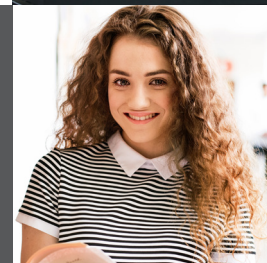


# Building a Grad Nation:

Progress and Challenge  
in Raising High School  
Graduation Rates

ANNUAL  
UPDATE  
2018



**A Report By:**  
Civic Enterprises

Everyone Graduates Center at the School  
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**Lead Sponsor:**  
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**A REPORT BY:**

Civic Enterprises  
Everyone Graduates Center at the  
School of Education at Johns Hopkins University

**IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:**

Alliance for Excellent Education  
America's Promise Alliance

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## Letter from General and Mrs. Powell

This year's report to the nation on high school graduation rates takes a sober look at our progress to date and the challenges that remain. We have always viewed a high school diploma as an "on-track indicator" of success at age 18 on a path to a quality postsecondary credential, decent paying job, and civic engagement. This report examines the gaps that exist between key drivers of the graduation rate, the connection between high school and postsecondary, and the work ahead for creating a more equitable future for young people.

The national on-time graduation rate continues to increase, and some states and districts are showing remarkable progress. Still, the rate of gain is too slow to meet our national goal and far too many students are still not graduating and being left behind. We need to redouble our efforts to learn from what's working, address areas of serious concern, and keep the country's attention on finishing the job.

Thanks to countless caring adults – parents and family members, educators, counselors, mentors, policymakers, clergy, nonprofit and business leaders – an additional three million young people graduated on-time since 2001, staying on the path to having a real chance to reach for their American dream.

If you are one of these caring adults, if you have been a part of the GradNation campaign, congratulations and thank you. This work continues to change lives.

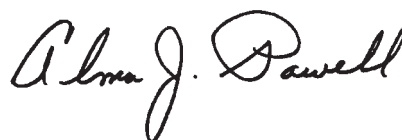
Yet, we have much more to do to make the promise of America real for all young people. We have continued to reduce the number of failing schools and the disparities in graduation rates for students from low-income families (and homeless students), students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners, but not in all places and not for all students. And while the gains in high school graduation rates are translating into more students of color enrolling in college and more credentials being earned by all students than ever before, less than 50 percent of working-age Americans hold a high-quality postsecondary credential. These efforts are more important than ever at a time when the global economy and changing nature of work are increasing the demand for better-educated and prepared students.

As a forthcoming report will show, too many students, particularly students of color, still remain trapped in low-performing high schools that deny them an equal opportunity to pursue their dreams and fulfill their potential. A plan of action for reforming and supporting those remaining schools is needed to turn them around.

Our nation must not lose focus of our goal – a national graduation rate of 90 percent - and we must work faster, more collaboratively, and more effectively to finally meet this challenge. Thankfully, we have evidence of what works and examples of success across the country. As more young people rise up to demand more from their schools and communities, we must also rise to the challenge and summon the will to fulfill the promise of helping every child succeed. They are counting on us. And we are counting on them.



**General Colin L. Powell, USA (Ret.)**  
*Founding Chair, America's Promise Alliance*



**Alma J. Powell**  
*Chair, America's Promise Alliance*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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High school graduation rates help us better understand how states, schools, and districts across the country are doing at graduating their students, bringing about more equitable outcomes for students facing the greatest challenges, and creating pathways for long-term success. This is essential because a high school diploma has become a prerequisite to postsecondary education and obtaining a livable wage and is associated with a wide range of important health and civic outcomes. Although strong and consistent progress has been made over the past decade in raising graduation rates, too often the same students, particularly those who are Black, Hispanic, low-income, and with disabilities, still have the most disparate outcomes, resources, and opportunities.

In the 2018 Building Grad Nation report, we take an in-depth look at the progress that was made between 2011 and 2016 in raising high school graduation rates and the state and district sources of those improvements, and identify where challenges remain. We also link improvements in high school graduation rates to the need to ensure that all students, including those historically underserved by the education system, graduate high school prepared for postsecondary education.

In 2011, when the majority of states began officially reporting the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, 79 percent of US high school students graduated from high school on time, up from 71 percent from the best available national estimate in 2001. Despite considerable progress by some states, most were still far from reaching a 90 percent graduation rate in 2011, a goal set by four successive U.S. Presidents and adopted by the Grad Nation campaign. By 2016, the national high school graduation rate was 84.1 percent, and more than half of states were within striking distance of graduating 90 percent of their students on time. Most notably, historically underserved student populations have been driving increases in high school graduation rates, and these gains continue into postsecondary enrollment and completion rates. Gains from these collective efforts have produced 3 million more students walking across the graduation stage to receive their diploma and moving one step closer to a more promising future.

These gains, however, are still uneven. There are still districts in which overall graduation rates have declined in the past five years and states where gaps between lower-income students and those better off have widened. There are also states that once saw rapid gains where progress has now stalled, others where gaps between white and minority students are still very large, and many states where students with disabilities continue to graduate at unacceptably low numbers.

This year's report comes at a turning point for the nation, as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) becomes a reality and the power of accountability moves from the federal government into the hands of states. It also comes amid growing calls to revamp high school education to better equip students with the academic, social, and emotional skills they need to succeed in postsec-

ondary education and careers, and within a larger conversation on long-standing inequities for young people of color, those growing up in poverty, and children with disabilities. In this year's report, we provide a baseline by which state efforts under ESSA can be examined. We show for each state, which districts have been driving progress, which subgroups of students are over-represented in each state's four-year non-graduates, and in which types of schools – traditional, alternative, or virtual – students who do not graduate on time can be found.

At the same time, there remain concerns about gains in some places, with reports of individual schools ushering students through who are not ready to graduate, credit recovery programs and alternative schools that lack quality and rigor, and a number of issues of variability in calculating graduation rates that need to be addressed to continue to give us comparable measures of progress and challenge across schools, districts, and states. We take these issues head on and identify a series of questions that need to be answered to ensure the continued integrity of high school graduation rates.

We conclude with a set of policy and practice recommendations that aim to help the nation reach its goal of a 90 percent high school graduation rate for all students, and provide full state-by-state data in the appendices.

## PART I: High School Graduation Trends across the Nation

The nation continues to see steady growth in high school graduation rates, but it remains off pace to reaching the 90 percent goal – a goal that would require graduating about 219,000 more young people on time than graduated in 2016 and nearly doubling the annual rate of gain in recent years through 2020. The story behind graduation rate gains can largely be seen at the state level:

- In 2011, five states reported graduation rates below 70 percent. In 2016, no state had a graduation rate below 71 percent.
- **In 2011, no state had achieved a 90 percent graduation rate, and only nine had a graduation rate above 85 percent. In 2016, two states reached the 90 percent goal, and 25 others reported a graduation rate above 85 percent.**
- The states with the lowest graduation rates in 2011 (62-73 percent) have all experienced growth greater than the national average (5.1 percentage points),

and the gap between the states with the highest graduation rate and the lowest has been reduced by six percentage points.

- **Eighteen states – many with large populations of Black, Hispanic, and low-income students – have largely driven progress nationally since 2011 and helped narrow national racial and income graduation rate gaps.**
- Several Midwestern and plains states that had graduation rates above the national average in 2011 have experienced below average rates of growth, as have nine other states that began with rates above 85 percent. These slowdowns should serve as a wake-up call to all states, even those within sight of 90 percent, that raising graduation rates will take a sustained, consistent effort.

Going down one step further, district-level patterns (of school districts with at least 1,300 students) provide greater understanding of how widespread graduation rate improvement is within each state and which school districts are having the most impact on state rates:

- In one set of states, including Florida, Georgia, and West Virginia, graduation rate improvement has been widespread, and few school districts saw no growth or backsliding.
- In a second set of states, including New Jersey and New Mexico, a subset of larger school districts that had substantial graduation rate gains have been able to offset lower rates of growth among the majority of school districts.
- A third set of states, including California, Oregon, Mississippi, and North Carolina saw 40 to 60 percent of school districts gain above the national rate of improvement, which helped counterbalance the substantial number of districts growing at much slower rates or sliding backwards.

These patterns prove that beneath state graduation rates, there are very different pictures of district growth that need to be addressed.

## PART II: Reaching a 90 Percent Graduation Rate for All Students

Raising rates for all students – particularly those who have long been underserved and who deal with the greatest challenges – and shining a light on the high schools that continue to lag behind and the graduation rate gaps that

remain continue to be major priorities. This is especially true now, as states have set graduation rate goals for all student subgroups (see Appendix P) and will begin to assist schools and districts identified as low performing. With accountability now moved into state hands, it will be more critical than before to closely monitor progress in reaching subgroup graduation rate goals and creating sustained improvements in the lowest-performing high schools, many of which educate high numbers of Black, Hispanic, and low-income students.

### Where We Stand: Black and Hispanic Students

**Black and Hispanic students continue to make graduation rate gains greater than the national average, but their overall graduation rates still fall below 80 percent. More states are increasing graduation rates for these students than ever before, but the gaps between them and white students still remain significant (11.9 percentage points between Black and white students and 9 percentage points between Hispanic and white students).** In five states – Wisconsin, Nevada, Minnesota, New York, and Ohio – the graduation rate gap between Black and white students is greater than 20 percentage points, and in two of those states – New York and Minnesota – the gap between Hispanic and white students is at least that large as well (21.2 and 21.7 percentage points, respectively). Together, Black and Hispanic students make up more than half of the nation’s four-year non-graduates, and both subgroups are greatly overrepresented in many states’ four-year non-graduates.

### Where We Stand: Low-Income Students

Just under half of the country’s 2016 cohort (47.6 percent), but more than two-thirds of the nation’s non-graduates, were low-income. This comes even as graduation rates for low-income students increased faster than the overall rate, yet still lingered at just 77.6 percent. The graduation gap between low-income and non-low-income students ranges from a high of 24 percentage points to a low of 2.8 percentage points. In five states, the gap between low-income students and non-low-income students is greater than 20 percentage points. In total, 39 states had gaps greater than 10 percentage points in 2016. **While gaps between low-income and non-low-income students have decreased in the majority of states over the past six years, 16 states have actually seen the graduation rate gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers increase.** Encouragingly, in almost four of every five states, the graduation rate for low-income students increased.

### Where We Stand: Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities continue to graduate at rates well below their peers. In 2016, just 65.5 percent of students receiving special education services graduated in four years – 21.1 percentage points behind general population students, and 26 states have graduation rate gaps between students with disabilities and general population students greater than the national average. Students with disabilities comprise significant proportions of the students not graduating on time in nearly every state, but this trend is most evident in several Northeastern and Southern states where they make up one-third or more of non-graduates. As states work to graduate more students with disabilities, they will need to grapple with issues around appropriately identifying them, providing them the services they need, and reducing or eliminating discriminatory policies and practices that disproportionately affect these students.

### Where We Stand: English Learners

English Learners (ELs) make up a small but growing group of students, and their graduation rates continue to languish near the bottom of all student subgroups. A handful of states – New Mexico, California, Colorado, and Hawaii – had significant concentrations of ELs among their four-year non-graduates.

### Where We Stand: Low-Performing High Schools

**In 2016, there were 2,425 high schools meeting the ESSA definition for a low-graduation-rate high school (enrolling 100 or more students, graduation rate of 67 percent or less), up from 2,249 in 2015.**

These schools represent 13 percent of all high schools and enroll approximately 7 percent of high school students. Low-graduation-rate high schools can primarily be found in urban and suburban areas, and within their student populations, Black, Hispanic, and low-income students are largely overrepresented. In four states – New Mexico, Alaska, Florida, and Arizona – one quarter or more of the state’s high schools graduate less than 67 percent of students. Within the report, low-graduation-rate high schools are also broken down by school type, paying particular attention to alternative and virtual schools that comprise a small percentage of all schools, but significant numbers of low-graduation rate schools and four-year non-graduates.

This year, analysis is also presented on the types of schools, including schools with graduation rates above 67 percent and even those that would otherwise be

considered a “high-graduation-rate” school, producing the greatest numbers of four-year non-graduates in each state to provide a road map for states on where the majority of their non-graduates can be found – and in some cases, where high graduation rates may be hiding them. For example, in Florida, only 4 percent of non-graduates are in low-graduation-rate high schools, while more than a quarter are in schools with graduation rates above 84 percent and 31 percent can be found in alternative schools. The various patterns of schools producing high numbers of four-year non-graduates across states show that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to graduating more students on time, and that even the highest performing high schools may be contributing to lower overall graduation rates.

## PART III: Examining the Connection between High School and Postsecondary

While high school graduation is an important on-track indicator for 18-year-olds, postsecondary education is an increasingly essential achievement on the path to adulthood. Recent data affirms that postsecondary education is increasingly important to secure a decent paying job.

**Thanks in part to efforts by the public and private sectors, postsecondary attainment is on the rise, yet the nation is off pace to reach its 60 percent postsecondary goal by 2025 and significant equity gaps remain:**

- Since 2008, the share of Americans ages 25 to 64 that hold a credential beyond high school has increased 9 percentage points to a record high of 46.9 percent;
- The gap between white and Black Americans age 25-64 with at least an associate degree was 16.4 percentage points; and
- The gap between white and Hispanic 25- to 64-year-olds was 24.5 percentage points (Lumina Foundation, A Stronger Nation Report 2018 using American Community Survey (ACS) data).

**Looking at recent high school completers who immediately enrolled in college, however, presents a considerably different story on subgroup gaps. The gaps between white and Black 16- to 24-year-olds who immediately enrolled in college stands at a 6.9 percentage points and is just 2.4 percentage points between white and Hispanic students (Census Bureau, 2016).**

We examine the potential causes for this gap to better understand why immediate enrollment rates of Black and Hispanic students are not yet translating equally into persistence and attainment rates.

Black and Hispanic students’ experiences with postsecondary education may in part stem from a lack of opportunity at the high school level:

- Black and Hispanic students have less access to high-level math (e.g. Calculus and Algebra II) and science (Chemistry and Physics) courses than their peers (U.S. Department of Education, Civil Rights Data Collection); and
- Black and Hispanic students are underrepresented in rigorous course programs, including in AP courses (College Board, 2018) and gifted and talented education (GATE) programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

While these issues of equity manifest themselves in districts and high schools, persisting into postsecondary education, it is unfair to place the onus squarely on their shoulders. Often times lack of opportunity at the high school level stems from a failure of states to appropriately provide support or requirements that are relevant for postsecondary attainment. This report explores ongoing efforts to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to attain a postsecondary degree or credential, including tracking the increasing number of states requiring students to take college admission exams in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. In order to reduce gaps, high schools and postsecondary institutions, as well as leaders at the community, state, and federal levels, must work together to broaden what it means to be a Grad Nation.

## Policy and Practice Recommendations

### Continue to improve graduation rate data reporting and collection.

The Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) is now in its sixth year, and though it is still considered to be the “gold standard” of graduation rate metrics with individual student identifiers, there are still ways it can be improved to guarantee the best data are available. Discrepancies in what is considered a “regular” diploma, how transfer students are taken into account, and how certain subgroups (e.g., students with disabilities, English learners, low-income) are identified within the cohort should be addressed. Having access to graduation rate data that can be disaggregated into more specific subgroups

(e.g., low-income Black students, Hispanic students with disabilities) and by gender would also provide greater insight into the students who do not graduate and what interventions might keep them on track.

### **Promote policies and practices that reduce harmful disparities.**

It is evident that Black, Hispanic, and low-income students are less likely to be on track to graduate on time and enroll in postsecondary education. Greater investments need to be made in these students and their schools starting in early education, and harmful, reactive disciplinary practices – particularly out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and law enforcement referrals – should be replaced with proactive practices and policies that keep students in school, accept personal responsibility for their actions, and work to address their underlying issues. States should also address funding inequities and ensure funds intended for targeted support and improvement are directed toward evidence-based programs and practices. The federal government should also continue to track racial, income, and ability disparities through the Office for Civil Rights and monitor state progress toward student subgroup graduation rate goals.

### **Align diplomas with college and career ready standards.**

Misalignment between what students need to graduate high school and what they need to be prepared for postsecondary hurts students, many of whom end up tracked into remediation courses. State leaders should establish diploma requirements aligned with state college and university admissions criteria, and schools and districts should ensure more students, especially those that are at the greatest disadvantage, earn a college and career ready diploma. Making a well-aligned college and career ready diploma the default diploma option can help ensure more students are on track to graduate prepared for postsecondary or career pathways.

### **Support schools and districts with comprehensive support and improvement plans.**

Districts with identified low-performing high schools must develop support and improvement plans. These plans must include evidence-based strategies and be approved and monitored by the state. States, with the help of researchers, should curate lists of evidence-based strategies and programs to assist districts in the development of these plans and connect schools

and districts to organizations and networks that can provide necessary and individualized technical assistance. School improvement will not happen without a strategic, sustainable approach, and schools, districts, and the communities they serve will need help determining the best course of action and implementing their plans.

### **Avoid and eliminate practices that lower the bar for students.**

Over the past decade, there has been a marked increase in the use of credit recovery courses and alternative programs to move off-track students toward their diploma. While some of these courses and programs may be useful for a small subset of students who have mitigating circumstances, many of them fail to provide a rigorous education and prepare students for life beyond high school. Many school districts across the country have become too reliant on credit recovery courses to graduate students, and while this often speaks to larger challenges faced by these school districts, credit recovery should be used as a last resort, not a first option. States, especially those with large numbers of alternative and virtual schools, also need to examine the quality of these schools and determine whether they are helping young people or simply offering meaningless credentials. And where these programs are having success, researchers and education leaders should do more to learn what works in engaging and graduating students who often face some of the greatest challenges.

### **Create state specific high school graduation plans.**

States should develop “Path to 90 Percent On-Time High School Graduation for All Plans” that analyze which districts, schools, and students within their state will need additional supports and/or guidance on implementing customized evidence-based approaches to enable all students to graduate, on-time, prepared for postsecondary success. Using data in this report, as well as available state-level data, states can more accurately capture where their biggest challenges remain above and beyond their low-performing and low-graduation-rate schools. Creating these plans can better ensure students do not fall through the cracks and districts and schools are better equipped to understand their needs and implement appropriate interventions.

### **Strengthen the transition from high school to postsecondary and careers.**

K-12 education leaders can ease the transition from high school to postsecondary and careers by creating

alignment between high school and college entry requirements, helping students understand their postsecondary options and the application process, and providing greater access to early college, career academies, and CTE coursework pathways. Postsecondary institutions should do more to support students—particularly first generation and low-income students—by working with high schools to offer remediation courses prior to high school graduation, considering eliminating or reducing the weight of test score-based admission requirements, developing more structured and strategic advising and engagement opportunities for students during the summer gap and school year, particularly in the critical freshman year, and

ensuring students have access to tutoring and other academic support. Employers can also help strengthen the transition between education and the workplace by increasing engagement with schools by providing internships and job shadowing to ground learning in real experiences and creating a more innovative last semester of high school where students can have the opportunity to have more practical, hands-on experiences. Federal policymakers can also contribute to creating stronger pathways between high school and postsecondary and careers by allowing high school students to use federal Pell Grants to pay for college courses taken in dual enrollment and early college programs.





