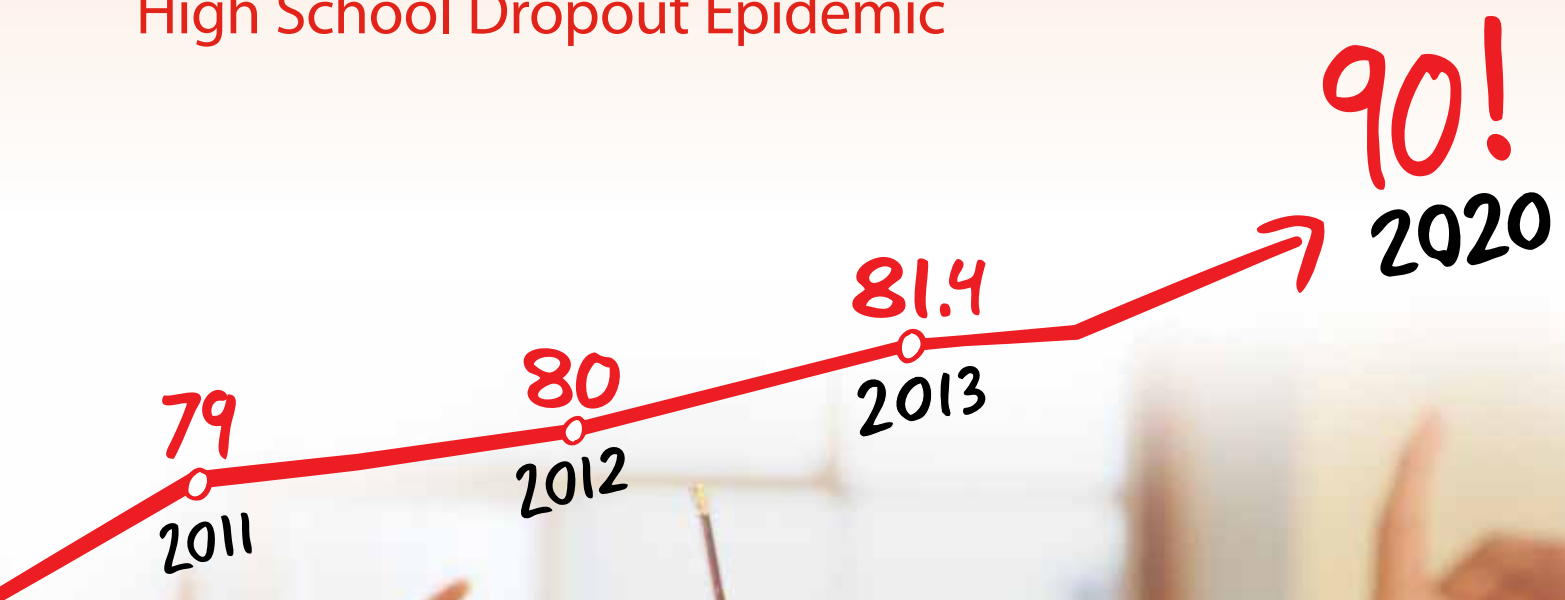


# Building a Grad Nation

Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic



## A REPORT BY:

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## IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

America's Promise Alliance

Alliance for Excellent Education

ANNUAL UPDATE

# 2015

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# Executive Summary



In 2013, the national high school graduation rate hit a record high of 81.4 percent, and for the third year in a row, the nation remained on pace to meet the 90 percent goal by the Class of 2020. This sixth annual update on America's high school dropout challenge shows that these gains have been made possible by raising graduation rates for students who have traditionally struggled to earn a high school diploma, and focuses on the student subgroups and geographic areas that both contribute to this progress and are key to driving toward the 90 percent goal.

Continuing a pattern seen in earlier years, rates of improvement among states and large districts varied considerably between 2011 and 2013. Some districts, including those with a majority of low-income and minority students, made big improvements, while others lost ground. This is significant because it indicates that high school graduation rates are not increasing because of broad national economic, demographic, and social trends. Rather, the constellation of leadership, reforms, and multi-sector efforts at state, district, and school levels drove this progress, and shows that with focus, graduation rates can be increased for all students in every part of the country.

## The National Picture

The nation's quest to achieve a 90 percent high school graduation rate by 2020 can be broken down into four quarters, with each five-year segment from 2001 to 2020 representing one quarter. During the current third-quarter (2011-2015), the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) became available for nearly all states, and it has been instrumental in showing where progress is being made and where challenges still exist.

- The latest state level 2012-13 Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate data revealed that 29 of 50 states equaled or exceeded the national average of 81.4 percent, and six states were within two percentage points of reaching the 90 percent goal. Fourteen states, with graduation rates between 69 and 78 percent, still have much further to go.
- Hispanic/Latino and African American students are starting to close the graduation rate gap with their White student peers. Hispanic/Latino students – the fastest growing population of students – have

made the greatest gains in the ACGR reporting era, improving 4.2 percentage points from 2011 to 2013. African American students also experienced significant improvement, rising 3.7 percentage points, from 67 percent in 2011 to 70.7 percent in 2013.

- One reason for the continuing improvement in graduation rates among Hispanic/Latino and African American students is the decline in the number of high schools with low graduation rates, often referred to as “dropout factories.” There are now fewer than 1,200 of these schools nationwide and 1.5 million fewer students attending them, and the number of African American and Hispanic/Latino students in these schools has dropped below 20 and 15 percent, respectively.
- Despite improvements, unacceptably low levels of minority, low-income, English Language Learners, and special education students are graduating from high school.
- Ten states increased their graduation rates by four percentage points or more from 2011-2013, while another 22 states made gains of 2 to 3.9 points. Unfortunately, 10 other states gained less than one percentage point or lost ground over the past three years.

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Though the challenge may seem large, to get to a 90 percent graduation rate for all students, the nation will need just 310,000 more graduates in the Class of 2020 than in the Class of 2013, which based on third-quarter progress, is attainable. As the third quarter comes to a close and the fourth and final quarter begins, the nation will need to double down on its efforts to increase graduation rate outcomes for low-income, minority, and special education students, and continue driving progress in big states and large school districts, where the majority of the country's student population resides.

## Driver 1: Low-Income Students

Though graduation rates have increased for low-income students over the past three years, this student subgroup still lags well behind their more affluent peers.

- The 2012-13 ACGR for low-income students reached 73.3 percent, up 3.3 percentage points from 2010-11 but still more than eight points behind the national overall rate.
- The national graduation rate for middle- and high-income students is estimated at 88.2 percent, almost 15 percentage points higher than the rate for low-income students.
- Graduation rates for low-income students range from 85.4 percent in Kentucky to 59.5 percent in Alaska.
- Graduating on time is the norm for middle- and high-income students, but not for their low-income peers. In 38 states, 85 percent or more of middle- and high-income students graduate high school in four years, but only two states graduate 85 percent or more of their low-income students on time.
- The graduation rate gap between low-income and non-low-income students ranges from 1.4 percentage points in Kentucky to 24.1 points in Minnesota.

With low-income students now a majority in America's public schools and income inequality and concentrated poverty on the rise in our neighborhoods and schools, the nation must redouble efforts to close the opportunity gap and ensure these students have the resources and supports they need to stay on track to graduation.

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## Driver 2: Minority Students

Graduation rates for students of color have significantly improved since 2006, with a 15-percentage-point gain for Hispanic/Latino students, and a 9-percentage-point gain for African American students (as measured by the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate). Yet even with this progress, Hispanic/Latino and African American graduation rates (75.2 percent and 70.7 percent, respectively)



are still lower than rates for White (86.6 percent) and Asian (88.7) students.

Enrollment of students of color is growing rapidly across the country, and it is essential that states focus on improving graduation rates for these increasingly majority populations.

- Six states collectively educate more than 70 percent of the nation's Hispanic/Latino high school students, and only one of these (Texas) has Hispanic/Latino graduation rates above the national average for all students of 81.4 percent.
- Five states collectively educate more than one-third of the nation's African American high school students. However, four out of these five still have graduation rates for Black students in the 60s.

Minority students continue to face barriers to their academic success, including discipline disparities that push them off track for graduation, language barriers, and lack of access to rigorous coursework that will enable them to be successful in college and career.

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### Driver 3: Students with Disabilities

The graduation rate for students with disabilities hit 61.9 percent in 2012-13, an increase of 2.9 percentage points since 2010-11, but still nearly 20 points behind the national average.

- Estimates show that the graduation rate gap between students with disabilities and students in the general population ranges across states from 3.3 percentage points to 58.8 points.
- These estimates also show that the majority of states consistently graduate 85 percent or more of their general population students, but most states are struggling to graduate even 70 percent of students with disabilities.

Though the ACGR data on students with disabilities are useful for examining these wide graduation rate disparities, this section also examines state variations that make ACGR data problematic for making broad assumptions and cross-state comparisons. In addition, this section describes some of the greatest challenges students with disabilities currently face in school, including chronic negative misperceptions and disciplinary disproportionalities, which add to the challenge of keeping these students in school and on track to graduate.



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### Driver 4: Big Cities/Big Districts

In the United States, there are 500 public school districts with K-12 enrollments of 15,000 or more that collectively educate 40 percent of all public school students, 58 percent of the nation's African American and Hispanic/Latino students, and 47 percent of its low-income students. Nationally and in most states, these larger school districts are the inflection points in raising high school graduation rates as well as those of low-income and minority students.

- **The Top 10** school districts each serve from 185,000 to more than 1 million K-12 students, and vary from highly urbanized and high poverty to more suburban than urban. Many are key to driving their state's graduation rate.
- **The Top 200** each serve more than 31,000 K-12 students, and include large suburban districts, most with growing numbers of high-poverty and minority students, as well as more typical "urban needs" – high-poverty and high-minority – districts, such as Atlanta, Boston, Milwaukee, Nashville, Newark, San Francisco, St. Louis, and Seattle. Many of these districts are the largest in their state and will help drive overall state graduation rates, while others are key to driving graduation rate improvements for minority and low-income students.
- **The Top 500** include the Top 200, plus districts with enrollments of at least 15,000 K-12 students (the latter found in all but seven states). This group includes the Ohio 8 districts, which collectively have profound effects on the graduation rates of a large state. It also includes large districts in small states, like Providence, RI, that will similarly impact state rates.

Of whatever size, the largest 500 districts are in many cases leaders in productive innovation. Some have accomplished exemplary results to date, and serve as a magnet for organizing community resources and ideas.

- One-quarter (124/500) of these districts had graduation rate gains of more than six percentage points from 2011 to 2013 (averaging 8.4 percentage points, more than triple the national average). These districts are 61 percent low-income and educate 10 percent of the nation's public high school students.
- One-sixth (88/500) of these districts had graduation rate gains of four percentage points (nearly two percentage points over the national average).
- On the other end of the spectrum, there are a combined 169 districts (one-third) that made little to no improvement or lost ground. Some of these are high-poverty, high-minority districts. Others, with relatively lower poverty rates and minority student populations, had high initial graduation rates but have recently stagnated.

What is evident is that while the nation's larger districts navigate enormous complexities, from student composition and population shifts to state regulations and funding, substantial progress is being made and continued improvement in these districts is possible.

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## Driver 5: Big States

Fifty-five percent of America's public high school students live in just 10 states – California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Georgia and North Carolina. These Big States are home to nearly 8.5 million of the nation's 14.7 million public high school students.

- The 2013 ACGR for these states ranges from 71.7 percent in Georgia to 88 percent in Texas, with six states already above the national average of 81.4 percent.
- The rate of increase for these states also varies widely. Florida and North Carolina, for instance, show nearly five percentage point increases from 2011 to 2013, while Illinois and New York posted decreases.
- California and Texas account for more than half of the growing Hispanic/Latino high school student population, and one-fifth of all students in the nation's public schools.
- California increased its graduation rate by 4.4 percentage points from 2011 to 2013, and has become a key driver of national improvement in Hispanic/Latino graduation rates.
- Although Texas is nearing the 90 percent goal, its growth stagnated over the past two years at 88 percent.
- North Carolina, a feature in this report, showed an increase in its cohort graduation rate from 68.3 percent in 2006 to 82.5 percent in 2013.

As these Big States seek to raise graduation rates for their students, many are putting innovative policies and programs in place: the use of data to identify and provide supports to struggling students, remodeling of school funding streams to allocate more resources to high-needs communities, and a focus on rigorous academics through early college programs and investment in professional development for teachers and staff.

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We also provide **policy recommendations** at the end of each section, and have compiled a list of further federal and state policy recommendations at the end of the report.







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