

## Are High School Graduation Gains Real?

*Experts at the GradNation campaign – led by America’s Promise Ailliance, Civic Enterprises, the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and the Alliance for Excellent Education – provide this FAQ to help explain what’s behind the increase in high school graduation rates.*

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### Why have high school graduation rates increased?

The national on-time high school graduation rate is at an all-time high of 83.2 percent. The greatest credit for this remarkable progress goes to students, families and teachers who are putting in the work and showing great determination and resolve, sometimes in the face of great challenge.

These efforts in households and classrooms are being supported by key leaders at every level. The last two presidents and their secretaries of education have put great emphasis on raising graduation rates. Similarly, [governors have focused](#) on improving graduation rates since the late 90s and early 2000s, including a graduation rate compact signed by governors of all 50 states. As a result of focused attention on graduation rates, there are people working hard on state initiatives across the nation.

**Around the country**, districts and states are making progress by understanding what works and implementing effective reforms and practices, like using data to make decisions, working to increase teacher quality, raising expectations for all students, paying attention to early warning signs, adding more caring adults into the lives of young people living in challenging circumstances, fighting chronic absenteeism, and eliminating disciplinary practices that disproportionately impact students of color. In many of the schools and districts across the country, a common refrain is creating an “every-student-counts culture” where educators and school staff get to know the student, understand his or her progress and challenges over time, and intervene to provide the support needed. [A recent Gallup poll](#) found that K-12 superintendents are most likely to rank high school graduation rates as the most important element in evaluating school effectiveness.

**At the federal level**, the U.S. Department of Education issued regulations in 2008 that had a tremendously positive impact on the national high school graduation rate.

In addition to requiring that states use a standard, accurate calculation of the high school graduation rate, the regulations required states set ambitious goals to improve graduation rates and required school districts to intervene in high schools where students from low-income families, students of color, and other traditionally underserved students had consistently low graduation rates. In 2011, the department issued further policy requirements mandating that states intervene in high schools with low graduation rates.

Since the 2008 regulations were issued, the national high school graduation rate increased from 74.7 percent to an all-time high of 83.2 percent in 2015. This is a remarkable achievement, particularly considering the lack of progress made in the years prior to the implementation of the federal graduation rate regulations.

**In the broader national conversation**, the GradNation campaign has worked with a powerful alliance to bring attention, focus and energy to the graduation rate challenge; highlight evidence-based policies and practices; provide technical assistance to schools, districts and states; and foster accountability for progress over time.

### **Are the gains in high school graduation rates real?**

Yes. The nation is seeing legitimate and significant gains in high school graduation rates in schools, districts and states across the country that now calculate and report their rates using the same formula.

GradNation researchers say there are still areas of the data collection and analysis that merit attention and improvement. We need standard answers to questions like these: What constitutes an incoming ninth grader? How do you count students who graduate with different diplomas? How do you handle a lack of accountability for home schooling? And how should schools account for transfers in and out of their systems?

Lacking answers, leading journalists and policy wonks have raised questions about the gains and even about the value of a high school diploma. Are some districts lowering the bar or cooking the books to increase graduation rates? What does it mean when states discontinue or change high school exit exams? Should diplomas certify that graduates are college-ready?

Although there have been some documented examples of districts gaming their high school graduation rates, there is no evidence that this has become a larger issue and shouldn't cast doubt on the national trend of rising graduation rates.

Some districts have been caught inappropriately removing students from cohorts and inflating graduation rates – but not in large numbers or to a large degree. [Looking closer at state-level student enrollment data](#) sheds some light on the extent of the problem. While inappropriately removing students from cohorts may inflate graduation rates in some individual school districts, the data show that it doesn't involve enough students to have a major impact on state graduation rates. GradNation researchers have found that in these cases, the actual graduation rate is just a percentage point or two lower than their reported rate.

By comparing the size of the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) cohorts for the classes of 2011 and 2015 with the size of their actual ninth grade enrollments in 2007-08 and 2010-11 (the years those two cohorts entered ninth grade), it is possible to compare the count of ninth grade students with the adjusted cohort for that grade, which is calculated later and adjusted for students who have transferred in or out of the cohort. This allows us to see if states are wrongfully removing students from their data to boost graduation rates by shrinking cohorts over time. The data, however, show that cohort sizes shrank at a rate comparable to decreases in ninth grade enrollment. In 34 states, changes in the ACGR cohort over time were similar to concurrent changes in ninth grade enrollment, while just six states had cohorts shrink at a more substantial rate than the overall ninth grade enrollment.

It's important to note that the rates under the two best calculations – the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate and the Average Freshmen Graduation Rate – have moved in parallel and are very close to being the same percentage.

### **Are news reports about a few states with questionable practices around the tracking of graduation rates valid?**

While [recent gains](#) in the national graduation rates are real, there are some examples of states and districts inflating their numbers, and the GradNation campaign has highlighted those states and districts in previous updates to the nation. Below are a few examples that were featured in the media over the past year. Even though the media has rightly highlighted the issues below, GradNation researchers caution that these examples don't undermine overall trends in these places or nationally.

- [In Texas](#), the state's "leaver code" allows schools to remove students from cohorts with very little required documentation, defining many dropouts as "other leavers," which doesn't count them in the state and school graduation rate.
- [Indiana high school students](#) who fail to pass one of two tests required to graduate are still receiving diplomas through the state's "evidence-based graduation waiver."
- [In Chicago](#), low-performing public school students have been encouraged to enroll in alternative schools, which are part of the district's portfolio. The district has misclassified these students as out-of-district transfers, effectively removing hundreds of students from the district's records so they won't hurt Chicago's graduation rate if they drop out. Yet if they do graduate, students receive a diploma from their school of origin, so the district still receives credit for graduating alternative students even as they are not held accountable for students who drop out.
- [In Louisiana](#), House Bill 1015 allows a special education student's advisory team to decide on an alternative path to graduation, regardless of how the student fares on state standardized tests. Often times, this results in students with disabilities failing to meet state requirements for a diploma but graduating anyway, raising concerns over the graduation criteria for these particular students.

### **How can states and districts improve tracking and reporting of high school graduation rate data?**

There are ways states and the federal government can solve many of these problems.

The federal government should draft stronger language and regulations regarding the loopholes some districts may be exploiting to inflate their graduation rates. The U.S. Department of Education should:

- Specify the amount of time a student must be enrolled at a school to be counted as an official ninth grader.

- Create standard requirements on how states define students who transfer out—into another school, another state, homeschooling, or even, unfortunately, juvenile detention—and when it is appropriate to remove students from a cohort.
- Ensure that only students who meet state graduation requirements are counted toward that state's ACGR, with very few exceptions.
- Require that all states report extended-year graduation rates. The GradNation campaign realizes the importance of four-year graduation rates, and ideally all students would graduate in that time. But not all students have ideal circumstances. While most students do graduate in four years, there are students who take an additional year or two to graduate. [Currently, 31 states report](#) five-year extended graduation rates, and just 13 report six-year rates. All states should report such data.

### **Have schools lowered their standards to graduate more students?**

No. In fact, the evidence points in the other direction. The most rapid rise in graduation rates occurred from 2006 to 2014, the peak years of exit and end-of-course examinations and an era when states were increasing graduation requirements, according to [NCES data](#). In other words, graduation rates rose even as it was getting more difficult to graduate.

[NCES has tracked](#) states' course credit requirements and exit exam requirements for a standard high school graduation from 2008-2013, the period of time in which graduation rates rose most significantly. Rather than seeing evidence of states easing graduation standards, NCES found that the vast majority of graduation requirements remained unchanged. In fact, while one state (Illinois) made it easier to receive a diploma, 13 states actually increased their graduation requirements over that period of time.

Overall, the evidence shows that, in most places, [high school graduation rates and more-rigorous standards are rising together](#). The results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress' High School Transcript Study show that the trends are moving in the right direction: In 2009, a greater percentage of high school graduates completed a curriculum that was more challenging than it was in 1990 or 2005.

### **Do increased graduation rates mean that graduates are less prepared for postsecondary education and careers?**

More kids graduating does not mean that graduates are less prepared for postsecondary education and careers. Here's why.

As the country turns more students who would otherwise have dropped out of high school into graduates, some assume schools and districts must be lowering standards. If that were true, as more of these graduates take the ACT and SAT, one would expect test scores to decline as graduation rates increase. The evidence does not support this case.

Looking at the percentage of graduates taking benchmark tests such as the SAT and ACT and overall scores over time, [scores on the ACT College and Career Readiness Benchmark](#) have on the whole either held fairly steady or increased slightly since 2009, even as the percentage of graduates taking the ACT exam has continued to rise (in 2005, approximately 40 percent of graduates took the ACT, rising to approximately 59 percent in 2015). SAT scores show similar flat-lining rates. Again, while this does not demonstrate increased rigor, it also does not substantiate the concern that standards are being lowered to allow more students to reach graduation.

Another way to measure the “college readiness” of graduating students is the number of passing scores in Advanced Placement courses and exams. AP courses are generally considered to have the rigor of a college-level course, and a score of 3 or higher on an AP exam can be used for college credit. Since 2004, the total number of graduates taking an [AP course has risen from 558,993 in 2004 to over 1 million in 2013](#). The number of students passing at least one AP course has risen in tandem, from 351,647 in 2004 to 607,505 in 2013. This data also holds true for low-income students, who historically take AP courses and exams at far lower rates than their non-low-income peers.

The real goal is not just to graduate more young people, but to keep more young people on the path to success in adulthood. That's why those of us working to increase graduation rates are equally forceful in insisting that we must continue to raise the bar and the value of a diploma so that graduates are able to succeed in post-secondary education and careers.

### **Are high school diplomas still meaningful?**

Definitely. Diplomas are not an end goal but an important indicator on the path to adult success. In today's economy, a high school diploma doesn't guarantee success, but the lack of a diploma consigns a young person to almost-certain failure. [A high diploma confers many other](#) economic, societal, health, and civic engagement benefits that make graduating from high school a significant milestone in the life of a young person.

Collectively, more kids graduating puts our county in a much better place economically. If the graduation rate increased to 90 percent for just one cohort of students, the country would see a [\\$7.2 billion increase in annual earnings](#) and a \$1.1 billion increase in federal tax revenue. For more facts on why the diploma matters to individuals, communities and our nation, check out [High School Graduation Facts](#).

### **What does the increase in graduation rates tell us about the condition of youth overall?**

To determine the real value of rising high school graduation rates in the wider societal context, it is important to look at how youth outcomes have changed across other indicators. As high school graduation rates have increased, the well-being of youth has improved in many other important ways. [Children are healthier](#) and more teens are making positive choices— [teen pregnancy rates have dropped](#), as has the [juvenile arrest rate](#). As a nation we've demonstrated that progress is possible, and now we must push forward in our efforts to help millions more young people get and stay on track to adult success.