

# BUILDING A GRAD NATION:

Progress and Challenge in  
Raising High School Graduation Rates

*Featuring the Meeting the Moment Plan*

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# Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic and protests against systemic racism have shaken the nation in recent months. While the data presented in this report for the 2017–18 school year predated these crises, these events have further highlighted the glaring opportunity and achievement gaps in education for students of color and from various backgrounds. In addition to presenting an update to the nation on progress and challenge in increasing high school graduation rates on a path to postsecondary and workforce readiness, this report also addresses some of the gaps, barriers, and innovations seen across school systems to strengthen the nation's educational response to these crises and help prepare for those in the future. It also unveils a “Meeting the Moment” plan of action to reach national goals and to ensure that these moments of crisis are used to re-envision education and to leverage what is most important to boost academic and other outcomes for children and youth.

Since 2001, the nation has been committed to reaching a 90 percent high school graduation rate and the GradNation campaign has had a focused effort to reach that goal by the Class of 2020. Steady progress has been made toward this goal. After 30 years of stagnating graduation rates from the 1970s to the early 2000s, the country has seen 14 consecutive years of increasing graduation rates since 2004. In 2018, the nation once again reached an all-time high national graduation rate of 85.3 percent and 3.8 million more students have graduated rather than dropping out over the past 20 years.

Notably, gains in high school graduation rates have been driven by improvements among underserved students, with increases driven by Black students (12 percentage point increase since 2011), Hispanic students (10 percentage points), low-income students (9.5 percentage points), and students with disabilities (8.1 percentage points). These increases have all out-paced the national rate of increase of 6.3 percentage points and have persisted into

postsecondary education, with Hispanic and Black students more than doubling their enrollment rates, and low-income students enrolling at rates that match their middle-income peers.

Still, there is crucial work to be done. The nation is currently off-pace to reach its 90 percent high school graduation rate goal, which would have required graduating an additional 174,152 students on-time in 2018. Across the nation, there remain serious gaps in providing an equal education to all students. Most students attend high schools with a graduation rate already at 90 percent or higher, but a disproportionate number of four-year non-graduates remain trapped in a subset of schools where the graduation rate is less than half that rate at only 41.8 percent. Students who are low-income, Black, Hispanic, English Learners, American Indian, experiencing homelessness, and have disabilities are all overrepresented in these schools where less than half the class graduates from high school, calling into question equal opportunity for students, regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic background, or other factors.

Now, more than ever is the time to commit to meeting the moment on high school graduation and redoubling our efforts to prepare students for the rigors of postsecondary education, training, and work. As such, this report lays out an in-depth Meeting the Moment plan of action that targets the remaining non-graduates, identifies critical metrics to strengthen the school to work pipeline, and provides detailed data that will allow states, in a spirit of equity, to develop locally-tailored efforts to support their students' graduations, ready for college, work, and civic life. The report also includes best practices in improving high school graduation rates and strengthening the school-to-work pipeline, highlights ongoing issues with high school accountability, and presents recommendations for policy and practice.

## Part I: High School Graduation Trends Across the Nation

In 2018, the national graduation rate reached an all time high of 85.3 percent, up from 79 percent in 2011, when the Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) was first reported nationally and up from 71 percent in 2001 when the Averaged Freshmen Graduation Rate (AFGR) was used, which has closely tracked the ACGR since 2011. This marks a small increase from the 84.6 percent rate in 2017, with the nation remaining off track to reach the goal of a 90 percent graduation rate by the Class of 2020. Reaching the goal would have required graduating an additional 174,152 students across the nation on time—an achievable goal.

While annual growth has slowed, it is important to view this stagnation in the larger context of progress since 2011. Just eight years ago, no states had attained a 90 percent graduation rate, and by the 2018 graduating class, seven states had reached 90 percent. In 2011, only 9 states had graduation rates above 85 percent and by 2018, 29 states did. Encouragingly, there has been progress across all states, especially in those with the lowest graduation rates.

- Since 2011, the gap between the state with the highest graduation rate (Iowa) and that with the lowest (New Mexico) has closed from 26 percentage points to 17.5 percentage points.
- In 2011, 12 states had graduation rates below 75 percent, with 5 of those states having rates below 70 percent. By 2018, no states remained below 70 percent and all but one (New Mexico) had crossed the 75 percent graduation rate threshold.
- Of the nine states that had graduation rates above 85 percent in 2011 (Indiana, Iowa, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, and Wisconsin), only Iowa, Tennessee, and Texas had reached the 90 percent goal by 2018. None of the other four states have seen their graduation rate increase by more than 2.7 percentage points,

and one (Vermont) has experienced a decrease of 2.4 percentage points.

- The four other states that have reached the 90 percent graduation rate goal (Alabama, Kentucky, New Jersey, and West Virginia) saw their graduation rates increase by an average gain of 11 percentage points since 2011.<sup>1</sup>

While progress has slowed, the remaining work to reach a 90 percent graduation rate by the Class of 2020 is manageable. In 15 states, less than 1,000 additional students are needed to graduate on time to reach a 90 percent graduation rate. Yet, the challenge is more daunting elsewhere, as 5 states will each need to graduate more than 10,000 additional students.

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

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to identify schools for comprehensive support and improvement, and continue to set goals to ensure student subgroups are making progress over time. Since ESSA's enactment, Building A Grad Nation has reported on these goals and tracked states' progress in meeting them (see Appendices N and O), and will continue to do so in order to hold states accountable in reaching not only the national 90 percent graduation rate goal, but ensuring it is done with equity. In this section, the report also examines the percent of non-graduates in each state by subgroup. With the help of these data, states can zero in on where students lack the full opportunity to succeed and provide necessary supports tailored to the needs of local populations and schools, in order to attain a 90 percent graduation rate for all students.

### Where We Stand on Key Drivers Low-Income Students

In 2018, low-income students accounted for 49.1 percent of the country's graduating cohort, but 68.5 percent of students that failed to graduate from high school on time. Promisingly, the on-time graduation rate for low-income students has increased nearly 10 percentage points over the past 8 years, rising to an all-time high of 79.5 percent in 2018. This includes a 1.2 percentage point gain from 2017. Despite this progress, however, low-income students continue to graduate at far lower rates than their more affluent peers, with a graduation gap of 11.4

percentage points. The low-income graduation gap ranges widely from state to state, from a high in Minnesota of 22.7 percentage points to South Carolina, where low-income students actually graduate at a higher rate than their non-low-income peers. Progress for low-income students has primarily been driven by a diverse group of eight states, where graduation rates have increased by 15 or more percentage points since 2011 (Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, South Carolina, and West Virginia).

### Black and Hispanic Students

Progress in the national graduation rate continues to be driven mostly by increases for Black and Hispanic students across the country. From 2011 to 2018, Black and Hispanic students experienced graduation rate gains of 12 and 10 percentage points, respectively, which nearly doubles the rate of growth of white students and outpaces the national increase rate of 6.3 percentage points. Black and Hispanic students also saw graduation rates rise faster from 2017 to 2018 as well, with increases of 1.2 and 1.0 percentage points, respectively, edging out the national rate of 0.7 percentage points. Despite this progress, significant graduation rate gaps remain for both populations and they continue to comprise a disproportionate percentage of the nation's non-graduates. While Black students accounted for 15.7 percent of the graduating cohort compared to 22.4 percent of the nation's non-graduates, Hispanic students accounted for a quarter of the 2018 graduating cohort and comprised 32.3 percent of the nation's non-graduates.

### Students Experiencing Homelessness

Data from the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) show that over 1.5 million K–12 students were identified as experiencing homelessness during the 2017–18 school year. This marks an 11 percent increase over the previous year and an all-time high (National Center for Homeless Education, 2018). Part of this increase may be due to schools and districts doing a better job identifying homeless students, which is a positive trend. Students experiencing homelessness face academic challenges that go far beyond that of stably-housed, low-income students (Ingram, Bridgeland, Reed, and Atwell, 2016). Data from 49 states showed the graduation rates of students experiencing homelessness ranged from a low of

47 percent in Minnesota to a high of 87 percent in West Virginia. While NCHE did not provide a national average graduation rate, author calculations using cohort counts from 49 states plus the District of Columbia produce an estimated national graduation rate of 67.5 percent for students experiencing homelessness. Since most states are just beginning to disaggregate graduation rates by housing status, it is expected that further improvements will be made in calculating graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness.

### Students with Disabilities

For the first time in 6 years, the graduation rate for students with disabilities did not increase from 2017 to 2018, remaining at 67.1 percent nationally. A graduation rate gap of 20.7 percentage points between students with disabilities and their peers without special needs emphasizes the inequitable educational outcomes that they face. This gap varies across states, ranging from 5.2 percentage points in Arkansas and 8.3 in Kansas to 50.7 percentage points in Mississippi and 36.5 in Ohio. Students with disabilities make up an increasing percentage of students who fail to graduate on time. In 2017–18, the rate increased 1.8 percentage points to 27 percent, despite comprising only 12.1 percent of the total 2018 cohort.

### English Learners

The percentage of K–12 public school students in the United States that were English Learners (ELs) increased from 8.1 percent (3.8 million students) in the fall of 2000 to 9.6 percent (4.9 million students) in the fall 2016, representing an increase of more than one million students.<sup>2</sup> Encouragingly, after a slight decrease in 2016–17, English Learners' graduation rate increased 1.9 percentage points to 68.3 percent in 2017–18. Still, EL students have the third lowest graduation rate of any subgroup of their peers, slightly higher than students with disabilities and students experiencing homelessness. English Learners are not only becoming a larger part of the population, they are also disproportionately comprising more of the nation's non-graduates. In 2017–18, English Learners represented 14.9 percent of all students who failed to graduate in four years (a 1.2 percent increase from 2016–17), but comprised just 6.9 percent of the cohort.

### Low-Graduation-Rate High Schools

By 2018, there were 2,062 low-graduation-rate high schools (schools enrolling more than 100

1. Past questions have been raised about the validity of Alabama's graduation rate following an internal audit and U.S. Department of Education investigation that found the state's 2015 graduation rates had been improperly calculated, leading to an inflation of the reported rate.

2. NOTE: Data comparisons between the total number of ELs enrolled in public schools and the percentage of public schools students prior to the 2014–15 school year must be done with caution. Previously, this data only included students who participated in EL programming. Beginning in 2015, however, calculations were changed to include all EL students, regardless of program participation.



students with a graduation rate at or below 67 percent), down from 2,357 in 2017 and 2,425 in 2016. These schools accounted for 11 percent of all high schools and enrolled only 7 percent of the 2018 cohort, but educated approximately 28 percent of all four-year non-graduates. The overall graduation rate for students across all low-graduation-rate high schools was 41.8 percent.

Low-income, Black, and Hispanic students disproportionately attend low-graduation-rate high schools. While low-income students accounted for 44.5 percent of students nationwide, they comprised nearly 57 percent of the students in low-graduation-rate high schools. Similarly, Hispanic students were about one-fourth of all students in public high schools with 100 or more students in the 2017–18 school, but over 31 percent of students in low-graduation high schools. Black students were similarly over-represented, with 26.7 percent of students in such schools even though they represent only 15.2 percent of all students. Conversely, white students were just under 50 percent of high school students, but less than one-third of the students attending low-graduation-rate high schools. This report also breaks down low-graduation-rate high schools by alternative or regular high schools; district- or charter-operated; and virtual schools (see Table 14).

## Part III: Meeting the Moment Plan

A 'Meeting the Moment' plan was created to target the high schools where most of the non-graduates in America are found and ensuring states, districts, and schools are serious about on-time completion *with* systems that not only facilitate high school graduation, but also college and career readiness. For the first time, this report drills a level deeper, targeting exactly where the dropout challenge remains, the barriers to successful transitions to postsecondary education, and what can be done to reach the nation's goals with greater equity.

### Where the Dropout Challenge Remains

Most of the remaining non-graduates are highly concentrated:

- **The top 5 states with the highest number of non-graduates have 37 percent of the nation's non-graduates**, the top 10 states have 56 percent, and the top 20 have 77 percent.
- At the district level, **half of all on-time non-graduates are found in just 4 percent of school districts**, while at the school level, 28 percent of all non-graduates are found in low-graduation-

rate high schools with 100 or more students. These schools have a graduation rate of only 41.8 percent.

- The remaining non-graduates are spread widely across the country with one-third of them distributed across 35 states and 12,000 school districts.

The Meeting the Moment plan focuses on the smallest subset of states, districts, and high schools in which the 90 percent graduation rate goal could be realistically met if the number of non-graduates were cut in half.

- The Plan identifies **22 states for accelerated action—19 states with some of the highest numbers of non-graduates**, plus an **additional three states** with graduation rates below the national average.
- Distilling the data further, **half of the non-graduates in these states are found in just 452 school districts and 887 high schools**.

Zeroing in on the most concentrated areas in this way allows effective, evidence-based interventions to have the greatest leverage and improve outcomes for the most students.

### Every Diploma Counts: High School to College and Career Readiness

To ensure quality, the Meeting the Moment plan examines key indicators and outcomes across the targeted states to understand current successes, challenges, and where more work is needed to ensure that increasing high school graduation rates translates into college and career readiness. The metrics examined are: the Secondary School Improvement (SSI) Index developed in last year's *Building a Grad Nation* report and updated this year; college and career readiness indicators and graduation rate goals in state ESSA plans; state graduation rate goals; the use of Early Warning Systems (EWS); the extent to which a state's students are impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and poverty; the rate of youth disconnection from school and the workplace; and the alignment between requirements for high school graduation and college admissions in the targeted states.

- **The Secondary School Improvement (SSI) Index**—which measures progress on the percent of students scoring proficient in Reading and Mathematics on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) exams, the percent who score a 3 or higher on Advanced Placement (AP) tests, and the percent that graduate on time within four years—**shows that 14 of the 22 targeted**

**states made improvements of at least one percentage point across at least three of the four indicators, with six states improving on all four indicators.** Six of the remaining eight states increased on two of the four indicators, while just Arizona and Oklahoma struggled to improve more than one indicator.

- Reviewing state ESSA plans indicated that while there has been progress, a great deal of work remains to strengthen the relationship between high school, college, and career. **Most, but not all, of the 22 states targeted in the Meeting the Moment plan measure chronic absenteeism, advanced coursework, and career and technical education.** Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania do not measure advanced coursework, while Minnesota, Nevada, and Oregon do not measure career and technical education. Notably, **only three states measure the college enrollment of high school graduates**; eight states measure placement tests; two states measure 9<sup>th</sup> grade students who are on-track; and three states measure a well-rounded education.
- **Seventeen of the targeted 22 states have established a high school graduation rate goal of 90 percent or higher, but most of their timeframes extend beyond 2020**, with some even pushing past 2030.
- While some evidence of the existence of early warning indicator data can be found in nearly all of the targeted states, often times there is a gap between state systems' potential data use and schools effectively employing Early Warning Systems on the ground. Data from the U.S. Department of Education show that **only half of all high school principals report the existence of Early Warning Indicator data or systems in their schools** and those who report using them regularly is considerably less (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).
- **In 16 of the 22 targeted states, 20 percent of students under age 17 encounter 2 or more ACEs** and 13 out of the 22 have 20 percent or more of their students aged 5–17 living in poverty (Appendix S).
- In 2018, the most recent year available, **11.2 percent of all 16 to 24 year-olds in the United States were disconnected from both school and work.** In total, 11 of the 22 targeted states had rates of youth disconnection above the national average (Appendix T).
- **Remarkably, most of the targeted states, and most of all states, do not have alignment between what is required for high school**

**graduation and admission to the state's flagship university systems.** Only three states of the 22 examined have high school requirements for diplomas that match the college admissions requirements of state university systems, while one other state required the correct amount of credits in high school, but students are not required to choose this sequencing.

While the Meeting the Moment plan is focused on a subset of states, all states—including those close to reaching the 90 percent graduation rate threshold—must take this moment to redouble their efforts to ensure more students are graduating high school and doing so more equitably across student subgroups. This plan also examines 15 states beyond the 22 targeted states that have to graduate only 1,000 students or less to cross the 90 percent graduation rate goal.

## Policy and Practice Recommendations

### Align diploma requirements with college- and career-ready standards

Our analysis shows that graduating high school after completing the required courses for admission into a state's university system is a strong predictor of postsecondary success. It is alarming, however, that we found misalignment between high school graduation requirements and college admissions requirements of state university systems in nearly *all* states. It is critical for state leaders to certify that high school diploma requirements are aligned with state college and university systems' admissions criteria to ensure students on track to graduate do so prepared to enter postsecondary or career pathways. Schools and districts should cooperate to ensure more students, especially those from traditionally underserved populations, earn a college- and career-ready diploma.

### Create state-specific high school graduation plans

States should develop "Meeting the Moment" State Action Plans, that analyze which districts, schools, and student subgroups within the state need additional support to ensure students graduate on-time and college- and career-ready equitably. This can be done using data on the equity path to 90 for all states in this report (see Appendix H). These plans will allow states to identify students in need of critical interventions and help districts and schools be better equipped to implement effective interventions. The GradNation campaign will be

working with States on the Meeting the Moment Action Plans in the coming year.

### Monitor the impacts of COVID-19 to address education gaps exposed by the pandemic

The full impact of the COVID-19 crisis is still unfolding. Just as the country has organized comprehensive reviews to address the health and economic crises, the nation should also be conducting a review of the education system to address the many equity gaps that have been further exposed by COVID-19. Policymakers and practitioners must continue to closely monitor its impact on student learning, including access to the internet for virtual learning, supports for the added trauma for youth in the aftermath of the pandemic, access to college counseling, and postsecondary preparedness. In addition, it will be essential to tailor policies and practices to support the most vulnerable students as schools reopen in the Fall of 2020 or beyond, including, but not limited to, mental health and basic needs supports.

### Further examine credit recovery programs

Credit recovery has been a target of recent skepticism about high school graduation rate gaming. It is difficult to measure this, however, because few rigorous studies have been done on the quality and effectiveness of credit recovery courses. Without data, we cannot understand the impact of these programs. It is therefore essential that credit recovery is further examined to uncover what type of students enroll, how many courses are taken on average, the percentage of total credits earned by students from credit recovery courses, which courses are predominately taken as credit recovery, and the degree to which they are enabling students to learn course content and graduate with a legitimate diploma prepared to succeed in postsecondary education. Members of the GradNation campaign will be studying credit recovery more deeply in the coming year and will issue findings in a forthcoming report.

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

The transition from high school into postsecondary education and careers is challenging for students. Education leaders in K–12 can ease this transition by providing students with the resources they need to understand their postsecondary options, the application process, financial aid, and the course requirements for their chosen pathways. Leaders can also support students in other ways, such as

increased access to dual enrollment, early college career academies, and career and technical education coursework. Postsecondary institutions must support more students, especially first generation and low-income students, before they step onto campus and while they are enrolled. Additionally, it is critical to the increasing number of low-income students who attend postsecondary institutions that financial aid is navigable and substantial enough to cover basic needs like food and housing.

### Expand the Use of Early Warning Systems

Early Warning Systems are one of the most effective means districts can use to increase their graduation rates in their high schools. Research has identified attendance, behavior, and course performance—the "ABCs"—as powerful predictors of high school completion (Bruce et al., 2011). Course performance in Grade 9, in particular, was shown to correlate strongly with high school graduation (Allensworth and Easton 2005). The systematic use of early warning or on-track to graduation systems has been credited, for example, with the substantial rise in graduation and college readiness rates in Chicago, and throughout the State of West Virginia. Early Warning Systems provide teams of teachers, counselors, and nonprofit student support partners with real time data to signal which students (absent effective intervention) have high odds of not graduating, along with protocols and procedures to identify and implement interventions with the highest odds of success. This allows schools to target the right intervention at the right time to the right student.

Although the idea of Early Warning Systems has become widely disseminated, their effective implementation has not. Half the nation's high schools report they do not have access to early warning indicator data, and even fewer report effective use of early warning systems (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

### Expand Capacity of Evidence-Based Nonprofits

Schools cannot face the dropout challenge alone. For decades, community-based nonprofits have provided additional capacity to schools to support students and teachers, boost student achievement and graduation, and create stronger pathways from school to work. Public and private funding should flow to nonprofits that have the most capacity to meet the needs of schools and districts, and that have the strongest evidence of success increasing high school graduation rates and student achievement.