	67.5%	71.4%	69.6%	44.9%	52.4%	68.8%
ALASKA	65.2	66.4	-1.2	53.5	58.1	33.0	64.4	‡	32.6	63.8
ARIZONA	68.2	59.8	+8.4	65.2	72.0	48.3	82.1	60.3	69.6	74.1
ARKANSAS	69.3	68.6	+0.6	‡	‡	‡	‡	‡	‡	‡
CALIFORNIA	62.7	67.4	-4.7	64.4	71.9	51.5	83.5	57.0	54.0	78.2
COLORADO	73.2	69.4	+3.9	69.2	77.8	48.8	83.2	53.7	68.9	79.8
CONNECTICUT	77.7	75.1	+2.6	74.3	80.3	36.3	80.2	52.6	62.0	84.2
DELAWARE	65.0	59.2	+5.7	59.3	70.0	‡	77.7	50.9	57.4	71.1
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	59.5	52.9	+6.6	†	†	†	†	†	†	†
FLORIDA	62.1	54.2	+7.8	57.7	66.5	51.0	83.0	58.4	51.0	67.5
GEORGIA	57.8	55.1	+2.7	53.1	62.8	38.4	81.3	42.8	48.4	65.5
HAWAII	65.1	58.4	+6.7	61.9	68.7	63.1	65.8	62.2	60.2	63.4
IDAHO	73.5	73.2	+0.3	71.5	76.8	42.9	‡	60.9	65.2	75.4
ILLINOIS	74.6	71.3	+3.3	70.2	77.0	‡	89.6	57.4	52.9	82.7
INDIANA	72.4	69.2	+3.2	68.5	75.6	36.2	75.1	57.5	53.4	75.1
IOWA	80.2	78.9	+1.3	78.1	81.7	37.4	76.8	57.9	59.2	82.4
KANSAS	75.1	73.8	+1.3	71.1	76.6	50.4	68.6	56.3	56.6	79.1
KENTUCKY	71.8	69.6	+2.2	68.2	76.2	‡	80.8	56.9	60.5	73.2
LOUISIANA	57.4	52.1	+5.3	50.6	64.3	‡	76.3	59.2	50.3	62.7
MAINE	77.6	74.8	+2.8	73.9	79.2	40.5	‡	‡	66.6	77.3
MARYLAND	73.7	74.5	-0.8	69.0	78.6	55.4	92.2	64.9	62.1	81.5
MASSACHUSETTS	77.3	74.4	+3.0	73.5	80.1	42.9	80.3	53.1	61.9	82.6
MICHIGAN	77.8	72.0	+5.7	74.8	80.7	47.6	81.9	49.4	‡	80.8
MINNESOTA	77.2	77.3	-0.1	75.9	79.5	47.5	68.3	44.1	‡	83.3
MISSISSIPPI	62.5	56.1	+6.4	56.3	68.0	31.7	64.1	48.0	58.7	65.6
MISSOURI	75.3	70.6	+4.6	72.4	77.2	52.4	‡	59.2	54.6	79.1
MONTANA	75.2	76.7	-1.5	72.6	77.3	48.6	‡	49.0	44.3	79.2
NEBRASKA	74.3	79.7	-5.5	70.8	76.7	‡	‡	48.4	43.0	82.1
NEVADA	41.8	65.7	-23.9	38.6	45.8	31.6	58.4	29.9	30.7	50.4
NEW HAMPSHIRE	76.2	66.4	+9.8	72.7	78.8	37.8	‡	29.1	‡	76.6
NEW JERSEY	83.3	80.6	+2.6	82.6	83.4	‡	85.9	66.1	66.7	87.9
NEW MEXICO	54.9	56.3	-1.4	51.9	59.0	51.3	74.3	50.3	52.6	62.6
NEW YORK	70.6	60.3	+10.3	66.7	73.0	46.8	77.6	49.1	52.5	80.5
NORTH CAROLINA	57.8	58.3	-0.5	53.5	62.6	50.6	76.0	43.5	49.5	64.1
NORTH DAKOTA	80.9	80.1	+0.8	78.0	80.0	44.3	‡	‡	‡	83.5
OHIO	74.6	68.3	+6.3	71.8	76.4	54.7	79.3	46.4	47.5	79.6
OKLAHOMA	71.8	68.9	+2.9	69.4	75.1	63.6	76.8	60.4	59.2	74.6
OREGON	74.1	69.0	+5.1	†	†	49.0	81.4	58.2	54.7	75.7
PENNSYLVANIA	77.6	74.7	+2.9	75.7	79.3	38.8	80.6	49.8	53.3	83.3
RHODE ISLAND	71.1	67.1	+4.0	69.3	73.0	‡	55.6	53.6	65.7	75.9
SOUTH CAROLINA	54.9	53.5	+1.5	48.1	60.8	26.0	‡	38.6	45.4	61.6
SOUTH DAKOTA	75.4	79.5	-4.1	71.8	76.1	39.3	78.1	51.3	‡	77.6
TENNESSEE	65.8	52.6	+13.2	61.9	69.8	‡	73.5	55.5	62.1	66.9
TEXAS	65.1	59.3	+5.8	62.4	68.1	49.8	87.7	55.6	55.3	76.0
UTAH	77.1	79.0	-1.9	76.1	80.1	‡	‡	‡	‡	79.9
VERMONT	82.3	76.4	+5.9	76.3	79.3	36.7	‡	‡	30.2	81.8
VIRGINIA	69.9	72.3	-2.3	65.1	75.0	54.6	84.9	58.0	55.7	75.9
WASHINGTON	67.9	70.6	-2.7	64.2	72.5	39.6	77.5	54.7	50.2	71.6
WEST VIRGINIA	71.6	75.5	-3.9	68.1	75.1	‡	‡	52.8	63.9	71.5
WISCONSIN	81.0	76.9	+4.1	77.9	83.2	50.7	78.0	53.8	47.1	85.9
WYOMING	72.6	74.4	-1.8	67.2	72.8	29.9	‡	59.9	57.2	73.5
U.S.	68.8%	65.7%	+3.1	66.0%	72.9%	50.7%	80.7%	55.5%	53.7%	76.6%

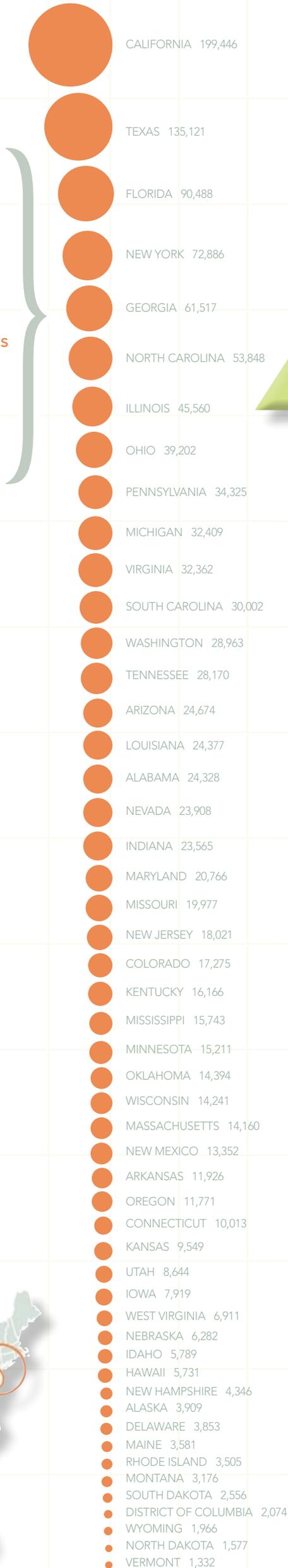
† Value not calculated because necessary data field(s) not reported in the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data and not provided by state education agency.
‡ Value not reported because of insufficient data for reliable estimate.

SOURCE: EPE Research Center, 2010. See Page 30 for more information about the methodology used to calculate graduation rates for this report.

1.3 Million Students Will Fail to Graduate In Class of 2010

**Nation:
1,297,628
Nongraduates**

Projected Number Of 2010 Nongraduates By State



EPICENTERS OF THE GRADUATION CRISIS

The high school crisis is extraordinarily concentrated, with a very small number of school systems accounting for a disproportionately large share of the students who fall out of the graduation pipeline. For the class of 2010, one in every five nongraduates nationwide can be traced to just 25 individual school systems. Roughly 11,000 school districts in the United States include secondary-level enrollment and issue diplomas.

PROJECTED NONGRADUATES	DISTRICT
43,643	NEW YORK CITY
42,174	LOS ANGELES
17,479	CLARK COUNTY, NEV.
16,731	CHICAGO
13,261	MIAMI-DADE COUNTY, FLA.
9,324	PHILADELPHIA
9,266	HOUSTON
9,093	BROWARD COUNTY, FLA.
8,754	DETROIT (CLASS OF 2009)
8,054	DALLAS
6,386	CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG, N.C.
5,773	HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY, FLA.
5,731	HAWAII (STATEWIDE DISTRICT)
5,656	ORANGE COUNTY, FLA.
5,507	PALM BEACH COUNTY, FLA.
5,426	PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, MD.
5,115	GWINNETT COUNTY, GA.
5,073	DEKALB COUNTY, GA.
5,051	SAN BERNARDINO CITY, CALIF.
5,047	BALTIMORE
5,002	DUVAL COUNTY, FLA.
4,836	SAN DIEGO
4,680	MILWAUKEE
4,637	ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.
4,280	PINELLAS COUNTY, FLA.



Highest to Lowest Graduation Rates in the Nation's 50 Largest School Districts

Class of 2007

GRADUATION RATE	DISTRICT	SIZE RANK
83.1	MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MD.	16
82.5	FAIRFAX COUNTY, VA.	13
79.3	JORDAN, UTAH	41
76.9	CYPRESS-FAIRBANKS, TEXAS	31
76.8	JEFFERSON COUNTY, COLO.	34
76.7	BALTIMORE COUNTY, MD.	26
75.2	ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY, MD.	46
74.1	MESA, ARIZ.	44
72.5	LEE COUNTY, FLA.	40
70.0	BREVARD COUNTY, FLA.	43
69.6	FULTON COUNTY, GA.	36
69.4	COBB COUNTY, GA.	25
66.2	VIRGINIA BEACH, VA.	48
65.9	GUILFORD COUNTY, N.C.	49
65.7	PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY, VA.	50
65.1	HAWAII (STATEWIDE DISTRICT)	9
64.6	WAKE COUNTY, N.C.	20
64.4	PALM BEACH COUNTY, FLA.	12
64.3	JEFFERSON COUNTY, KY.	30
63.0	HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY, FLA.	8
62.8	NORTHSIDE, TEXAS	37
62.4	GWINNETT COUNTY, GA.	15
61.7	MEMPHIS, TENN.	23
61.4	LONG BEACH, CALIF.	32
61.4	ORANGE COUNTY, FLA.	11
60.7	PINELLAS COUNTY, FLA.	24
60.5	BROWARD COUNTY, FLA.	6
60.3	NASHVILLE-DAVIDSON COUNTY, TENN.	45
59.9	SAN DIEGO	18
59.3	PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, MD.	17
59.0	POLK COUNTY, FLA.	29
58.5	AUSTIN, TEXAS	38
58.4	DUVAL COUNTY, FLA.	21
56.9	MIAMI-DADE COUNTY, FLA.	4
55.4	CHICAGO	3
54.8	NEW YORK CITY	1
52.8	DENVER	47
51.2	FRESNO, CALIF.	42
50.0	FORT WORTH, TEXAS	39
49.3	CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG, N.C.	19
48.4	PHILADELPHIA	10
47.5	MILWAUKEE	33
47.4	DEKALB COUNTY, GA.	27
46.4	ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.	28
43.4	BALTIMORE	35
42.8	DALLAS	14
42.2	HOUSTON	7
40.6	LOS ANGELES	2
39.9	CLARK COUNTY, NEV.	5
N/A*	DETROIT	22

* Graduation rate for class of 2007 not available.

SOURCE: EPE Research Center, 2010

Pinpointing District Performance

By Christopher B. Swanson

The graduation statistics reported in *Diplomas Count* come from an extensive EPE Research Center database that captures detailed information for every school system in the United States. This collection of indicators for graduation rates, demographic composition, structural features, and other district characteristics offers an unparalleled opportunity to investigate patterns of high school completion across the country.

Leveraging the data offers a way to answer such basic questions as: What district conditions are most strongly related to lower graduation rates, or higher ones? More importantly, deep engagement with data can also lead insight into the more subtle dimensions of high school performance: What would we expect a particular district's graduation rate to be, given its specific profile of demographic and structural characteristics? Which school systems are beating the odds when it comes to graduation?

And, can we find examples of overachievers among the nation's most at-risk communities? The short answer: Yes. Read on for details.

An original nationwide analysis exploring

a wide range of factors potentially linked to high school completion identified a core set of 10 district characteristics that demonstrated consistent relationships to graduation rates: district enrollment, average high school size, student-to-teacher ratio, urbanized location, racial composition, poverty level, race- and poverty-based segregation, per-pupil spending, and the share of expenditures devoted to instruction.

Specifically, the research center found that larger district sizes (measured by student enrollment), higher student-to-teacher ratios, an urban location, and higher spending levels on a per-pupil basis are systematically associated with slightly to moderately lower graduation rates. Much stronger negative impacts are linked to high concentrations of poor or minority students and severe segregation along racial or socioeconomic lines. On the other hand, more students earn diplomas in districts with larger secondary schools and those devoting higher proportions of their budgets to instructional expenses.

Moving beyond basic correlations, it is possible to build on this framework of key predictors to construct a statistical model that determines an anticipated graduation rate for any given school district, based on its distinctive profile, as defined by size, location,

poverty level, demographic composition, and other core characteristics.

This type of statistical modeling—akin to, but more sophisticated than, the correlational analysis described earlier—essentially determines the strength and direction (positive or negative) of the independent relationships between a series of specified district characteristics and the graduation rate. Those model results are, in turn, used to generate a predicted graduation-rate value for each district, based on its individual profile of demographic and structural features. For instance, the statistical modeling shows that poverty exerts a strong negative influence on graduation rates, over and above other factors also related to high school completion. As a result, a high-poverty district will tend to have a lower expected graduation rate than one serving a more affluent population, all else being equal.

Defying Expectations

A substantial body of research, including results presented elsewhere in *Diplomas Count 2010* (see Page 25), has consistently found that the brunt of the nation's graduation crisis is borne by certain school systems, most notably those serving large urban centers. As a result, a relatively small number of districts generate an outsize share of the nation's total dropouts.

To focus the EPE Research Center's inves-

tigation on the hardest-hit communities, the center developed an algorithm to further narrow results of its statistical modeling to a set of districts that closely fit the structural and demographic features of the largest urban school systems. Matched against the set of 10 core characteristics linked to graduation, the center identified a group of 151 urban peer districts with highly similar profiles that are also likely to signal common underlying challenges.

Within this group of big-city peer districts, the final analysis highlights 21 "overachieving" school systems—those exceeding expected graduation rates for the class of 2007 by at least 10 percentage points. Twenty-seven peer districts fall short of expectations by a similar 10-point margin, with the balance of this big-city group (103 school systems) performing close to the levels predicted.

At the top of the overachievers list is the Newport-Mesa Unified School District. Located in Newport Beach, Calif., the district posted a graduation rate of 86 percent, 29 percentage points higher than would be anticipated given its large size, urban environment, high degree of racial and socioeconomic segregation, and spending patterns. Five other school systems exceeded expectations by a margin of around 20 points: David Douglas, in Portland, Ore.; Jonesboro, Ark.; Memphis, Tenn.; the Texarkana Independent district in Texas; and Visalia Unified, in California. ■

21 Urban Districts Beat the Odds

An EPE Research Center analysis identified a pool of school districts matching the profile of the nation's largest urban systems and then singled out those demonstrating the highest graduation rates, relative to expectations based on district size, poverty level, and other characteristics. Among the 151 districts in this big-city peer group, 21 school systems posted graduation rates for the class of 2007 at least 10 percentage points higher than anticipated.

Urban Overachievers

Graduation Rates for Class of 2007		Graduation Rate Class of 2007		Expectations Index
		Actual	Expected	(Actual Minus Expected)
District				
Newport-Mesa Unified	Newport Beach, Calif.	86%	57%	+29
David Douglas	Portland, Ore.	83	63	+20
Texarkana ISD	Texarkana, Texas	77	58	+19
Memphis	Memphis, Tenn.	62	43	+18
Visalia Unified	Visalia, Calif.	74	56	+18
Jonesboro	Jonesboro, Ark.	80	63	+18
Mesa Unified	Mesa, Ariz.	74	58	+16
Hamilton County	Chattanooga, Tenn.	71	55	+16
Madera Unified	Madera, Calif.	66	51	+15
Phenix City	Phenix City, Ala.	71	57	+14
United ISD	Laredo, Texas	71	58	+14
Fort Smith	Fort Smith, Ark.	78	65	+13
Evansville-Vanderburgh	Evansville, Ind.	76	63	+13
Hemet Unified	Hemet, Calif.	65	52	+12
Riverside Unified	Riverside, Calif.	67	55	+12
Ferguson-Florissant	Florissant, Mo.	74	62	+12
Cumberland County	Fayetteville, N.C.	61	49	+12
Long Beach Unified	Long Beach, Calif.	61	50	+11
Little Rock	Little Rock, Ark.	70	59	+11
Muscogee County	Columbus, Ga.	56	46	+10
Warren Township	Indianapolis	71	61	+10

SOURCE: EPE Research Center, 2010

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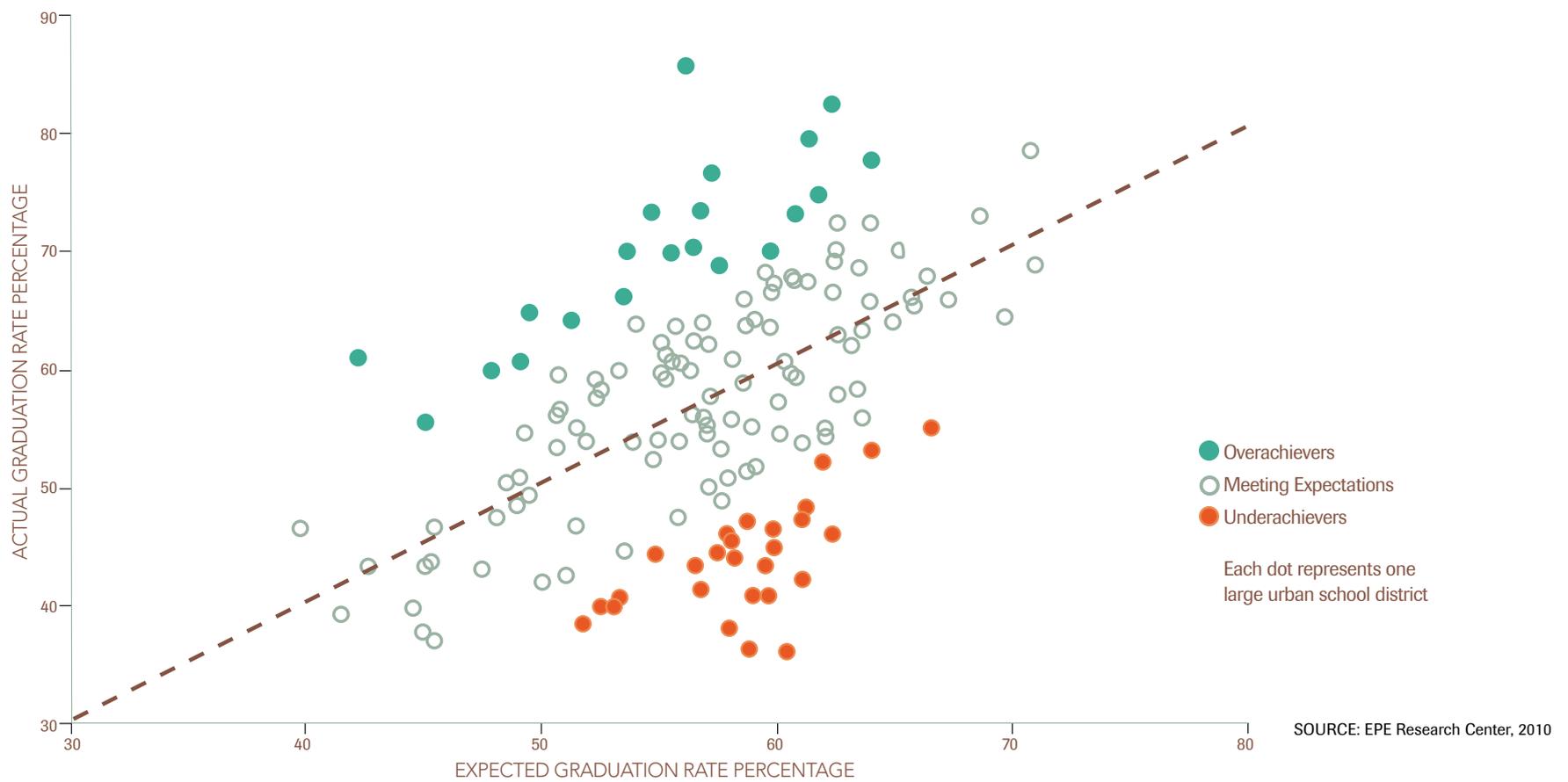
www.sustainableschoolimprovement.org



The mission of the Success for All Foundation is to develop and disseminate research-proven educational programs to ensure that all students, from all backgrounds, achieve at the highest academic levels. These programs were originally developed at Johns Hopkins University.

Charting Expectations For Big-City Graduation

This graphic displays the actual and predicted graduation rates among the roughly 150 largest and most urbanized school systems in the nation. The trend line tracks the point at which the actual graduation rates for the class of 2007 would equal the predicted rate, with districts farther from the line exceeding or falling short of expectations by larger margins. Twenty-one of these districts have been identified as overachievers, whose graduation rates are at least 10 percentage points higher than would be expected based on their characteristics. Rates fall short of predicted levels by a similar margin among 27 underachieving school systems.



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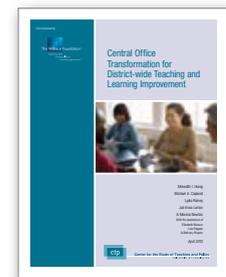


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Schools can't succeed without effective principals. Two new reports offer ideas to support them. You'll find them online as free downloads, along with other research on educational leadership, out-of-school time learning, summer learning and arts education.



Education Leadership: An Agenda for School Improvement (April 2010)
This report on Wallace's 2009 national education leadership conference looks at the crucial issues in leadership.



Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement (May 2010)
This study suggests five ways urban districts can help principals improve teaching and learning.

Graduation Policies For the Class of 2010

	DEFINING READINESS					HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION CREDENTIALS				
	State has defined college readiness	How college readiness is defined	State has defined work readiness	How work readiness is defined	K-12 work-readiness definition is different from college readiness	Total number of credits required to earn standard diploma	Standard diploma options	Advanced recognition for exceeding standard requirements	Focus for advanced recognition	
ALABAMA	✓	courses	✓	courses, skills		24.0	standard, CTE	✓	academic, CTE	
ALASKA			✓	standards		21.0	standard			
ARIZONA	in progress		✓	standards		20.0	standard	✓	academic	
ARKANSAS	✓	courses	✓	courses		22.0	standard			
CALIFORNIA	✓	courses	✓	standards	✓	13.0	standard	✓	academic	
COLORADO	✓	skills	✓	skills			standard			
CONNECTICUT	in progress		✓	skills		20.0	standard			
DELAWARE						22.0	standard			
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA						23.5	standard			
FLORIDA	in progress		in progress			24.0	standard			
GEORGIA	in progress		✓	skills, standards		22.0	college prep, CTE	✓	academic, CTE	
HAWAII						24.0	standard	✓	academic	
IDAHO						21.0	standard			
ILLINOIS	in progress		in progress			16.0	standard			
INDIANA	✓	courses, standards, tests	✓	courses, standards, tests		20.0	standard	✓	academic, CTE	
IOWA	✓	standards, tests	✓	standards			standard			
KANSAS			in progress			21.0	standard			
KENTUCKY	✓	courses, skills, standards, tests				22.0	standard	✓	academic, CTE	
LOUISIANA	in progress		in progress			23.0	standard	✓	academic, CTE	
MAINE	in progress		in progress			16.0	standard			
MARYLAND	✓	courses	✓	skills, standards	✓	21.0	standard	✓	local option	
MASSACHUSETTS			✓	standards			standard	✓	academic	
MICHIGAN	✓	courses, standards, tests	✓	courses, standards, tests			standard			
MINNESOTA	✓	standards	✓	standards		21.5	standard			
MISSISSIPPI	✓	skills				21.0	standard			
MISSOURI			✓	standards		24.0	standard	✓	academic	
MONTANA	in progress		✓	standards		20.0	standard			
NEBRASKA						200 credit hours ¹	standard			
NEVADA						22.5	standard, CTE	✓	academic	
NEW HAMPSHIRE			✓	standards		19.75	standard	✓	local option	
NEW JERSEY	✓	courses, standards	✓	courses, standards		22.0	standard			
NEW MEXICO	✓	courses, standards, tests	✓	courses, standards, tests		23.0	standard			
NEW YORK	✓	courses, standards, tests	✓	courses, standards, tests		22.0	standard	✓	academic, CTE	
NORTH CAROLINA	✓	courses, tests	✓	courses, tests		20.0	standard	✓	academic	
NORTH DAKOTA			✓	standards		22.0	standard			
OHIO	✓	skills	in progress			20.0	standard	✓	academic, CTE	
OKLAHOMA	✓	courses, standards, tests	✓	courses, standards, tests		23.0	standard	✓	academic	
OREGON	in progress		✓	standards		24.0	standard			
PENNSYLVANIA	✓	standards	✓	standards			standard	✓	academic	
RHODE ISLAND ²			in progress			20.0	standard			
SOUTH CAROLINA	✓	courses, skills, standards				24.0	standard	✓	academic	
SOUTH DAKOTA						22.0	standard	✓	academic	
TENNESSEE	✓	courses, skills	✓	skills, standards	✓	20.0	standard	✓	academic, CTE	
TEXAS	✓	standards	✓	standards		24.0	standard	✓	academic	
UTAH						15.0	standard			
VERMONT						20.0	standard			
VIRGINIA	in progress		✓	skills, standards		22.0	standard	✓	academic, CTE	
WASHINGTON	✓	standards	✓	skills, standards	✓	19.0	standard			
WEST VIRGINIA	✓	courses, skills, tests	✓	courses, skills, tests	✓	24.0	standard	✓	academic, CTE	
WISCONSIN	in progress		in progress			13.0	standard			
WYOMING						13.0	standard	✓	academic	
U.S.	23		30		5	20.8³		25		

Notes:

- CTE refers to career and technical education.
- Exit-exam subjects tested: E=English (includes writing), M=Mathematics, S=Science, and H=History/Social Studies

Footnotes:

1. Credit hours for Nebraska are not expressed in Carnegie units.
2. Beginning with the graduating class of 2012, Rhode Island will require all school districts to use students' results on statewide assessments as part of graduation determinations. Students will not be prohibited from graduating based solely on assessment results.
3. Subject-specific credits for states that do not have total course-credit requirements are not listed in the total-credits column and are not reflected in the national average for total credit requirements.

					HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAMS					
Basis for advanced recognition	Alternative credential for not meeting all standard requirements	Basis for alternative credential	K-12 system offers pathway leading to industry-recognized certificate or license	State has exit exam	Subjects tested	Exam based on standards for 10th grade or higher	State finances remediation for students failing exit exams	Appeals or alternative route to diploma		
courses	✓	disabilities	✓	✓	EMSH	✓	✓	✓	ALABAMA	
	✓	fail exit exam		✓	EM	✓		✓	ALASKA	
tests			✓	✓	EM	✓	✓	✓	ARIZONA	
			✓	✓	M		✓	✓	ARKANSAS	
tests	✓	pass proficiency test	✓	✓	EM	✓	✓	✓	CALIFORNIA	
									COLORADO	
	✓	disabilities	✓						CONNECTICUT	
	✓	disabilities	✓						DELAWARE	
	✓	disabilities, fail exit exam	✓	✓	EM	✓	✓	✓	DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	
courses, GPA	✓	disabilities, fail exit exam	✓	✓	EMSH	✓	✓	✓	FLORIDA	
courses, GPA	✓	disabilities	✓						GEORGIA	
				✓	EM	✓	✓	✓	HAWAII	
									IDAHO	
courses, GPA, tests			✓	✓	EM		✓	✓	ILLINOIS	
			✓						INDIANA	
courses, tests	✓	disabilities	✓						IOWA	
courses, GPA, tests	✓	disabilities, fail exit exam	✓	✓	EMSH ⁴	✓		✓	KANSAS	
	✓	education disruption	✓						KENTUCKY	
local option	✓	disabilities	✓	✓	EMSH	✓	✓	✓	LOUISIANA	
courses, GPA, tests	✓	local option	✓	✓	EMS	✓	✓	✓	MAINE	
	✓	local option	✓						MARYLAND	
	✓	disabilities	✓	✓	EM ⁵	✓	✓	✓	MASSACHUSETTS	
courses, GPA, tests			✓	✓	EMSH	✓	✓	✓	MICHIGAN	
									MINNESOTA	
courses, GPA, tests			✓						MISSISSIPPI	
									MISSOURI	
courses, GPA	✓	disabilities, fail exit exam	✓	✓	EMS	✓		✓	MONTANA	
local option	✓	local option	✓						NEBRASKA	
				✓	EM	✓		✓	NEVADA	
tests	✓	fail exit exam	✓	✓	EMSH	✓	✓	✓	NEW HAMPSHIRE	
tests	✓	disabilities	✓	✓	EMSH	✓		✓	NEW JERSEY	
courses, GPA	✓	disabilities, fail exit exam	✓	✓	EMSH	✓	✓	✓	NEW MEXICO	
				✓	EMSH	✓	✓	✓	NEW YORK	
courses, GPA, tests			✓						NORTH CAROLINA	
			✓	✓	EMSH	✓		✓	NORTH DAKOTA	
courses, GPA, tests			✓						OHIO	
courses, GPA, tests			✓	Class of 2012					OKLAHOMA	
tests	✓	disabilities, local option	✓						OREGON	
	✓	disabilities	✓						PENNSYLVANIA	
courses, GPA, tests	✓	fail exit exam	✓	✓	EM	✓	✓	✓	RHODE ISLAND	
courses, GPA			✓						SOUTH CAROLINA	
GPA	✓	disabilities, fail exit exam	✓	✓	EMS	✓			SOUTH DAKOTA	
courses, tests	✓	local option	✓	✓	EMSH	✓	✓	✓	TENNESSEE	
	✓	district criteria	✓						TEXAS	
courses, GPA, tests	✓	disabilities, district criteria	✓	✓	EMSH ⁶	✓	✓	✓	UTAH	
courses, tests	✓	disabilities	✓	✓	E ⁷	✓		✓	VERMONT	
tests	✓	alternative education program	✓						VIRGINIA	
	✓	local option	✓						WASHINGTON	
									WEST VIRGINIA	
									WISCONSIN	
									WYOMING	
	30		40	25		22	16	22	U.S.	

4. Students must pass either the science or social studies components of the Graduation Exit Examination (GEE) to receive a standard diploma.
 5. For the graduating classes of 2010 through 2014, students in Minnesota can graduate by passing statewide reading and writing assessments and either passing mathematics assessments or meeting other requirements.
 6. To receive the standard diploma, students must earn at least six verified credits by passing end-of-course assessments. One of those credits may be earned by passing a student-selected test in computer science, technology, career and technical education, or other areas.
 7. For the graduating class of 2010, students must pass an exit exam in reading and writing. Students in the class of 2013 will be required to pass reading, writing, math, and science assessments.

SOURCE: EPE Research Center, 2010

For information on indicator definitions and sources, see Page 30.

Progress Postponed

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 23

graphic profile of the largest urban school systems. Because this set of peer districts shares a wide array of underlying characteristics and challenges, they offer highly relevant points of comparison for one another.

Among a group of about 150 closely matched school systems, we identified 21 “urban over-achievers.” These are districts where the actual graduation rates for the class of 2007 were at least 10 percentage points higher than would be expected based on their structural and demographic characteristics. Detailed results of the analysis can be found on Page 26 of this report.

By national standards, most of

these overachieving districts post graduation rates close to or even lower than the national average of 68.8 percent. Nevertheless, other districts may have something to learn from these school systems that have beaten the odds in the face of often-daunting challenges.

Tracking State Policy

To assess the status of state policies that may affect high school graduation, the EPE Research Center conducted an original survey of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Eighteen policy indicators were used to track activity in three broad areas: college- and work-readiness definitions, high school completion credentials, and high school exit exams.

For this year’s graduating class, 23 states (three more than last year) have instituted a definition of college readiness that captures the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in entry-level college courses, typically articulated in terms of coursetaking recommendations, academic standards, minimum scores on standardized tests, or sets of applicable skills. Thirty states have comparable definitions of work readiness in place.

The significant number of additional states that are now developing definitions suggests that college and career readiness will continue to be an important area of state activity.

Perhaps the most fundamental way states can influence patterns and rates of graduation is through

their authority to set requirements for earning a diploma. Typically, state policies involve a combination of formal coursetaking requirements for standard diplomas and avenues that may allow students to earn an alternative high school credential.

Course-credit requirements have changed little in recent years. For the average student in the class of 2010, earning a diploma requires accumulating a total of 21 credits, typically including four credits in English/language arts, three each in mathematics and social studies, and two or three in science. Half the states offer some form of advanced recognition for academic accomplishments above and beyond those required for a standard diploma or for a concentration in

a career or technical program of study. Thirty states offer a certificate of attendance or other alternative credential for students not fully meeting the requirements for a diploma.

To qualify for a standard diploma, students have to pass exit examinations in 25 states, one more than last year. English/language arts and math are the most commonly tested subjects, with 23 states assessing students in both areas. Testing programs in 11 of those states also cover science and social studies. Among the states that make passing an exit exam a formal condition for earning a diploma, all but three allow for an appeals process or alternative route to a diploma for at least some students who fail the test. ■

SOURCES AND NOTES

DEFINING READINESS

College-readiness definition: State has formal expectations for what students will need to know and be able to do in order to be admitted to state’s two-year and/or four-year postsecondary institutions and enroll in credit-bearing courses. State approaches to defining college readiness have been classified into the following categories: courses, skills, standards, and tests. Some states’ definitions may include elements that do not fall into categories established for this analysis. EPE Research Center annual state policy survey (2009-10 school year), 2009.

Work-readiness definition: K-12 education system has formal expectations for what high school students will need to know and be able to do in order to be prepared for work. State approaches to defining work readiness have been classified into the following categories: courses, skills, standards, and tests. Some states’ definitions may include elements that do not fall into categories established for this analysis. Ibid.

Distinct definitions of readiness: K-12 education system has different definitions of college readiness and work readiness. Ibid.

HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION CREDENTIALS

Credits to earn standard diploma: Credit requirements are expressed in Carnegie units unless otherwise specified. One Carnegie unit is equivalent to one year of coursework. Credits reflect minimum or default course requirements mandated by

state for standard high school diploma. Education Commission of the States, Standard High School Graduation Requirements (50-state), 2009.

Standard diploma options: Indicates types of regular diplomas issued by state: standard, college preparatory, and/or career-technical specialization. EPE Research Center annual state policy survey (2009-10 school year), 2009.

Advanced recognition for exceeding standard requirements: State offers advanced diploma or other form of recognition for students who exceed requirements of standard diploma by completing additional coursework, achieving high grade point average (GPA), or other accomplishments. Ibid.

Focus for advanced recognition: State awards honors for accomplishments in core academic subjects and/or accomplishments in career-technical program. Ibid.

Basis for advanced recognition: State awards honors for accomplishments in one or more of the following areas: courses, GPA, and tests. Some states have requirements that do not fall into categories used in this analysis. Ibid.

Alternative credential for not meeting all standard requirements: State offers credential, such as certificate of attendance, for students not meeting criteria for standard diploma. Ibid.

Basis for alternative credential: State offers alternative credential for students with disabilities or those young people failing exit exams, although other students may be eligible in some states. Ibid.

Industry certificate or license: State offers high school students option of participating in career or technical program or pathway that leads to industry-recognized certificate or license. Ibid.

HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAMS

State has exit exam: State requires that students pass exit exam or one or more end-of-course exams in order to graduate. EPE Research Center annual state policy survey (2009-10 school year), 2009.

Subjects tested: Academic subject areas covered on state exit exams. Ibid.

Exam based on standards for 10th grade or higher: State has exit exam(s) aligned to state 10th grade standards or higher in at least one academic subject. This includes exams that cover standards from 9th to 11th grades or end-of-course exams for courses that are typically taken in 10th grade or above. Ibid.

Financing for remediation: State provides at least partial financial support for remediation of students who fail exit exams. Ibid.

Appeals process or alternative route: State allows students to appeal after failing exit exam or has alternative route students can take to earn standard diploma. Ibid.

HOW DOES THE EPE RESEARCH CENTER CALCULATE GRADUATION RATES?

Diplomas Count uses the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) method to calculate high school graduation rates for American public schools. This approach allows the EPE Research Center to compute the percent of public high school students who graduate on time with a diploma.

The CPI method represents the high school experience as a process rather than an event, capturing the four key steps a student must take in order to graduate: three grade-to-grade promotions (9 to 10, 10 to 11, and 11 to 12) and ultimately earning a diploma (grade 12 to graduation). Each of these individual components corresponds to a grade-promotion ratio. Multiplying these four grade-specific promotion ratios together produces the graduation rate.

Different methods for calculating a graduation rate may employ different definitions of a “graduate.” The CPI method adheres to the guidelines established under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, by counting only students receiving standard high school diplomas as graduates. Recipients of General Educational Development diplomas, certificates of attendance, and other nondiploma credentials are treated as nongraduates in this context. States are likewise mandated to adopt a similar definition of a graduate for the rates they calculate for adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the federal law (although they may adopt different definitions for other purposes).

The 2010 edition of *Diplomas Count* presents a new analysis of graduation rates for the high school class of 2007, the most recent year for which information is available. Data for 2007 and prior years were obtained from the U.S. Department of Education’s Common Core of Data (CCD). The CCD, an annual census of all public schools and school districts in the country, also provided the data on district characteristics used in this report’s analyses of expected graduation rates.

The District of Columbia, Kentucky, and Oregon did not report 2006-07 diploma counts for student subgroups to the CCD. The EPE Research Center was able to obtain additional graduation data directly from the state education agencies of Kentucky and Oregon.

The EPE Research Center calculates graduation rates for all school districts in the country that issue diplomas (that is to say, those with a 12th grade). Statistics for the nation and states are generated by aggregating district-level data upward.

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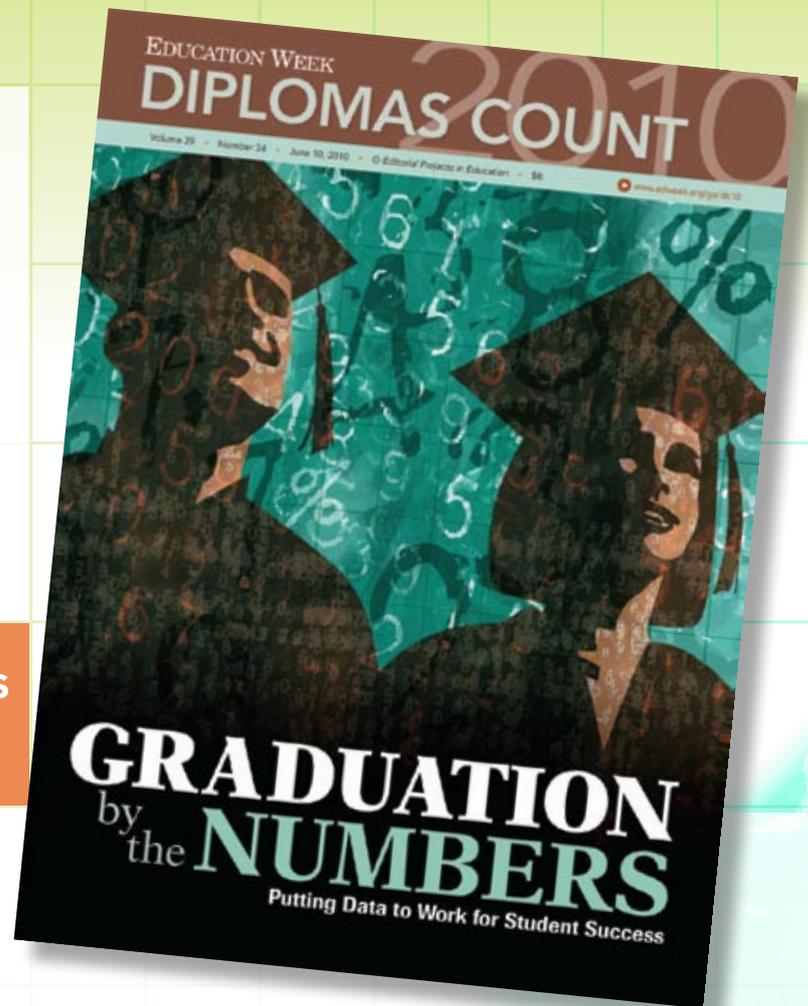
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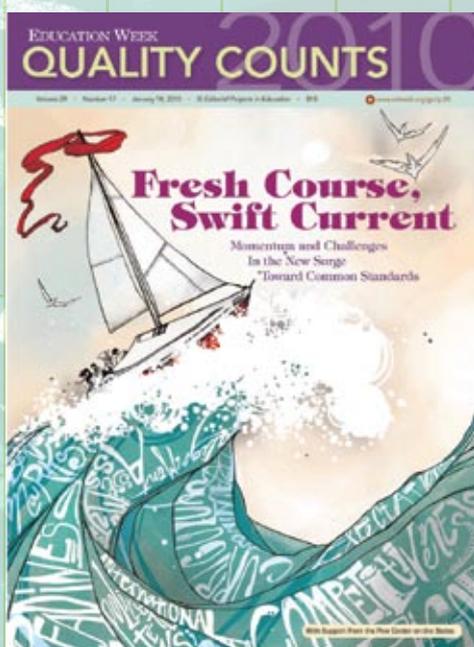
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