

Building a Grad Nation

Progress and Challenge
in Ending the High School
Dropout Epidemic

Executive Summary

Annual Update
February 2013

A Report by

Civic Enterprises

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

America's Promise Alliance

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Letter from General and Mrs. Powell

We know where to channel our efforts and can learn from increasing examples of success. We need to start early preparing our children for a lifetime of learning, and we need to help keep them on track until they reach the 'starting line' of success—graduating high school.

Our country is making real progress in building a Grad Nation, particularly in recent years. In spite of this progress, too many of our students do not finish high school with their class, especially disadvantaged students. And far too many of those who do graduate lack the skills for success in post-secondary education and the 21st century workforce.

So year after year, class after class, America is still needlessly losing too much of the talent and potential of our young people to the high school dropout epidemic. In other words, we have not yet fulfilled our promises to all of America's children—promises that include loving families and caring adults; schools filled with engaging teachers and effective leaders; communities that support all aspects of a child's growth and development; and opportunities for young people to serve.

Building a Grad Nation will take all of us working together in a full-scale mobilization on behalf of *all* children, not just those in our own families or neighborhoods. Fortunately, we don't have to reinvent the wheel. We know where to channel our efforts and can learn from increasing examples of success. We need to start early preparing our children for a lifetime of learning, and we need to help keep them on track until they reach the 'starting line' of success—graduating high school. We know reaching this goal takes more than schools; it also requires commitment and collaboration from families and communities and every sector of our society.

Building on the awareness and action generated at the 105 *Dropout Prevention* Summits that America's Promise Alliance convened with our partners in all 50 states, we have focused the Grad Nation Campaign on changing lives and futures in the places of greatest need: our lowest performing high schools, which account for nearly half of all the young people who drop out. We have accelerated the use of and response to good data, and embraced a research-based Civic Marshall Plan of action with 10 planks that guide and measure the nation's progress. Partners, communities, and institutions across the country are aligning with the campaign to raise high school graduation rates, refocusing resources on what works so they can build the foundations for success that young people deserve. Like never before, we are working together in hands-on collaborations that involve educators, policymakers, business and civic leaders, young people, parents, nonprofits, and media. It is this spirit of collaboration that was the vision set forth at the Presidents' Summit for America's Future, which gave rise to America's Promise Alliance nearly 16 years ago.

This is a campaign we can win. We have seen tremendous energy, commitment, and results—but we also know that we must do much more. Given the stakes to our young people, communities, economy, and nation, we have no choice but to win. With your help, we will be a Grad Nation, and ensure our future as a great nation.



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



Alma J. Powell
Chair, America's Promise Alliance

Executive Summary

This fourth annual update on America’s high school dropout crisis shows that for the first time the nation is on track to meet the goal of a 90 percent high school graduation rate by the Class of 2020—if the pace of improvement from 2006 to 2010 is sustained over the next 10 years. The greatest gains have occurred for the students of color and low-income students most affected by the dropout crisis. Many schools, districts and states are making significant gains in boosting high school graduation rates and putting more students on a path to college and a successful career. This progress is often the result of having better data, an understanding of why and where students drop out, a heightened awareness of the consequences to individuals and the economy, a greater understanding of effective reforms and interventions, and real-world examples of progress and collaboration. These factors have contributed to a wider understanding that the dropout crisis is solvable.

The national high school graduation rate is increasing at an accelerated pace and, for the first time, puts the nation on a path to reach the 90 percent goal by the Class of 2020.

While progress is encouraging, a deeper look at the data reveals that gains in graduation rates and declines in dropout factory high schools occurred unevenly across states and subgroups of students (e.g. economically disadvantaged, African American, Hispanic, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency). As a result, large “graduation gaps” remain in many states among students of different races, ethnicities, family incomes, disabilities and limited English proficiencies. To repeat the growth in graduation rates in the next ten years experienced in the second half of the last decade, and to ensure progress for all students, the nation must turn its attention to closing the graduation gap by accelerating progress for student subgroups most affected by the dropout crisis.

This report outlines the progress made and the challenges that remain. **Part 1: The Data** analyzes the latest graduation rates and “dropout factory” trends at the state and national levels. **Part 2: Progress and Challenge** provides an update on the nation’s shared efforts to implement the Civic Marshall Plan to reach the goal of at least a 90 percent high school graduation rate for the Class of 2020 and all classes that follow. **Part 3: Paths Forward** offers recommendations on how to accelerate our work and achieve our goals, with all students prepared for college and career. The report also offers “snapshots” within schools, communities, and organizations from Orlando to Oakland that are making substantial gains in boosting high school graduation rates.

Part 1: Graduation Rate Data and Dropout Factory Trends

With better data and a coordinated approach, the nation is increasingly targeting efforts to stem the dropout tide by understanding who dropouts are, why they leave school, which schools are responsible for the most dropouts, and what research and real-world examples teach us about how to keep more students on track. In total, the 2010 and 2011 data, including trends, indicate that this strategy is having an effect.

- **The national high school graduation rate is increasing at an accelerated pace and, for the first time, puts the nation on a path to reach the 90 percent goal by the Class of 2020. The graduation rate, as measured by the Averaged Freshman**



Two states have a 90 percent high school graduation rate. Eighteen states are on pace to reach this goal by 2020. Seven states need to further accelerate their progress to reach this goal, and 23 states are off-pace.

More than 200,000 additional students received diplomas in 2010 than in 2006.

Graduation Rate (AFGR), increased from 71.7 percent in 2001 to 78.2 percent in 2010. The greatest gains in high school graduation rates occurred since 2006, with the national graduation rate increasing 5 percentage points over four years. **Two states—Wisconsin and Vermont—have met the 90 percent high school graduation rate goal. If this average rate of improvement of 1.25 percentage points per year from 2006 to 2010 is maintained during the second decade of this century, the nation will reach its graduation rate goal by 2020.** Students who graduated in 2010 entered high school in 2006 when efforts to reform the large, low-performing high schools that produced a disproportionate share of the nation’s dropouts were spreading and intensifying and a more targeted approach to addressing the dropout challenge was emerging. Equally significant, the improvements between 2006 and 2010 were driven largely by a 10.4 percentage point increase in the graduation rate of Hispanic students and a 6.9 percentage point increase among African American students.

- **There were 583 fewer dropout factories and 1.1 million fewer students attending them in 2011 than in 2002.** From 2009 to 2011, the number of dropout factories fell from 1,634 to 1,424, down from a high of 2,007 in 2002. The rate of decline in the number of dropout factories and the number of students attending them was significantly faster between 2008 and 2011 than between 2002 and 2008. **The percentage of African American students attending dropout factory high schools has declined from nearly 50 percent in 2002 to 25 percent in 2011; for Hispanic students, the rate declined from 39 percent in 2002 to 17 percent in 2011.**

- **The Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates confirm progress.** Forty-seven states have reported the new adjusted four-year cohort graduation rate (the Cohort Rate). **Twenty-four states are at or above 80 percent.** Thirty-five states have a graduation rate of 76 percent or higher. **Twelve states have rates at or below 75 percent,** and three states—Idaho, Kentucky and Oklahoma—have yet to report graduation rates under the Cohort Rate.
- **Significant “graduation gaps” impede progress, as graduation rates among states are uneven for students of different races, ethnicities, family incomes, disabilities and with limited English proficiency.** Although there has been progress in boosting graduation rates for Hispanic and African American students in recent years, the four-year graduation rate is still 66 percent or less for African American students in 20 states and for Hispanic students in 16 states. For students from low-income families, graduation rates are at 66 percent or less in 18 states. For students with disabilities, graduation rates are below, often shockingly below, 66 percent in 30 states, and the same is true for limited English proficient students in 33 states. By contrast, there are no states in which the graduation rate for white students is below 66 percent and only four states in which it is 75 percent or less. Moreover, there are eleven states in which the graduation rate for white students is 89 percent or higher, but no state where this is true for African American, Hispanic, or economically disadvantaged students.



PART 2: PROGRESS AND CHALLENGE—The Civic Marshall Plan to Build a Grad Nation

A coalition of leading U.S. organizations has been working to heighten awareness of the dropout epidemic, identify the schools from which students disproportionately drop out, host summits to

build awareness and prompt action, and support reforms and interventions that research shows are effective. This coalition developed a Civic Marshall Plan (CMP) that adopts a cohort approach that identifies and supports over time the students from the Class of 2020 (today's current fifth-graders), targets the lowest-performing schools, and builds a research-based plan to prompt those institutional changes that will ensure more students graduate prepared for the future. The 2012 *Building a Grad Nation* report provided comprehensive updates on the CMP.¹ This year, we provide updates only in areas with significant improvements from the previous year.

Principle: Strategic Focus on and Accountability for Graduation Rates

While progress has been made in collecting and reporting more accurate graduation rate data and setting targets for progress, kinks in calculation methods and the underlying definitions must be addressed to ensure better measurement *and* real accountability.

- Forty-seven states and the District of Columbia are reporting graduation rates using a common measure—the Cohort Rate the U.S. Department of Education required beginning in the 2010-11 school year.**² Under the Cohort Rate, students receive an individual student identifier, so that student progress can be accurately known, not estimated. The Cohort Rate calculates how many students start ninth grade and finish four years later, accounting for transfers in and out of schools in a state with documentation. States are required to differentiate among students who take four, five, and six years to graduate from high school, as well as count “regular” diplomas rather than certificates of completion and GEDs. Across most states, implementation of the Cohort Rate is proceeding well, but continued scrutiny and a commitment to common definitions will be required to reach the full apples-to-apples comparison potential of the Cohort Rate.
- No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Flexibility Waivers to States change the landscape, and close monitoring will be required to insure graduation rate accountability is not undermined.** As a result of the failure to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), the U.S. Department of Education (ED) responded to requests from states to create flexibility through waivers from some provisions of federal law. With waivers in place, the key now is effective monitoring to help ensure states follow the intent of the waivers to allow innovation while keeping a focus on improving outcomes, including graduation rates, for disadvantaged students.

Principle: High Expectations—the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) signal tremendous progress in the American education system.

Nearly every state has adopted CCSS.³ The standards represent a critical step toward ensuring the national high school graduation rate goal has meaning in preparing students for college and career and in providing equality of opportunity in all areas of the country.



The shift to higher expectations may mean that students who are already off-track, or at risk of becoming off-track, may have further to go to get back on track.

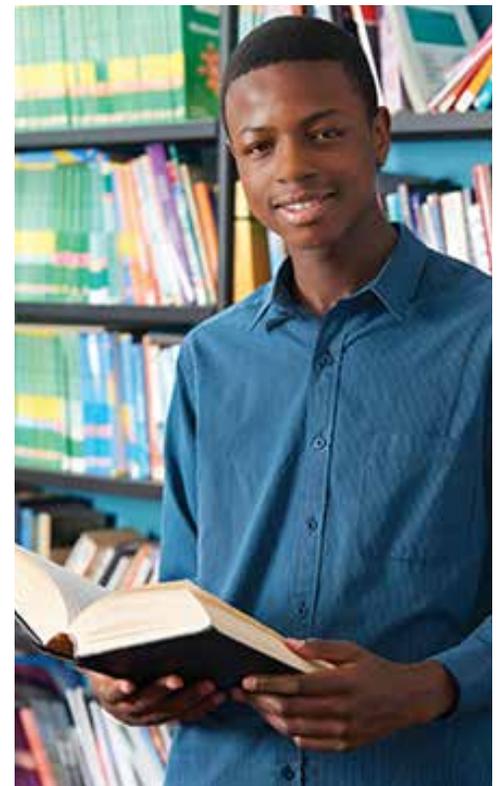
Research shows proficient reading by the end of third grade is an important predictor of school success and high school graduation.

- **Implementation challenges loom for CCSS.** The shift to higher expectations may mean that students who are already off-track, or at risk of becoming off-track, may have further to go to get back on track. Raising standards without also providing new school designs and additional supports could mean fewer graduates. At the same time, many of the school districts making significant gains in high school graduation rates have risen to a standard of excellence, giving more students access to a college-prep sequence and AP courses, early college high schools, dual enrollment, and alternative pathways to a college credential with value in the labor market.

Principle: Thoughtful Collaboration—The Planks of the Civic Marshall Plan

The Civic Marshall Plan (CMP) focuses on using evidenced-based strategies to address the dropout crisis and engages leading organizations from across sectors to align their efforts with the CMP (see Appendix J for a full list of the CMP Leadership Council). The planks that have been most significantly advanced in the previous year are:

- **Plank 1: Grade-Level Reading.** Research shows proficient reading by the end of third grade is an important predictor of school success and high school graduation. In the past year, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading Network—represented in 34 states and 350 school districts—has made tremendous efforts in this area. In addition to improving instructional approaches, each of the communities has developed an action plan to address challenges beyond the schoolyard that keep low-income students from learning to read well.
- **Plank 2: Chronic Absenteeism.** Research shows that chronic absence is an early warning indicator of potential dropout and affects a student's ability to master reading, pass courses and gain credits. Efforts to combat chronic absenteeism gained considerable traction in the past year with a new report estimating that five million to 7.5 million students are chronically absent and highlighting the failure of school districts and schools to track the chronic absence of individual students. Successful strategies led by mayors and superintendents, combined with the increased availability of on-line tools and resources, are helping to raise awareness of the impact of chronic absenteeism and driving action to address it. In September 2012, Attendance Works and The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading requested that superintendents make attendance a top priority, mobilize the community around reducing chronic absence, and use data to identify students and schools in need of extra support.
- **Plank 3: Early Warning Indicator and Intervention Systems (EWS).** Over the past decade, schools, districts, and states have become increasingly savvy with data collection and analysis, including the use of early warning indicator and intervention systems. Recently, Race to the Top has driven states to improve the quality of their data systems and their use in driving policy and practice. To accelerate use of early



warning indicators and intervention systems, the George W. Bush Institute plans to host a series of Early Warning System Summits to accelerate the adoption and use of high-quality systems and interventions. These summits, beginning in October 2013, will highlight related research and evidence-based practices from around the country and then help leaders from states, districts, schools, and nonprofits build and utilize such systems.

- Plank 4: The Middle Grades; Plank 6: Adult and Peer Supports.**⁴ Plank 4 of the Civic Marshall Plan, redesign the middle grades to foster high student engagement, and Plank 6, provide transition support for struggling students in grades 8-10, are being addressed by the George W. Bush Institute and national organizations with networks that serve more than two million middle-school youth. To accelerate use of evidence-based interventions to keep students on the path to high school graduation in the middle grades, the George W. Bush Institute's Middle School Matters, the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk and partners are delivering a set of research-based online tools for schools and districts. In addition, 20 youth-serving networks and national out-of-school time (OST) intermediaries are working to strengthen the learning experiences of and support provided to middle-school youth outside of school hours by boosting the competencies of OST program professionals, volunteers, and mentors.
- Plank 9: Pathways to College and Career.** There are 29 million middle skill jobs requiring sub-baccalaureate degrees.⁵ In the past year, national leaders have re-envisioned career and technical education (CTE) as a prestigious, enterprising pathway for more students. For example, Opportunity Nation released a national plan of action with input from partners in their network of 250 organizations actively engaged in connecting more young adults to school and career. The Obama Administration developed a blueprint to reauthorize the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, the federal government's primary investment in CTE. High-quality CTE programs of study, aligned with academic as well as technical workplace standards, have the potential to reduce high school dropout rates as students see the relevance of what they are learning to potential careers. CTE will also reduce remedial education and training costs for post-secondary institutions and employers as more qualified entrants appear. At the same time, CTE will help the nation close the skills gap and place more American's in available jobs.
- Plank 10: Dropout Recovery.** In recent years, increased efforts have emerged to reengage the 6.7 million 16-to-24-year-olds who are disconnected from school or work, about half of whom are high school dropouts. The White House Council for Community Solutions listened to the perspectives of "opportunity youth," commissioned research to understand the economic costs of their disconnection, highlighted successful community models, produced an employer toolkit to help reconnect them, and issued a set of recommendations for the Obama Administration. The Aspen Forum on Community Solutions and its Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, Opportunity Nation, YouthBuild, Forum for Youth Investment, Jobs for the Future, Year Up, National Youth Council, and Hope Street Group, together with many other organizations, are working together to reconnect opportunity youth to school and work.



In the past year, national leaders have re-envisioned career and technical education (CTE) as a prestigious, enterprising pathway for more students.

For reporting and accountability purposes, the Cohort Rate should be used. For reporting purposes, the Department of Education should also continue to collect AFGR, as it allows for longitudinal analysis.

Part 3: Paths Forward

Supplementing the comprehensive recommendations from previous years, we provide recommendations related to the core elements of this year's report: graduation rate reporting and accountability, the "graduation gap," and the Civic Marshall Plan.

- **Continue to Strengthen and Align Graduation Rate Reporting and Accountability.**

The Cohort Rate should continue to be used for reporting and accountability purposes at the school, district, state, and federal levels. Rates of graduation in four, five, and six years should be calculated and reported separately, for both reporting and accountability purposes, with an emphasis on graduating students from high school within four years, college- and career-ready. States and the U.S. Department of Education should reach consensus on key issues that remain critical to true comparisons and informed policy decisions across school districts and states, including common definitions of: what is a "regular diploma"; how this applies to all students, including students with disabilities; who is a ninth grader; how to document and count transfers to other degree-granting institutions; how to code and count undocumented transfers out of state and the country; and how to account for home schooling to ensure consistent and accurate state graduation rates. For reporting purposes, the Department of Education should also continue to collect AFGR, as it allows for longitudinal analysis. Additionally, schools, districts, states, and the U.S. Department of Education should work to ensure that graduation rate data are available to the public quickly and transparently. The data on state-level graduation gaps, across

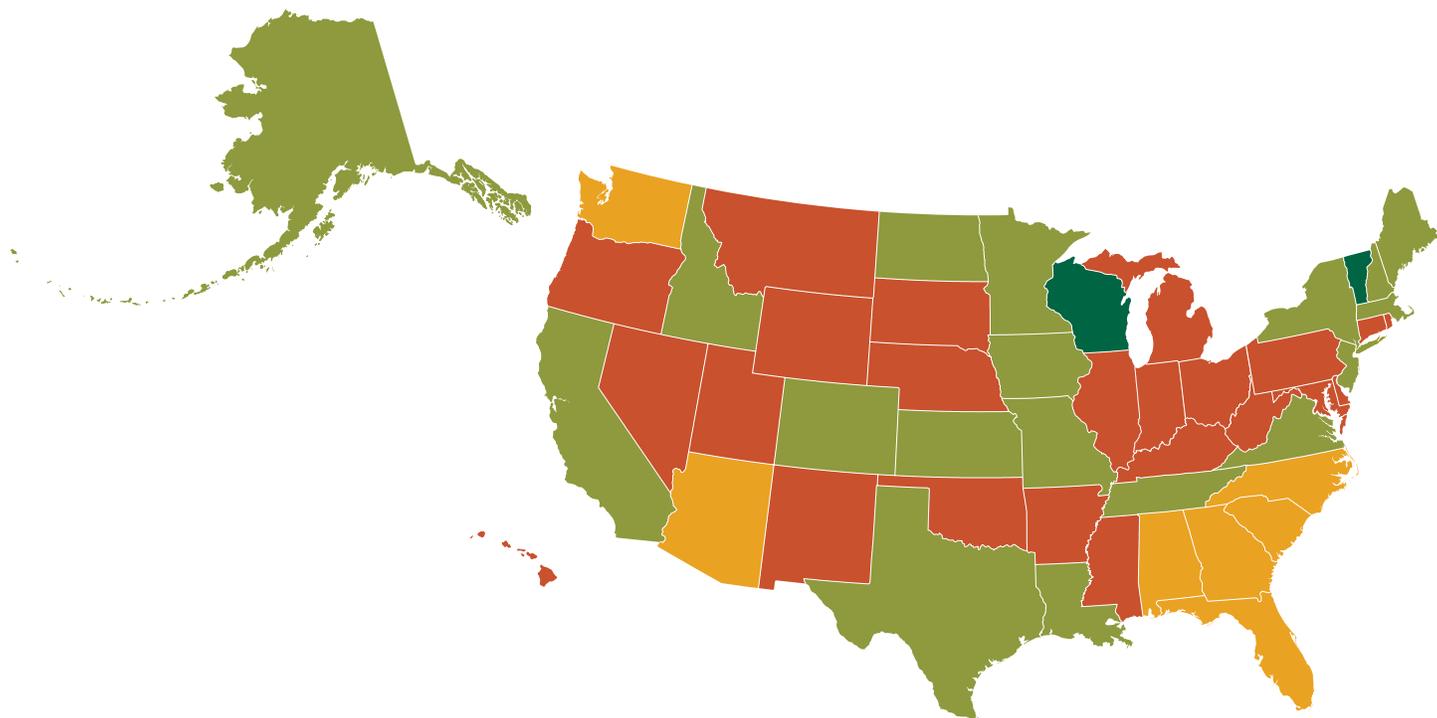
sub-groups, including students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency, as well as the data on the extent to which graduation gaps for African American and Hispanic students were closed across states during the NCLB era, show that strong accountability for closing graduation gaps will be required for the nation to reach a 90 percent graduation rate. Lastly, the extent to which graduation rate improvement is sufficiently encouraged in state accountability systems in waiver states needs to be closely watched.

- **Expand efforts to close the "graduation gap" among students of different races, ethnicities, income levels, disabilities and language proficiencies.** Data show that the nation must close the graduation gap in order to reach the Grad Nation goal and strengthen its commitment to equality of opportunity. Practitioners and policymakers must redouble their efforts to target policy, evidence-based interventions, and additional resources to enable low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and limited English proficiency students to graduate at rates equal to more advantaged students. Just as the nation has focused its attention on boosting high school graduation rates in low-performing schools, we need additional efforts to help students within all schools who need greater support.

- **Stay the course of the Civic Marshall Plan to Build a Grad Nation.** The Civic Marshall Plan includes ten research-based planks to guide the work to reach the 90 percent high school graduation goal by 2020. Since the founding of the Grad Nation Campaign, organizations representing policymakers, educators, nonprofits, foundations, businesses, communities, and the media have been mobilizing their resources and people around this plan, driving action and results in schools and communities. Policymakers and practitioners should continue to expand what works and foster significant institutional alignment with the Civic Marshall Plan. The full report also offers detailed recommendations on the ten planks of the Civic Marshall Plan.



Are States on Pace to Reach 90% Graduation Rate Goal by 2020?



At 90%

Vermont Wisconsin

On Pace: States are on pace to reach 90%, if they can keep up their rate of gain over the past four years

Alaska	Idaho	Louisiana	Minnesota	New Jersey	Tennessee
California	Iowa	Maine	Missouri	New York	Texas
Colorado	Kansas	Massachusetts	New Hampshire	North Dakota	Virginia

Further Accelerate: States are improving, but need to accelerate progress to reach 90%

Alabama	Florida	North Carolina	Washington
Arizona	Georgia	South Carolina	

Off Pace: States are off pace to reach 90% at their current rate of growth

Arkansas	Illinois	Michigan	Nevada	Oregon	Utah
Connecticut	Indiana	Mississippi	New Mexico	Pennsylvania	West Virginia
Delaware	Kentucky	Montana	Ohio	Rhode Island	Wyoming
Hawaii	Maryland	Nebraska	Oklahoma	South Dakota	

Progress is measured by change in Averaged Freshman Graduation Rates (AFGR) from 2006-2010.

States were defined as on pace if their AFGR average annual rate of growth between 2006 and 2010 was greater than or equal to the average rate of growth necessary to reach a 90 percent AFGR by 2020. States were defined as needing to further accelerate their improvement if their AFGR average annual rate of growth between 2006 and 2010 was at least one percentage point, but because of a low baseline AFGR, their rate of growth was not great enough to reach 90 percent by 2020. States were defined as off pace if their AFGR average annual rate of growth between 2006 and 2010 was less than one percentage point and less than the rate needed to reach 90 percent by 2020.

Source: Stillwell, R., and Sable, J. (2013). Public School Graduates and Dropouts from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2009–10: First Look (Provisional Data) (NCES 2013-309). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Are States on Pace to Reach 90% Graduation Rate Goal by 2020?

State	Average Annual Growth in AFGR, 2006-2010 (% Point)	2010 AFGR (%)
Nation	1.25	78.2
Tennessee	2.45	80.4
Louisiana	2.33	68.8
Vermont	2.28	91.4
Alaska	2.25	75.5
California	2.25	78.2
New York	2.15	76.0
South Carolina ⁱ	2.03	68.2
Georgia	1.88	69.9
Florida	1.80	70.8
Kansas	1.73	84.5
Virginia	1.68	81.2
Maine	1.63	82.8
Texas	1.61	78.9
North Dakota	1.58	88.4
Alabama	1.41	71.8
New Hampshire	1.30	86.3
North Carolina	1.28	76.9
Colorado	1.08	79.8
Washington	1.08	77.2
Arizona	1.05	74.7
Indiana	0.97	77.2
Michigan	0.93	75.9
Wisconsin	0.91	91.1
Wyoming	0.90	80.3

State	Average Annual Growth in AFGR, 2006-2010 (% Point)	2010 AFGR (%)
Idaho	0.88	84.0
Oregon	0.82	76.3
Massachusetts	0.78	82.6
Kentucky	0.68	79.9
Missouri	0.68	83.7
New Jersey	0.60	87.2
Maryland	0.57	82.2
Illinois	0.55	81.9
Ohio	0.55	81.4
Minnesota	0.50	88.2
Nevada	0.50	57.8
Pennsylvania ⁱ	0.40	84.1
West Virginia	0.35	78.3
Iowa	0.25	87.9
Oklahoma	0.18	78.5
Mississippi	0.07	63.8
New Mexico	0.01	67.3
Montana	0.00	81.9
Utah	0.00	78.6
Hawaii	-0.02	75.4
Delaware	-0.20	75.5
Rhode Island	-0.35	76.4
South Dakota	-0.68	81.8
Nebraska	-0.80	83.8
Arkansas	-1.35	75.0
Connecticut	-1.68	75.1

AFGR is the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate.

ⁱ No 2006 AFGR, used 2005 AFGR

Source: Stillwell, R., and Sable, J. (2013). Public School Graduates and Dropouts from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2009–10: First Look (Provisional Data) (NCES 2013-309). U.S. Department of Education.

Endnotes

- Balfanz, R, Bridgeland, J, Bruce, M, & Fox, J.H. (2012). *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic - 2012 Annual Update*. Washington, D.C.: America's Promise Alliance, Alliance for Excellent Education, Civic Enterprises, & Everyone Graduates Center. Retrieved from http://www.civicerprises.net/MediaLibrary/Docs/Building-A-Grad-Nation-Report-2012_Full_v1.pdf.
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About Civic Enterprises

Civic Enterprises is a public policy firm that helps corporations, nonprofits, foundations, universities, and governments develop and spearhead innovative public policies to strengthen our communities and country. Created to enlist the private, public, and nonprofit sectors to help address our nation's toughest problems, Civic Enterprises fashions new initiatives and strategies that achieve measurable results in the fields of education, civic engagement, economic mobility, and many other domestic policy issues. For information about Civic Enterprises, please visit www.civicerprises.net

About The Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University

The Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University seeks to identify the barriers that stand in the way of all students graduating from high school prepared for adult success, to develop strategic solutions to overcome the barriers, and to build local capacity to implement and sustain them. For more information, please visit www.every1graduates.org

About America's Promise Alliance

America's Promise Alliance is the nation's largest partnership organization dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth. We bring together more than 400 national organizations representing nonprofit groups, businesses, communities, educators and policymakers. Through our Grad Nation campaign, we mobilize Americans to end the high school dropout crisis and prepare young people for college and the 21st century workforce. Building on the legacy of our Founding Chairman General Colin Powell, America's Promise believes the success of young people is grounded in Five Promises: caring adults; safe places; a healthy start; an effective education; and opportunities to help others. For more information, visit www.americaspromise.org

About The Alliance for Excellent Education

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a Washington, D.C.-based national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. For more information about the Alliance for Excellent Education, please visit www.all4ed.org

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