

The Everyone Graduates Center

Raising Graduation Rates: A Series of Data Briefs

Progress Toward Increasing
National and State
Graduation Rates

Robert Balfanz
Thomas C. West

The Everyone Graduates Center is located at the Center for Social Organization of Schools,
Johns Hopkins University.

Robert Balfanz is a Principal Research Scientist at CSOS and Co-Director of the Everyone Graduates Center.

Thomas C. West is a Senior Research Analyst at the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Raising Graduation Rates: A Series of Data Briefs

This is the first in a series of briefs examining the progress in raising high school graduation rates over the past decade. During this period, the prevailing view on high school graduation rates has moved from the belief that essentially everyone who wanted to, or needed to, graduate from high school was doing so to the recognition that in every state there were too many communities and schools where high school graduation was not the norm. Moreover, a widespread national consensus developed that state and national graduation rates were far from where they needed to be to insure success in the 21st century. As awareness of the magnitude, scope and consequences of the nation's graduation challenge grew in the past decade, many states and communities responded with a call to action and a diversity of attempts to increase graduation rates. Has this made a difference? How far do we still have to go to graduate all students from high school prepared for college, career, and civic life?

Our first data brief looks at progress in raising graduation rates in the nation and its 50 states. Future briefs will look at progress in the nation's 50 largest cities, and among the high schools with the lowest graduation rates -- those schools we identified in prior work as "dropout factories."

In addition, in partnership with Jobs for the Future, we are working on a report that will take an in-depth look at the challenges and opportunities in 17 make-or-break states -- those where continued and increased progress is necessary if the nation is to reach its graduation rate goals. Taken together, these briefs and reports and their related data profiles and data sets will provide a road map to where progress has been made, and begin to illuminate the actions behind the success, and clarify the scale, location, and characteristics of the challenges that remain. Individual data profiles on the graduation challenge and recent progress in each of the 50 states can be found at the Everyone Graduates Center's web site, www.every1graduates.org.

Executive Summary

How great is the nation's graduation challenge? To meet President Obama's call to graduate all students from high schools prepared for college, career, and civic life how much progress is needed, in which states, school districts and communities? This is the first in a series of data briefs aimed at answering these fundamental questions. It examines national and statewide progress in raising the high school graduation rate between 2002 and 2006. This is the most recent period for which comparable data across states is available. The period also saw growing awareness of low graduation rates and high dropout rates in many communities across the country, coupled with a marked increase in philanthropic investment and activity among states and school districts, as well as advocacy and social change organizations seeking effective responses to these challenges. What progress have we made?

National Findings

The overall national graduation rate remained essentially flat between 2002 and 2006, at approximately 74 percent.

This period did see a 3 percentage point improvement in promoting power (i.e., the timely progress of students from 9th to 12th grade). Those gains in promoting power were offset, however, by a 3 percentage point decline in the ratio of seniors to diplomas awarded (i.e., the extent to which 12th graders obtain diplomas).

There also was a near 10 percent decline in the number of high schools with weak promoting power, that is, the nation's dropout factories.

Overall, 300,000 fewer students attended weak promoting power high schools at the end of 2006 than in 2002. Gains were greatest among minority students.

State Level Findings

The mixed national picture is explained by state level trends. Some states and communities made substantial progress; others lost ground; most others mirrored the overall national trend of essentially flat rates.

Eighteen states posted gains in their graduation rates between 2002 and 2006 and in twelve states, which can serve as models for the nation, the gains were substantial.

Gains in these states ranged from an 11.2 percentage point gain in Tennessee to a 3.0 percentage point gain in New Hampshire. The 12 states (listed from largest to smallest gains) are: Tennessee, Delaware, Kentucky, South Dakota, Arkansas, Alabama, North Carolina, New York, Hawaii, Missouri, Nebraska, and New Hampshire.

Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, New York and North Carolina stand out as states that made good gains, produced significantly more graduates in 2006 than 2002 and saw a decline in the number of high schools with weak promoting power (the nation's dropout factories) and a gain in the number of high schools with high promoting power. This progress, however, must be tempered with the acknowledgement that except for Kentucky all of these states still have overall graduation rates below the national average.

There is wide variation across the states in the implementation of many key policy reforms advocated over the past decade. States that made improvements do not appear to share one common set of policies or practices, but all are implementing some key reforms.

Results from 2002 to 2006 indicate that in order to meet its graduation challenge the nation will need a more comprehensive approach involving federal, state, community and school projects along with the active support of parents, teachers, and students.

National and State Progress Toward Raising Graduation Rates 2002-2006

This data brief focuses on national and statewide progress in raising the high school graduation rate between 2002 and 2006. This time period is both the most recent for which comparable data is available across all states and important in the nation's efforts to raise graduation rates. In the late 1990s raising graduation rates was not at the forefront of the nation's educational reform agenda. Census data seemed to indicate that graduation rates were high and that minority/majority gaps were closing, putting the nation on a trajectory to meet the Goals 2000 objective of a 90 percent graduation rate. In reality, however, graduation rates began to decline during the late 1990s and the number of high schools in which graduation was not the norm actually increased. By 2001, 20 percent of all students and nearly 40 percent of minority students attended schools that could be described as dropout factories (Balfanz and Legters, 2004).

Beginning in about 2001, the nation started to recognize that graduation rates were not as high as believed and to understand that at least some communities in every state faced what could fairly be called a dropout crisis. Over the next few years this knowledge became widespread. As a result, 2002 to 2006 saw a growing response at multiple levels to the need to increase the number of high school graduates.

Led by then-Gov. Mark Warner of Virginia, the National Governors Association declared 2005 the Year of the High School, with numerous states launching reform efforts. The governors also signed a graduation compact and agreed to implement a common method for measuring the graduation rate. During this time, a number of states implemented accurate measures of cohort graduation rates. In many cases this increased the urgency for action, as states and school districts realized, often for the first time, the extent of their graduation challenge.

The philanthropic community also turned its attention – and resources – to the graduation rate challenge during these years. Most notable in their contributions were the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation and the Open Society. These and other organizations invested more than \$2 billion in state, district, and school reform strategies and new school creation aimed at increasing high school achievement and graduation rates. Growing awareness of the extent and significance of the dropout crisis also led to a marked increase in activity among advocacy and social change organizations seeking effective policy responses to the dropout crisis and graduation rate challenge.

During this time, the federal government included graduation rates as a key accountability measure for high schools in the No Child Left Behind legislation, though effectively neutralized much of its impact by leaving it to the states to establish their own measures, goals, and rates of progress. The federal government, partly in response to criticism that the existing graduation rate measures greatly under-estimated the scope and scale of the graduation challenge, also developed an estimated graduation rate calculation that could be applied uniformly to all states. This action, combined with continued external analysis by a growing body of academics and researchers, played a key role in establishing that the nation's overall graduation rate was closer to 75 percent than to 90 percent and was considerably lower for poor and minority students. Lastly, the federal government, through the Department of Education's Small Learning Communities grant program, funneled between \$100 and \$300 million a year to school districts to help implement high school reforms aimed at increasing graduation rates, among other goals.

National Graduation Rate Trends 2002-2006

Despite this growing awareness of the graduation rate challenge and initial efforts to stem the dropout crisis, the national graduation rate appears to have remained essentially flat between 2002 and 2006, rising only from 73.6 percent in 2002 to 74.0 percent in 2006. This period, however, saw a three percentage point improvement in promoting power, the ratio of 12th-graders to 9th-graders three years prior, which provides an estimate of the extent to which students are being promoted grade to grade in high school on time. At the national level, this gain in promoting power, though, was off-set by a three percentage point decline in the ratio of seniors to diplomas awarded. One possible interpretation of this is that increased attention to the importance of on-time grade promotion led the nation to move its students from the ninth to twelfth grades in a timely fashion. Support for this can be found in a four percentage point decline in the percent of students attending high schools with weak promoting power (60% or less) and an almost ten percentage point increase in the number of students attending high schools with high promoting power (90% or more). In addition, there was about a 10 percent decline in the number of high schools with weak promoting power, that is, the nation's dropout factories.

This improvement in promoting power, however, did not at the national level translate into rising graduation rates, because of counter-trends that led to fewer 12th-graders earning diplomas. What calls for further investigation are the causes of these two off-setting trends. Did increased knowledge of 9th grade success lead to more students earning on-time promotion to 10th grade? Did higher graduation requirements lead more students

to stumble and not complete all requirements in their senior year? Or did states or school districts with fewer grade-to-grade promotion requirements -- states and districts in which years in school equal grade in school regardless of credits earned -- experience overall declines in their graduation rates?

The other critical trend in raising graduation rates between 2002 and 2006 was its uneven nature. Some states and communities made substantial progress; others lost ground; most others mirrored the overall national trend with rates remaining the same.

Progress, however, had a meaningful impact in the states and communities that experienced it. Collectively in these locales, tens of thousands of additional students, controlling for population change, graduated in 2006 compared to 2002. These improvements occurred in large cities as well as suburban and rural communities. Overall, 300,000 fewer students attended weak promoting power high schools at the end of this period than at its beginning, and the gains were greatest among minority students. It is to this progress that we now turn our attention. It has much to teach us. As the nation moves toward more comprehensive approaches to meeting its graduation rate challenge, it is important to take stock of where improvements have occurred, their magnitude, and what they have to say about the challenge that remains. Methodological details on how we measure progress in raising graduation rates can be found in the boxes on pages 4 and 5.

States That Made the Most Progress in Raising Graduation Rates: 2002-2006

For this analysis, the focus is on the 25 percent of states (the top 12) that had the greatest overall gain in graduation rates, as measured by the average freshmen graduation rate, between 2002 and 2006.

An alternative grouping could have been the 25 percent that saw the greatest net increase (controlling for population change) in the number of graduates. This grouping would have replaced four smaller states that saw larger overall gains in graduation rates (DE, SD, HI, and NE) with four larger states that saw smaller gains (IL, SC, MN, and OR). These states essentially saw a two percentage point increase in graduation rates during this period. These gains are statistically significant, as are the two percentage point gains of Wisconsin and West Virginia. This means those 18 states, or a little more than one out of three, experienced gains in their graduation rates between 2002 and 2006.

Data and Methods Used to Analyze Progress in Raising Graduation Rates

Four years after the nation's governors signed a graduation compact and pledged to use a common measure of the graduation rate measure across all 50 states, less than 20 states have achieved this end (though a number more will soon be able to). As a result it is still not possible to compare all states, using a cohort graduation rate, which follows an entering class of first-time ninth-graders and establishes how many ultimately graduate within four years or with extra time. It is possible, however, to use estimates of both overall graduation rates and progression toward graduation to compare and analyze state progress toward raising graduation rates through 2006. The following methods and measures are used here.

Average Freshmen Graduation Rate-This measure was found by the U.S. Department of Education to be the graduation rate estimate that most closely approximates a cohort graduation rate, in the widest range of circumstances. It is found by averaging the 8th grade, 9th grade, and 10th grade enrollments of a class and dividing the average by the total number of regular diplomas awarded in the year of on-time graduation for the class. Hence, for the Class of 2006 the number of diplomas awarded in that year is compared to the total number of students enrolled in 8th grade in 2001-02, 9th grade in 2002-03, and 10th grade in 2003-04. This method helps to control for the impact of students repeating 9th grade but ultimately graduating. Because it uses all diplomas awarded in a given year, it will capture students who are graduating on time, as well as students who are graduating early or with extra time. This means that in states where significant numbers of students graduate in five or six or more years, this measure can more closely approximate a total, rather than on-time graduation rate. The estimate is not adjusted for net in-or-out migration. Thus, it can under-estimate graduation rates in states that are losing population and over-estimate them in states that are gaining population.

Promoting Power-This measure compares 9th-grade enrollment to 12th-grade enrollment three years later. As such, it estimates the extent to which students are progressing from 9th grade to 12th grade on time. It is the only common estimate of progress toward high school graduation that is available at the school, as well as at the state, level. It is not possible to calculate the average freshman graduation rate for schools because data on the number of diplomas awarded is collected only at the district level. Research has shown that grade retention is a strong predictor of not graduating. Hence, states and schools with large numbers of students not progressing in a timely fashion from 9th to 12th grades, have a high probability of significant graduation rate challenges. Progress on this measure likely indicates that high schools have been able to increase the number of students who are meeting promotion requirements, and hence, have fewer students repeating grades. At both the state and school levels, the difference between 9th-grade enrollment and 12th-grade enrollment three years later also provides a decent estimate of the number of students who could need

extra help to graduate. As with the average freshmen graduation rate, promoting power does not control for net in-or-out migration.

Ratio of 12th- grade Enrollment to Diplomas Awarded-This measure compares 12th- grade enrollment in the fall to the number of diplomas awarded through the summer of the following year. This measure captures two distinct populations of non-graduates: Students who are close to meeting their graduation requirements but still do not graduate, and students who are seniors only by virtue of being enrolled in high school for four years, but still many credits shy of earning a diploma. The relative mix of these two populations in a given state largely depends on the extent of promotion requirements throughout the state's high schools. In many states, most or all students have to earn a certain number of credits, often in specific courses, to obtain 10th, 11th, or 12th grade status. In other states, these requirements are very modest or non-existent and students' official grade status is based on years in school. Some of these students become 12th-graders with the credits of a 9th, 10th, or 11th grader and hence do not graduate with their class. Progress on this measure then can indicate that the high schools have gotten better at making sure more of their seniors reach the senior year close to graduation. Alternatively, it can indicate that high schools are seeing fewer students only a few credits shy of meeting graduation requirements fail to graduate, have instituted rapid summer recovery programs for seniors who are a few credits short of being able to graduate at the end of the school year, and/or are enabling more second year seniors to graduate.

Weak Promoting Power High Schools -In our prior research, we identified high schools where there are 60% or fewer seniors than freshmen three years earlier, as schools with weak promoting power, and high odds of graduation not being the norm. We have also shown that in most states, these high schools account for half or more of a state's non-graduates. Promoting power does not control for net in-or-out transfer at the school. So it will be less accurate in schools that experience many more students transferring out than in, or in than out. Extensive analysis, however, has shown that few schools have net in-or-out transfer rates of more than 10 percent. Thus, except for rare cases, estimated promoting power rates are typically within 5 to 10 percentage points of actual rates. Progress on this measure likely indicates that there are fewer high schools where graduation is not the norm.

High Promoting Power High Schools-This measure uses a promoting power rate of 90% or more to estimate the number of high schools in a state where nearly all students progress in a timely fashion from 9th-to-12th grades. They are likely to have high graduation rates. This measure can be biased upward if large numbers of high schools in a state do not have significant grade progression requirements, that is, if years enrolled in school determines grade status. Examining changes in the number of high schools with promoting power of at least 90 percent, however, should be less biased, as these schools would trend upward only where grade promotion requirements have been substantially eased between 2002 and 2006.

Because each of these measures has strengths and weaknesses, the most complete picture can be assembled by using and cross-referencing all of them.

Ultimately, however, the most straightforward measure – the states that saw their graduation rates rise the most between 2002 and 2006 -- provides the most information. As seen in Table 1, 11 of the top 12 states experienced graduation rate increases from 3 to almost 7 points between 2002 and 2006. Tennessee stands out as the exception, having witnessed an 11-point increase, double the gains achieved in all but two states.

Overall, there is considerable diversity among the top states. Four of them had graduation rates in the 60s, among the lowest in the nation, in 2002 (TN, AL, NC, and NY). Five had rates among the highest, and by 2006 achieved graduation rates of 80 percent or higher (NH, NE, MO, SD, and AK). The remaining three states (DE, KY, and HW) began in the middle of the pack, somewhat below the national average, but by 2006 had climbed above it. Five of the states are among the nation's smallest in population, four are larger states, and three are in the middle. They are also geographically diverse, though it is possible to define half of them as southern or border states (TN, NC, AL, AK, MO, and KY).

Comparing gains in average freshmen graduation rates to improvement in promoting power and the ratio of 12th-graders to diplomas provides several insights. Tennessee and Delaware witnessed substantial gains in both promoting power and the percent of seniors obtaining diplomas. Hawaii, at more modest levels, also saw balanced gains across both measures. In the main, however, state improvements in raising graduation rates appear to be driven primarily by either substantial gains in promoting power (i.e., the timely progress of students from 9th to 12th grade) or in the ratio of seniors to diplomas (i.e., the extent to which 12th-graders obtain diplomas).

Graduation rate gains in Kentucky, North Carolina, New York, Missouri, and New Hampshire appear to be driven by improvement in promoting power. Whereas, the gains in Arkansas, South Dakota, and Alabama, as well as the preponderance of the gain in Tennessee, appear to be driven by the percent of 12th-graders obtaining diplomas. Some of these gains may reflect the fact that more students are arriving in 12th grade closer to meeting graduation requirements than in the past. In other words, if the states or school districts that witnessed large gains in the percent of 12th-graders obtaining diplomas did not have strong grade-to-grade promotion rates then promoting power could have witnessed limited growth, even while more students were showing up in 12th grade closer to meeting graduation requirements.

In three states (NC, MO, and NH), the impact of gains in promoting power on raising graduation rates appears to have been partially off-set by declines in the percent of

seniors receiving diplomas. In New York considerably smaller gains in the percent of seniors receiving diplomas than in promoting power may have slowed the rate of progress.

When population growth is controlled for, it becomes apparent that improvements in Tennessee and New York produced the greatest number of additional graduates, roughly 8,000 more students earning diplomas in 2006 than in 2002 in each state. Improvements in North Carolina, Kentucky, Missouri, Alabama, and Arkansas also produced consequential increases at the national level, leading to an additional 1,900 to 3,900 graduates in these states. Collectively, the less populous states of Delaware, South Dakota, Hawaii, Nebraska and New Hampshire produced an additional 2,800 graduates.

Table 1 – State Progress Toward Raising Graduates Rates from (2002 to 2006): Top 25%

State	Graduation Rate Gain (Percentage Points)	Promoting Power Gain (Percentage Points)	12 th Grade to Diplomas Ratio (Percentage Points)	Net Gain in Graduates*	Graduation Rate 2002**	Graduation Rate 2006**
Tennessee	11.2	3.8	9.6	8,000	61%	72%
Delaware	6.8	5.3	4.1	600	70%	76%
Kentucky	6.8	6.8	0.4	3,400	71%	78%
South Dakota	5.3	1.8	3.7	500	79%	85%
Arkansas	5.2	1.3	4.6	1,900	75%	80%
Alabama	4.1	2.1	3.6	2,300	62%	66%
North Carolina	3.6	5.9	-1.5	3,900	68%	72%
New York	3.5	7.3	1.8	8,400	64%	67%
Hawaii	3.4	1.6	1.9	500	72%	76%
Missouri	3.4	4.7	-1.0	2,500	78%	81%
Nebraska	3.1	2.1	0.7	700	84%	87%
New Hampshire	3.0	4.0	-0.3	500	78%	81%
United States	0.4	0.4	-3.1	40,400	74%	74%

* Net gain in graduates was calculated by applying the Graduation Rate for 2002 to the estimated number of first-time ninth-graders in 2002-2003, and then subtracting the result from the total number of graduates in 2005-2006.

** Rates for 2002 and 2006 are rounded for ease of comparison; source: Common Core of Data

Table 2 – Changes in the number of and percent of students attending Weak and High Promoting Power High Schools 2001-2006*

State	Change in Number of Weak Promoting Power High Schools	Change in Number of High Schools with a Promoting Power Ratio of 90% or More	Percentage Point Change: Students at Weak Promoting Power High Schools	Percentage Point Change: Minority Students at Weak Promoting Power High Schools	Percentage Point Change: Students at High Schools with 90%+ Promoting Power Ratio	Percentage Point Change: Minority Students at High Schools with 90%+ Promoting Power Ratio
Tennessee	-22	38	-6	-	11	-
Delaware	2	4	-3	-5	12	12
Kentucky	-26	12	-11	-17	4	2
South Dakota	4	-2	6	5	5	6
Arkansas	0	50	0	0	17	16
Alabama	-30	15	-10	-12	3	3
North Carolina	-26	25	-12	-11	6	4
New York	-37	71	-6	-14	11	10
Hawaii	2	5	-6	-4	4	3
Missouri	7	64	-1	-5	17	12
Nebraska	1	39	8	22	7	5
New Hampshire	-1	10	0	1	15	14
United States	-184	2,008	-4	-9	10	9

– Tennessee did not report enrollment information by race/ethnicity for the 2001-2002 school year.

* SOURCE: Common Core of Data. Figures based on comparing 3 year averages for 2000-2002 to 2005-2007.

Changes in the Number and Percent of Students Attending High Schools with Weak and High Promoting Power

Looking at changes in the number of high schools with weak (below 60%) and high (above 90%) promoting power in the states with the greatest graduation rate gains provides a more nuanced understanding of these gains. Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, New York and North Carolina stand out as states that made good gains, produced significantly more graduates in 2006 than 2002 and saw a decline in the number of high schools with weak promoting power (the nation's dropout factories) and a gain in the number of high schools with high promoting power. This is important because high schools with weak promoting power are the sources of half or more of all dropouts in many states. Thus, these states appear to have made broad-based improvements resulting in fewer high schools with low graduation rates and more high schools with high graduation rates. They

also saw at least a 10 percentage point drop in minority students attending weak promoting power high schools. This progress, however, must be tempered with the acknowledgement that except for Kentucky all of these states still have overall graduation rates below the national average.

Five of the states that saw overall improvement in their graduation rates also saw an increase in the number of weak promoting power high schools. South Dakota and Nebraska saw an increase in the percent of minority students attending weak promoting power schools.

Did the States with the Greatest Gains in Graduation Rates Implement a Common Set of Policies and Programs?

An in-depth examination of why these states improved is important but beyond the scope of this brief. It is possible, however, to begin to examine if these states implemented a common set of policies or programs. The overall answer appears to be no.

As seen in Table 3, there is wide variation across these states in their implementation of many of the key policy reforms advocated during the past decade. The legal age for dropping out of school varies from 16 to 18 across the 12 states. The number of credits required for graduation ranges from 20 to 24. Only four of the states have implemented cohort graduation rate measures, following the guidelines of the NGA Graduation Rate compact. Just four have graduation exams. In terms of programs, districts within these states differed widely in applying for, and winning, Small Learning Community grants (the major federal program that supported high school reform during this period). It is noteworthy, however, that three of the states with the most significant gains -- Kentucky, North Carolina, and New York -- had the greatest number of schools winning SLC grants and Hawaii had a high concentration of its high schools involved. On the other hand, only two of the 12 states won NGA Honor Grants designed to support high school redesign.

Among the subset of states that produced the greatest number of additional graduates, there is evidence that it is possible to raise standards, increase accountability and have more students graduate. Tennessee, Alabama and New York have graduation exams, and Tennessee increased the challenge of its exams while it was experiencing significant gains in its graduation rates. Alabama has among the most stringent graduation credit requirements in the nation -- four credits in each of the major subjects and 24 credits overall.

Table 3 – Educational Reforms as of 2006 in the Top 25% of States Making Progress toward Raising Graduation Rates

State	NGA Grant Recipient	Number of Districts/School Awards Under SLC Grant, 2006	Uses NGA Compact Graduation Rate, 2006	Uses High School Graduation Exams, 2006	Legal Dropout Age	Math Credits Needed for Graduation	Total Credits Needed for Graduation
Tennessee	No	5 Districts/ 18 Schools	No	Yes	17	3	20
Delaware	Yes	1 District/ 3 Schools	Yes	No	16	3	22
Kentucky	No	9 Districts/ 35 Schools	No	No	16	3	22
South Dakota	No	1 District/ 3 Schools	No	No	16	3	22
Arkansas	Yes	6 Districts/ 9 Schools	Yes	No	17	4	22
Alabama		2 Districts/ 2 Schools	No	Yes	16	4	24
North Carolina	No	26 Districts/ 64 Schools	Yes	No*	16	4	20
New York	No	32 Districts/ 77 Schools	Yes	Yes	16	3	22
Hawaii	No	5 Districts/ 20 Schools	No	No	18	3	22
Missouri	No	7 Districts/ 11 Schools	No	No	16	2	22
Nebraska	No	7 Districts/ 13 Schools	No	No	18	Local Decision	
New Hampshire	No	2 Districts/ 3 Schools	No	No	16	3	20

* In NC in 2006 students had to pass 8th grade competency tests to graduate, and took end of course exams in core subjects, but passing the end of course exams was not a requirement for graduation.

SOURCE for SLC Awards: Smaller Learning Communities Awards Database on the Department of Education Website, <http://slcprogram.ed.gov/cgi-bin/mysql/slcawards.cgi?l=summary-locale> and <http://slcprogram.ed.gov/cgi-bin/mysql/slcawards.cgi?l=summary-state>. It appears that each grant (even if given to a particular district more than once) counted as a new district receiving that money. Although the total may list a higher number of districts, this is because each district is listed once, even if it received multiple awards. All of the awards and years are separated under the district name.

SOURCE for Graduation Requirements: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/res_tab3.asp

SOURCE for Legal Dropout Age: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07_157.asp?referrer=list SOURCE: Common Core of Data. Figures based on comparing 3 year averages for 2000–2002 to 2005–2007.

The Case of Tennessee

Among the states that saw the largest graduation rate gains and the greatest increase in graduates, North Carolina, New York and Kentucky will perhaps come as no surprise. All three have had well-known and active high school reform agendas at state and/or local levels. Tennessee, however, which had the largest overall graduation rate increase, and produced the second greatest number of additional graduates, has not been on the national reform radar screen to the same extent. This brings up the obvious question of what did Tennessee do to bring about such a significant increase in its graduation rate and number of graduates. At this point, the best that we can do is raise questions, and highlight some potential areas for further exploration.

Tennessee witnessed gains in both promoting power and the ratio of 12th-graders to diplomas with the biggest increase in the latter measure. Inspection of more detailed information from the state's education department shows a marked decline in the number of students earning special education diplomas and certificates of attendance during this period. This suggests that some of the increase in 12th-graders earning regular diplomas was the result of more special education students receiving regular rather than special education diplomas, and fewer students overall earning certificates of attendance. At most, however, this movement from special education to regular diplomas could explain about 2 to 3 points of the overall 11-point growth. The more detailed state level data, moreover, shows that the graduation rate increase experienced between 2002 and 2006 continues through 2008.

About a third of the overall increase in diplomas awarded appears to have occurred in Memphis. Among the issues worthy of exploration is that in the late 1990s Memphis was one of several cities that embraced the notion of using externally developed school reform models district-wide. Although the effort was ultimately discontinued and evaluations demonstrated mixed impacts on raising standardized achievement, it is notable that students who experienced elementary and middle grade reforms in the late 1990s reached the age of high school graduation between 2002 and 2006.

Hamilton County also experienced substantial improvements in its graduation rate, coinciding with a notable district-wide high school reform effort. The overall impact on increases in the state's graduation rate, however, is somewhat muted by the district's relatively small size.

Given that the state's gains appear to be driven by substantial gains in the number of 12-graders receiving diplomas, efforts aimed at students who are close to meeting graduation requirements but not convinced of the value of a diploma deserve deeper examination. These include the Jobs for Tennessee's Graduates program, which works to connect students to employment and further education, by providing supports to 12th-graders to insure graduation and post-secondary schooling or employment. During this era, the program was recognized by its national parent organization, for its high success rate, with the 2,000 12th-graders enrolled each year posting a 90 percent-plus graduation rate. Other examples were model efforts in Kingsport and Sullivan counties in which local government paid high school graduates' tuition at the local community college.

At the policy level, the Tennessee legislature passed a driver's license law in 2001, which revoked the licenses of 16- and 17-year-olds for at least one semester if they did not pass

four courses or dropped out. In 2000 the state department of education was required to establish and implement a comprehensive statewide strategy to assist districts and schools in addressing the dropout problem, include stakeholders in the development of the strategy, and build upon existing programs and initiatives that worked. In 2006 the governor committed the state to raising its graduation rate to 90 percent by 2012.

It is essential to note that no evidence links any of these programs or policy changes to improvements in Tennessee's graduation rate. Similar programs and policies can be found in states that did not see equivalent improvements in graduation rates. The factors that ultimately led to improvements in Tennessee may be significantly tied to the particular context of the state. But what even a cursory examination of Tennessee points out is that the answer will not be found in a single program or policy change, but in the combination of multiple local and state efforts. That the 12 states that made the most progress do not appear to have used a common set of practices and policies further points out that context matters and graduation rates are not improved through a single program or policy but through a multiplicity of efforts at multiple levels within a state. At the same time, the fact that a dozen states did witness significant improvements signals that even when comprehensive efforts to improve graduation rates were not the norm, progress was possible.

The Challenge Ahead

Finally, examining progress in raising graduation rates through 2006, as well as the levels achieved, can provide a baseline for the current period and its ambitions for more comprehensive efforts to improve the nation's graduation rate. As such, outcomes in 2006 enable us to paint a picture of the scope, magnitude, and location of the challenge states and the nation face in meeting the call to graduate all students from high school prepared for college, career, and civic life. As noted before, a profile of the graduation challenge, as well as data on the level of recent progress, for each of the nation's 50 states can be found at the Everyone Graduates Center's web site at www.every1graduates.org.

Looking collectively across these profiles, as well as the national profile, we can see the following:

- Each year there are approximately 1.2 million ninth-graders who likely need additional supports to graduate. Recent progress in on-track indicators shows that many of these students can be identified before they enter, or soon after they begin, high school, enabling a shift from reactive to active support systems and school reforms.

- About 250,000 students enrolled as seniors annually do not receive diplomas by the following summer. Some are only a few credits shy of graduation and represent both a tragic loss and the potential for quick gains. Others likely need alternative and multiple pathways to graduation.
- In the 12 least populous states, only 2,000 to 4,000 9th-graders need additional supports each year and only 1,000 to 2,000 12th-graders do not receive diplomas that year. This suggests that even at the state level it should be possible to monitor the progress of these students and continually evaluate the success of the supports provided, ultimately targeting the needed level of support to each student. It also suggests that while these states are geographically dispersed, establishing a learning network between them may hasten both their individual and collective ability to succeed. For example, current efforts in New Hampshire may have much to offer states with similar numbers of students in need of support or alternatives pathways to graduation.
- Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin are within striking distance of achieving 90 percent graduation rates, though no state has yet to achieve this rate. Improvements from 2002 to 2006 though did lead to at least 19 states having graduation rates of approximately 80 percent or higher.
- Some of the states, with relatively higher graduation rates, however, have seen essentially no progress since 1998.
- For the nation to meet its graduation rate challenge, significant improvements will need to continue or begin in 17 to 20 states with the greatest number of dropouts, the most intense concentration of weak promoting power high schools, and/or fewer graduates than their share of high school students. These make-or-break states are the focus of a forthcoming report by Jobs for the Future and the Everyone Graduates Center.
- As whole the nation made more progress in increasing the number of high schools with high promoting power (90% or more) than in decreasing the number of high schools with weak promoting power (60% or less).
- Some states, however, made notable progress in decreasing their number of weak promoting power high schools. Learning more about how this occurred is essential.
- There were also significant improvements (10 percentage points) in both the percent of minority students attending high promoting power schools and not attending weak promoting power schools.

Conclusion: The Need to Move from Sporadic Effort to Comprehensive and Sustained Action.

What the analysis of national and state level progress between 2002 and 2006 shows is that the nation's initial response to its recognition of a graduation rate challenge was not sufficient. The nation as a whole did not move forward, and only one out of three states made measurable progress. The states that did progress show that improvement, indeed substantial improvement, is possible. They challenge other states to match or exceed their efforts.

The good news is the nation is responding. The last few years have seen both an acceleration of efforts and the beginning of more comprehensive approaches. It has also become clear that the federal government needs to play a more active role. At the close of 2008 the U.S. Department of Education issued regulations aimed at greatly increasing graduation rate accountability. All states must employ accurate graduation rate measures by 2012, establish ambitious graduation rate goals, and require substantial and continuous progress toward those goals for all students as well as subgroups. President Obama has made it a national mission to insure that all students graduate from high school prepared for, and then enroll in, post-secondary schooling or advanced career training. Federal legislation is pending to transform or replace the 15 percent of high schools that produce half the nation's dropouts, as well as the middle schools that feed them. There are also bills that call for supportive national service, integrated student support, and educational innovations.

A much broader spectrum of the nation is getting involved in insuring that all students graduate from high school. The dropout crisis is no longer seen as simply a school problem. The national service movement has identified the dropout crisis as one of the key areas where national service can be employed to help solve an urgent national priority. Growing numbers of social change organizations, including the United Way, City Year, Communities In Schools and the Boys and Girls clubs, have made the nation's graduation rate one of their core missions. The America's Promise Alliance has launched an ambitious national effort to galvanize community efforts to end the dropout crisis by sponsoring dropout prevention summits in all 50 states and 55 cities. The Department of Labor has launched several initiatives aimed at increasing graduation rates in medium and large cities and public health professionals have recognized dropout prevention as a key to community well-being.

Both the National Council of State Legislators and the National League of Cities are seeking solutions to the nation's graduation challenge. The National Governors Association's Best

Practices Center has launched fresh initiatives in Dropout Prevention and School Improvement. These growing community efforts are driven by the twin realization that the nation's graduation rate crisis must and can be solved. Emerging evidence-based and innovative practices in school reform, multiple pathways to graduation, and new schools, as well as dropout prevention and early warning and intervention systems, provide an increased repertoire of tools to drive improvement.

Lastly, there is consensus that simply increasing high school graduation rates is not enough. For the nation to prosper and for all citizens to partake in the prosperity, all students need to graduate prepared for college or challenging career training. The nation's governors are responding. More states are joining efforts like the American Diploma Project aimed at establishing accountability and assessment systems linked to internationally benchmarked college and career readiness standards. With federal assistance they are also making major investments in new and improved data systems that will enable better monitoring of student progress, as well as continuous improvements in reform efforts.

What this brief demonstrates is that a subset of states can also provide important insights into what it will take for the nation to overcome its graduation rate crisis. We need to learn more about how New York, North Carolina, and Kentucky combined accountability, support and intervention to push their rates forward; how Alabama combined progress with higher standards, and how Arkansas pushed its graduation rate to 80 percent. We also need to learn much more in particular about Tennessee, as well as the other states that moved forward, when the nation as whole did not.

Reference

Balfanz, R., & Legters, N. (2004). Locating the dropout crisis: Which high schools produce the nation's dropouts? In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America* (pp. 57–84). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.