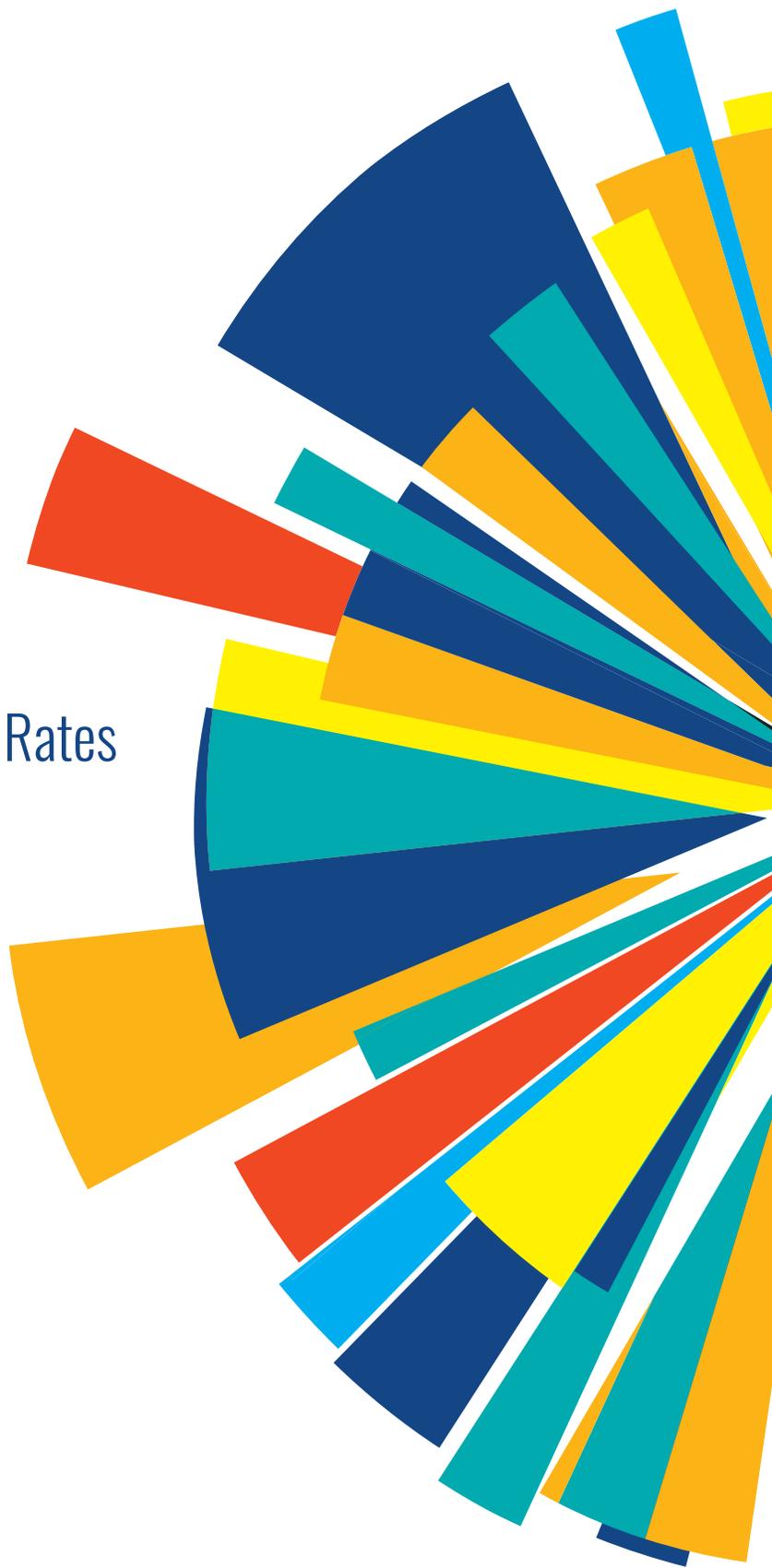


Building a Grad Nation:

Progress and Challenge in
Raising High School Graduation Rates
Annual Update 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Executive Summary

This year's annual update to the nation includes three new features. The first is a **Secondary School Improvement Index** to assess whether gains in high school graduation rates nationally and by state are translating into better preparation for postsecondary education. **Sixty-eight percent of states have been able to improve both their graduation rates and at least two other measures of academic success of their secondary schools, while nearly one-third have not.** The second feature is a focus on homeless students with graduation rate data available for the first time from 26 states, together with a national graduation rate released by the National Center for Homeless Education, **signaling that homeless students may be the subgroup with the lowest graduation rates in the nation.** The third new component highlights indicators of postsecondary success and provides snapshots of **innovations in the school-to-work pipeline** as the nation works to prepare more Americans for the increasing demands of the workplace.

This year's report also continues to keep the nation's attention on the progress and challenge across the nation and by state in raising high school graduation rates, a critical on-track indicator for young people as they enter adulthood. The graduation rate has continued its rise from 79 percent in 2011 to an all-time high of 84.6 percent in 2017 under the Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), and from 71 percent since 2001 based on the best available estimate that has tracked the ACGR very closely. This progress means that **more than 3.5 million additional students have graduated instead of dropping out over the last decade and a half.**

Encouragingly, Hispanic, Black, and low-income students continue to drive increasing graduation rates, with **Hispanic students being the first among them to reach an 80 percent graduation rate in 2017**, up from 71 percent in 2011. Graduation rates during this period climbed from 67 percent to 77.8 percent for Black students, 70 percent to 78.3 percent for low-income students, and 59 percent to 67.1 percent for students with disabilities.

Notwithstanding this progress, however, **the nation is off pace to reaching its 90 percent high school graduation rate goal and needs to more than double its annual rate of progress since 2011. Reaching the 90 percent goal would have required graduating an additional 199,466 students on time across the nation in 2017.** What's more, to achieve an equitable path to 90 percent, the majority

of these additional students would need to be students of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities.

Students continue to live in two educational nations. **Most students attend high schools with a graduation rate already at 90 percent, while other students remain trapped in a subset of high schools where the average graduation rate for students is only 40 percent.** This report looks at these issues of equity in-depth—both the subgroups of students that disproportionately fail to graduate on time, as well as the types of schools where these students are educated. There were 2,357 low-graduation-rate high schools in 2017, down from 2,425 in 2016. These low-graduation-rate high schools accounted for 12.5 percent of all public high schools enrolling 100 or more students that reported ACGR in 2017, enroll about 6.5 percent of all students, and educate approximately 31 percent of all four-year non-graduates. The vast majority of these schools have been identified for reform.

We conclude with a list 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 ensure they are better prepared for postsecondary education in an economy that increasingly demands it. The report also includes a deep analysis of state-by-state data in the appendices.

► Part I: High School Graduation Trends Across the Nation

The nation continues to see steady, but slowing, growth in graduation rates and remains off-pace to reach the 90 percent goal, which would require graduating an additional 199,466 more students on time and more than doubling the annual rate of gain since 2011 through 2020.

In 2011, no state had reached a 90 percent graduation rate and only nine had graduation rates above 85 percent. By 2017, two states were already at the national goal of 90 percent and 25 additional states had surpassed 85 percent.

- In 2011, 15 states had graduation rates below 75 percent but by 2017, all but one of those states had crossed the 75 percent graduation rate threshold.
- Of the 15 states that had the lowest graduation rates in 2011, five have seen their graduation rate increase by more than 10 percentage points, helping to close the gap between lowest- and highest-

performing states in the nation and serving as a challenge: If some states can make such significant gains, others can too.

- Despite the challenges of closing the last remaining gaps, reaching the 90 percent goal by 2020 in fact comes down to highly achievable numbers at the state level, **as 17 states need to graduate fewer than 1,000 additional students on time to reach a 90 percent rate, while some larger states have to graduate an additional 10,000 students.**

The progress of high-poverty states like Georgia and West Virginia, which have seen their graduation rates increase by more than 10 percentage points since 2011, shows that, even in the face of challenges, boosting high school graduation rates is possible, even as some states struggle to do so.

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

As accountability is transitioned back into the purview of states under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), it is important to closely monitor states' progress in reaching their ESSA subgroup graduation rate goals (see Appendix O) and in driving sustained improvements in the schools attended by their student populations with the lowest graduation rates. By keeping a spotlight on progress, these goals have the ability to continue to play a crucial role in creating more equitable outcomes for all students. Under ESSA, states are also required to identify their lowest-performing high schools for comprehensive improvement, many of which educate disproportionate numbers of Black, Hispanic, and low-income students, and to generate plans to improve them.

Where We Stand on Key Drivers Low-Income Students

Low-income students made up 47.2 percent of the nation's graduating cohort in 2017, but nearly two-thirds of the nation's four-year non-graduates with an average graduation rate of 78.3 percent. The graduation rate gap between low-income and non-low-income students ranges from a high of 24.5 percentage points in Wyoming, to a low of -2.7 percentage points in South Carolina. While the majority of states have seen their graduation gaps between low-income and non-low-income decline, 13 states have actually seen this gap increase. **Fifteen states are driving progress for low-income students, with gains of 10 percentage points or more in the last seven years.**

Black and Hispanic Students

Both Black and Hispanic students continue to make gains greater than the national average. **While Black students have had a double-digit gain since 2011 in their graduation rates, even higher than Hispanic students, Hispanic students became the third major subgroup, after white and Asian students, to reach the 80 percent mark.** Yet, while these students continue to drive gains in the national graduation rate, gaps remain considerable (10.8 percentage points between Black and white students; and 8.6 percentage points between Hispanic and white students).

Moreover, these students continue to disproportionately fall off track to graduate on time. While Black students made up 15.6 percent of the 2016–17 cohort, they comprised 22.5 percent of the nation’s non-graduates. Hispanic students were similarly overrepresented, amounting to 23.4 percent of the cohort but 30.4 percent of non-graduates.

Homeless Students

Homeless students face barriers to graduation above and beyond poverty alone, and newly collected graduation rate data reflects the challenges of keeping this demographic in school and on track, highlighting that they may have the lowest graduation rates in the nation of any subgroup. Under the ESSA, all states will be required to submit disaggregated graduation rates for homeless students for the 2017–18 school year. This year, 44 states shared 2016–17 data voluntarily with the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE). NCHE used the submitted state data to calculate a **national average graduation rate of 64 percent for homeless students**, as compared to the low-income rate of 78.3 percent, and 84.6 percent for all students. In addition, 26 states shared their graduation rate data for homeless students with our **Education Leads Home** campaign, which we provide for the first time in this report.

- **Twenty states have rates below 70 percent for homeless students, and nine among that group have rates below 60 percent. Minnesota has the lowest rate, at 45.4 percent.**
- One state (Delaware) has a graduation rate above 80 percent for homeless students.

Students With Disabilities

The graduation rate for students with disabilities ticked up in 2016–17, increasing by 1.6 percentage points to 67.1 percent nationally. This makes students with disabilities the student subgroup with the third-lowest graduation rate across the country, ahead of only English Learners and homeless students (based on the data available today). Although most states saw improvements in their on-time graduation rate for students with disabilities, just 26 states saw increases of at least 1 percentage point.

Moreover, 14 states saw their rates decline over the past year. Still, a **1.6 percentage-point increase amounts to the largest percentage-point gain this past year among subgroups analyzed in this report and is more than three times the national rate of increase.** Across states, the **high school graduation rate for students with disabilities ranges from a low of 36.4 percent in Mississippi to a high of 83.8 percent in Arkansas.** Students with disabilities face some of the most inequitable outcomes of any student subgroup, with a 19.8 percentage point graduation rate gap between them and their peers. What’s more, students with disabilities amount to more than one in four students that fail to graduate on time.

English Learners

English Learners (EL) represent a growing population of America’s public school students, reaching 9.5 percent of all U.S. students in grades K–12 by the fall of 2015. Discouragingly, as English Learners increasingly make up a larger share of the population, in 2017 their graduation rate decreased nationally by 0.5 percentage point, dropping to 66.4 percent. In 15 states, less than 60 percent of EL students graduate on time. English Learners graduate at a rate 19.4 percentage points below their non-English Learner peers. **Over 41 percent of all English Learners that do not graduate on time are concentrated in four states (Texas, New Mexico, California, and Nevada).**

Low-Graduation-Rate High Schools

In 2017, there were 2,357 low-graduation-rate high schools of all types (regular, vocational, charter, virtual, etc.) with a graduation rate of 67 percent or less, enrolling 100 or more students, down from 2,425 in 2016. These low-graduation-rate high schools accounted for 12.5 percent of all public high schools enrolling 100 or more students that reported an ACGR in 2017, enroll about 6.5 percent of all students, and **educate approximately 31 percent of all four-year non-graduates. The average graduation rate for students trapped in these low-performing schools is 40 percent.** Black, Hispanic, and low-income students disproportionately attend low-graduation-rate high schools. In four states, more than one in every five high schools has an on-time graduation rate of 67 percent or less, while in seven states, over 25 percent of on-time non-graduates are found in low-graduation-rate high schools. This report also breaks down low-graduation-rate high schools by whether they are alternative or regular schools; district operated or charter operated; and virtual schools. **Through ESSA, states identified 1,805 of their low-graduation-rate high schools by the spring of 2019. This means that the vast majority of the 2,357 low-graduation-rate high schools in the nation have been targeted for comprehensive reform.**

► Part III: Examining the Connection Between High School, Postsecondary, and the Workforce

The GradNation Campaign has always viewed high school graduation as an “on-track indicator” for students at or around the age of 18. This year’s report examines the relationship between increasing high school graduation rates and college readiness, increasing postsecondary enrollment rates for low-income high school graduates, indicators of postsecondary success, and innovative practices in the school-to-work pipeline. Below are some highlights:

- To show the relationship between increasing high school graduation rates and college readiness, the 2019 Annual Update features for the first time a **Secondary School Improvement Index** that uses four measures—the percent of students scoring proficient on the 8th grade Reading National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam, the percent of students scoring proficient on the 8th grade Math NAEP exam, the percent of students receiving a 3 or higher on an Advanced Placement (AP) exam, and the percent of students graduating from high school in four years. **Sixty-eight percent of states have been able to improve both their graduation rates and at least two other measures of academic success of their secondary schools, while nearly one-third have not.**
- Analysis of recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey show that, for the first time ever, **immediate postsecondary enrollment rates for low-income students match those of their middle-income peers.**
- Analysis of a recent longitudinal study out of Boston show that three indicators—an **attendance rate of 94 percent or higher during four years of high school, a GPA of 2.7 or higher, and completing the required set of courses for admission to state university systems and taking an AP class**—were highly predictive of both earning and not earning a bachelor’s degree within seven years of high school graduation. In fact, **the odds of achieving a four-year degree increase from 10 percent to 84 percent as the number of college success indicators a student meets moves from zero to three.**

► Policy and Practice Recommendations Continue to improve graduation rate data collection and reporting.

While the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate remains the “gold standard” for collecting and reporting on high school graduation rates in its seventh year, there is still room for improvements that would guarantee the best

data is available. There remain discrepancies in how states remove students from their cohort counts, what is considered a “regular” diploma, how transfer students are taken into account, and how certain subgroups (e.g., students with disabilities, English Learners, and low-income students) are identified within the cohort. In addition, access to disaggregated data on more specific intersections of student socioeconomic subgroups (e.g., low-income white students, English Learners with disabilities, etc.) would allow us to better narrow where major problem areas may exist. We strongly recommend that graduation rate data be disaggregated by gender.

Probe deeper on credit recovery programs.

Credit recovery practices and pathways have rightfully become a cause for concern and add to the recent skepticism over increasing high school graduation rates. Yet, this is due, in large part, to the fact that few rigorous studies have been done on the quality and effectiveness of credit recovery courses. Given the lack of comprehensive knowledge on the rigor of the most widely adopted credit recovery programs, it is difficult to understand the true impact of these courses. It is then essential that deeper investigations be done to understand how effective credit recovery courses and programs are; what types of students make up the enrollment in credit recovery courses and programs; how many credit recovery courses on average are taken per student; and what percentage of total credits earned by students come from credit recovery. It would also be important to understand what courses are predominantly taken in these settings and the degree to which credit recovery courses are enabling some students to learn course content and graduate with a legitimate diploma, and how these students fare in postsecondary education.

Promote greater alignment and clarity on how students with disabilities are treated across states.

State variation in graduation rates for students with disabilities merits further study and examination to understand why some states have been able to make significant progress, while others continue to lag. In order to better understand the education landscape for students with disabilities and hold states accountable for progress, all states should disaggregate data on the types of diplomas students with disabilities are receiving. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) should also consider setting a universal definition for who is a student with a disability and how states count students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who graduate with a state-defined alternative diploma. Finally, states should ensure that their graduation requirements and diploma options for students with disabilities align with

postsecondary requirements so that students are not denied the opportunity to access a postsecondary education.

Promote policies that reduce damaging academic disparities.

The data show that Black, Hispanic, and low-income students are less likely to be on track to graduate on time and be college and career ready. Greater reforms and investments need to be made in their schools and greater supports need to be provided to these students across the education continuum to ensure equitable access to opportunities from early education through postsecondary education. Additionally, states should address inequities between high- and low-poverty school districts by establishing weighted funding formulas that provide more money to schools serving students with the greatest needs. States and districts should also work together to identify where those dollars can have the greatest impact, especially as they begin to develop comprehensive support and improvement plans for their lowest performing schools under ESSA, and ensure funding is tied to evidence-based policy and practice.

Align diplomas with college- and career-ready standards.

The misalignment between what students need to graduate high school and what they need to succeed in postsecondary education puts students at a disadvantage and often leads to them taking remedial courses that can add significant costs to a postsecondary education. State leaders should establish diploma requirements aligned with state college and university systems’ admissions criteria. Schools and districts should ensure more students, especially those from traditionally underserved populations, earn a diploma that ensures they are college and career ready. Ensuring high school diploma requirements are aligned with college- and career-ready standards can help ensure more students are on track to graduate prepared to immediately enter postsecondary education or the workplace.

Create state-specific high school graduation plans.

States should develop “Closing the Grad Gap on the Path to 90 Plans” that analyze which districts, schools, and students within their states need additional supports or guidance on implementing evidence-based approaches to enable *all* students to graduate on time and be prepared for postsecondary or workforce success. Using data in this report, including data on the equity path to 90 for all states (see Appendix H), states could identify where their biggest challenges remain. Creating these plans can better ensure students in need of critical interventions do not fall through the cracks, and that districts and schools are

better equipped to understand their needs and implement appropriate interventions.

Improve data collection and reporting on postsecondary transitions and outcomes.

Creation of the Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate allowed for a reliable, consistent, on-track indicator for young people as they transition to adulthood, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, income, disability, English Learners, and homelessness, as well as by state, district, and even school. Data reporting on postsecondary enrollment and success rates is, as a result of the nature of postsecondary education, less reliable. In order to properly understand the full nature of postsecondary enrollment and success, there must be improvement in data reporting. Specifically, we need state level data on how many high school graduates immediately enroll in postsecondary institutions, as this is an important metric of momentum toward postsecondary success. We also need better data on whether high school graduates are succeeding in postsecondary education in a timely matter, and how that tracks with the state in which the student was educated and their socioeconomic background.

Strengthen the transition from high school to postsecondary and careers.

It is critical that schools help students understand the postsecondary options available to them, including financial aid and the application process, as well as the course requirements to access certain pathways. Moreover, schools and districts should provide greater access to dual enrollment, early college, career academies, and career and technical education pathways. Postsecondary institutions should do more to support students, particularly first generation and low-income students, both before they step onto campus and once they are there. Employers can also help strengthen the transition between education and the workplace by increasing engagement with schools through internships and the Federal Work Study program that ground learning in real-world experiences in communities and the workplace. Federal policymakers can also contribute to creating stronger pathways between high school and postsecondary by allowing high school students to use federal Pell Grants to pay for college courses taken in dual enrollment and early college programs. They can also increase national service opportunities to provide additional mentors and tutors in high-needs schools, help those who serve defray the cost of college with education awards, and allocate additional funding to accelerate research on college- and career-pathway initiatives to build the evidence of what is effective.