AMERICA’S PROMISE
America’s Promise Alliance is the driving force behind a nationwide movement to improve the lives and futures of America’s youth. Its work is anchored in the belief that every young person deserves to succeed, and every adult is responsible for making that happen. By bringing together hundreds of national nonprofits, businesses, community and civic leaders, educators, citizens, and young people, the Alliance does what no single organization can do on its own: catalyze action on a scale that reaches millions of young people. GradNation mobilizes Americans to increase the nation’s high school graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020. In the past 12 years, an additional 2.8 million young people have graduated from high school. www.AmericasPromise.org.

AT&T
AT&T has been a generous sponsor of the GradNation campaign for many years and is the sole sponsor of the Acceleration Initiative through the AT&T Aspire program. AT&T Aspire has given $450 million to organizations dedicated to improving graduation rates, innovating in education, and preparing students for careers of the future. It is with the utmost gratitude that we give thanks to AT&T and AT&T Aspire for their sustained GradNation support. Without the leadership, initiative, and investments of this organization, the Acceleration Initiative would not be possible.
Christie left high school when she was 16.

She eventually got her foothold back after visiting Michigan Works Southeast. The workforce agency referred her to Jobs for Michigan’s Graduates (JMG), a statewide nonprofit initiative that makes meaningful connections between workforce and school partners.

Working with a JMG specialist, Christie earned her GED in two months. Now enrolled in patient care specialist training at a medical academy, her goal is to become certified in EKG, acute care, CNA, and phlebotomy. Christie also has a long-term goal: continuing her studies to become a registered nurse.

Young people seek to understand the connections between what they’re doing in school and their future aspirations. Those connections can be particularly difficult to ascertain when they face more immediate needs, such as mental health challenges or food insecurity, which can in turn make the important first step of graduating from high school seem less relevant to their day-to-day lives—or their futures.

Showing young people there are realistic paths to viable careers and connecting them to the help they need to get there is essential to keeping them on track through and beyond graduation. Unfortunately, coordinating efforts among education systems, employers, and workforce systems to provide the clear vision and support needed to help young people find and stay on these pathways has proven challenging.

“There doesn’t always seem to be some overarching common purpose or shared goals across these organizations,” says Kristin Harrington, executive director of Youth Solutions Inc., the nonprofit which operates JMG.

America’s Promise Alliance, which began focusing on improving graduation rates more than a decade ago (see box), recognizes the importance of coordinated efforts to create the kinds of meaningful pathways that lead youth to viable career opportunities after they complete high school. Communities participating in the GradNation Acceleration Initiative are creating engaging and academically challenging programs that connect students with future opportunities through college and career preparation (see profiles, appendix). While these pathways extend beyond high school, requiring collaboration with postsecondary
Eight out of 10 employers believe that social and emotional skills are the most important to success, and are also the hardest skills to find.


Institutions, employers, and workforce boards, they are critical in helping students receive their diplomas as the critical first step toward productive and fulfilling lives.

“If you can connect your own interests and passions to industry opportunities that are real and available and you can understand that your coursework has relevance to that, you can get buy-in to complete [high school] in a way that’s difficult to do otherwise,” says Harrington.

PRACTICES IN ACTION

GradNation and the communities participating in the Acceleration Initiative have focused on creating pathways that begin well before students graduate high school and pursue college or career training. This approach to pathways is broad and not necessarily sequential, encompassing a wide range of opportunities that help provide the necessary training and skills for young people to succeed in the workplace.

These efforts recognize the idea that desired workforce outcomes—college degrees or postsecondary training for careers—require a foundation that begins prior to students graduating high school. In Albuquerque, for example, the United Way of Central New Mexico’s Mission: Graduate initiative focuses on dramatically increasing the number of residents with college degrees or postsecondary credentials in order to boost the region’s economic competitiveness. But community leaders quickly recognized the importance of connecting those postsecondary goals with explicit high school curriculum and early childhood initiatives. Doing so “gives students a context and understanding of why they should stay in school and how it’s helping them now and in the future,” says Selena Hardy, Mission: Graduate’s former college and career readiness manager. In Michigan, JMG focuses on positive outcomes in employment, the military, or postsecondary education. One of its key metrics is high school graduation, with a 90 percent goal for its in-school programs; 95 percent of its most recent multiyear cohort graduated, says Sonya Blanzy, JMG’s director of operations.

Communities participating in the Acceleration Initiative have taken different approaches to creating pathways. In Greeley, Colo., the work is driven by the K-12 school district, and all students—in traditional schools as well as alternative programs—are engaged in career planning. JMG’s model is statewide, with the nonprofit organization, Youth Solutions, collaborating with the state workforce board to deliver services in more than 80 schools or Michigan Works! service centers. While New Mexico’s Mission: Graduate is a regional initiative, the United Way intentionally chose to focus programming at one Albuquerque high school and its feeder schools to learn what works and inform broader initiatives.
Launched in 2007 by America’s Promise Alliance, the GradNation campaign was created to raise awareness of the nation’s low graduation rates. At the time, nearly one in three young people did not graduate high school in many communities, and there were no consistent data within or between states.

To learn more about why so many young people were not graduating, America’s Promise went directly into 205 communities in every state, bringing together educators, families, business partners, and youth to explore successful strategies for helping young people stay and succeed in school.

Recognizing the economic and social imperative of helping more young people graduate, America’s Promise brought together President Barack Obama, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and Thomas Donohue of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 2010 to set a national goal of a 90 percent high school graduation rate by the decade’s end. Under federal regulation, the first consistent measure of national graduation rates followed in 2011, and GradNation released two influential reports, Don’t Call Them Dropouts and Don’t Quit on Me, which fundamentally changed the way people understood and responded to the graduation issue by elevating the lived experience and perspective of the youth the system had not served.

Based on research and a wide range of community and partner work to improve the high school experience, the GradNation Action Platform identifies six areas that every community can act upon to accelerate high school graduation: high-quality data, non-academic factors, school climate, caring adult relationships, youth re-engagement, and pathways.

In February 2017, America’s Promise announced partnerships with three communities and two states to improve graduation rates for specific groups of young people. This “Acceleration Initiative” included the following sites (see appendix for more information):

- Boyle Heights English Learner Acceleration Project (Los Angeles, California)
- Project Graduate 2.0 (Georgia)
- Every Student Matters: Accelerating Graduation Rates (Greeley, Colorado)
- Jobs for Michigan’s Graduates (Michigan)
- Mission: Graduate (Albuquerque, New Mexico)

Graduation rates continue to rise—up from 79 percent in 2011 to 85.3 percent in 2018.* But for the nation to meet its 90 percent graduation goal, we must collectively meet the needs of students who face structural barriers through diverse systems, supports, and partnerships that address multiple platform areas. This series of issue briefs details how the five communities participating in the GradNation Acceleration Initiative are leading efforts to put the action platform principles into motion and improve the lives of the young people who need it the most.

Sources
College and Career Readiness

Building skills for college and career readiness is a foundational element of successfully navigating pathways. Unlike postsecondary pathways focused on specific vocations, however, programs focused on high schoolers largely target broader attributes that were once dismissively labeled as “soft skills.” A 2016 World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, referenced in the 2019 report From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope, found that eight out of 10 employers believe that social and emotional skills are the most important to success and also the hardest skills to find.

“Employers recognize that it doesn’t matter how much workers know if they can’t work well in teams, communicate clearly, and persevere when confronted with complex problems,” the report states.

In Albuquerque, the United Way convened more than 50 focus groups to identify the knowledge, skills, and characteristics that the community believed was important for students to have when they graduate, which were codified into the Central New Mexico Graduate Profile (see Resources). The profile, which lists more than 20 characteristics, is supported by a “launchpad” of foundational experiences that help students develop them, including planning for the future, civic engagement, and opportunities to work independently and in teams.

In Michigan, JMG follows the model of its national organization, Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG), which identified a wide range of career readiness competencies ranging from communicating and problem-solving to leadership, self-development, and financial literacy. The program’s specialists, mostly certified teachers, teach these skills in schools and service centers throughout the state. Participating students, most of whom face barriers outside of school or have been identified as at risk of not graduating, are enrolled in JMG classes, which are elective courses built around fostering these career competencies and leadership skills.

Along with focusing on these overarching skills and competencies, Acceleration Initiative communities help students develop more specific career plans—in some cases, as early as in middle school. In Greeley, for example, students in Greeley-Evans School District 6 develop a post-graduation plan that shapes the classes they take throughout high school. In Albuquerque, students at Rio Grande High School and its feeder schools follow a “blueprint” that scaffolds career exploration experiences, starting with career fairs and field trips in middle school and building to job shadowing and then internships and other work experiences in high school. “As students age, the experiences get deeper,” says Hardy.

In Michigan, JMG classes emphasize career exploration through activities like visits to local businesses and job shadowing. The program’s specialists also develop relationships with employers to connect students with opportunities for internships and jobs for program participants. “It’s about moving from these [exploratory] pieces into longer-term employment opportunities,” says Harrington.

In Greeley, finding jobs isn’t a problem for most of the students enrolled in one of the K-12 district’s alternative programs. About 60 percent of students in the Greeley Alternative Program, or GAP, have jobs, says Rhonda Haniford, the district’s former assistant superintendent for secondary schools. The question students are asked, she says, is whether “the job they’re currently working is the job they want to have after high school.”
The YES Project is a national campaign led by America’s Promise Alliance that brings together youth, employers, and a diverse network of stakeholders and advocates working to support and grow our youth workforce so that every young person seeking a job can find a job.

The YES Project developed the Ready, Connected, Supported (RCS) framework, a shared approach that everyone from employers and public officials to community leaders and young people themselves can use to drive action toward increased opportunities for workplace success and development. The framework envisions that young people will be:

• **Ready to enter the workforce.** To thrive, young people need a combination of technical skills that are relevant for their chosen career pathways; social, emotional, and cognitive skills (like problem-solving and persistence) that allow them to achieve complex tasks; and career management skills (like adaptability) with an understanding of how one’s strengths connect with the labor market.

• **Connected to networks, relationships, and resources needed to access new opportunities.** When young people are connected, they are actively engaged and directed to knowledge, resources, and opportunities. Being connected also means that young people have access to relationships and networks, including but not limited to, individuals with high social capital relevant to their career needs and goals.

• **Supported with coaching, access to information, and healthy work environments.** It’s not enough to find where to work—young people also need guidance learning how to make the best impact both for their employer and themselves. Young people should have a comprehensive web of support, filled with caring relationships across contexts that provide assistance tailored to each young person’s unique strengths and needs at each stage of their career development.

Learn more at americaspromise.org/yes.

“The question students are asked is whether the job they’re currently working is the job they want to have after high school.”

RHONDA HANIFORD
Greely-Evans School District 6’s former assistant superintendent for secondary schools
“If [basic] needs are not being met, students are not going to be successful in their internships. Those basic needs are so fundamental to being able to achieve.”

RHONDA HANIFORD
Greely-Evans School District 6’s former assistant superintendent for secondary schools

To that end, Greeley offers internships and other programs to help students identify future career opportunities in higher-wage fields than the warehouse and retail jobs high school students typically have. The district developed an apprenticeship program with Vestas, a local manufacturer of wind turbine blades. More than 25 district students are apprentices at the company, earning academic credit through work-based learning programs. Along with providing career opportunities, the apprenticeship provides incentives for students to graduate—a requirement for continuing employment.

“I see the industry helping us with student engagement, but also helping kids see the bigger picture—why completing their diploma is important to that industry,” says Haniford.

Supporting Broader Needs

Acceleration Initiative communities emphasize supporting the needs of the “whole child,” including addressing out-of-school barriers such as family challenges, health issues, and food and housing insecurity (see the first issue brief in this series). These efforts also play a critical role in making pathways successful.

In Albuquerque, for example, the Graduate Profile takes a page from Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and cautions partners that developmental activities are predicated on students’ central needs being met, including food, health, water, shelter, transportation, and “stability, safety, security, and freedom from fear.” The United Way of Central New Mexico, which coordinates Mission: Graduate with a wide range of stakeholders, connects students with services and encourages its workforce partners to do the same.

“We help employers understand that if [basic] these needs are not being met, students are not going to be successful in their internships,” says Hardy. “Those basic needs are so fundamental to being able to achieve.”

In Michigan, JMG specialists go beyond the program’s career readiness curriculum to mentor students and connect them to community supports. Low student-teacher ratios within the program make this level of support possible, says Blanzy.

LESSONS LEARNED

Make connections between academics and postsecondary pathways.

Pathways must make clear connections between students’ career aspirations and the high school courses they are taking now. “A lot of times it’s taken for granted that kids know what they’re going to do and why their core academics are relevant,” says JMG’s Blanzy. “How do we connect algebra to an internship in the energy sector that can lead to a robust career? That sense of purpose is often lacking in the educational system.”

It’s also vital that the courses students take as part of pathways are rigorous and engaging. Along with affecting their ability to access and be successful in postsecondary education and training, less rigorous courses and expectations risk signaling to students that the system expects less of them than their peers facing fewer barriers.

Don’t conflate postsecondary opportunities with college.

To meet all students’ needs, it’s critical to promote a wide range of options, including two- and four-year degrees, certificate programs, apprenticeships,
Some of the young people who could most benefit from pathways to sustainable careers are the ones who are hardest to reach. They’re often called “opportunity youth”—young people who have left school without graduating and are now unemployed or underemployed.

“The exit signs are neon yellow showing students all the ways to get out of the school system, but the onramps back are close to nonexistent,” says Hardy.

In 2017, some 4.9 million 16- to 24-year-olds—roughly one of every eight people in that age group—were not in education, employment, or training (“NEET,” as policymakers term it). In many cases, says Mark Cousins, director of Greeley’s Next District 6 program, they wait until their late 20s to get a GED from an adult education program, a delay that affects their careers and earning potential for the rest of their lives.

“This population of disconnected young people is another layer in the larger conversation around graduation rates,” says Harrington. “We believe there’s a big opportunity to connect the workforce system to the education system [to meet the needs of] this population.”

To that end, JMG set as a goal a 50 percent completion rate for its recovery program for out-of-school youth. Unlike its in-school programs, JMG staff work with local districts to identify and seek out opportunity youth where they are—often, by talking to them at workforce and adult education centers or public spaces within their communities—“any place where youth hang out,” Blanzy says—and provide whatever supports they need outside of the traditional school setting.

These strategies recognize the importance of not pushing students back into the same systems they’ve left. In Greeley, for example, the district’s data shows that fifth-year seniors and older out-of-school students rarely return to graduate. So the Next District 6 program, targeting older and disconnected students, is a standalone program focused on helping students take concurrent enrollment courses at the local community college while they work on earning their high school equivalency diploma, says Cousins. The program is a 4.5 hour, four-day a week program held across multiple shifts to accommodate students’ work schedules.

“It’s a better opportunity for these students than sitting in a traditional classroom,” Cousins says. “There’s no door that’s closed to them, but the journey looks a lot different.”

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**In 2017, some 4.9 million 16- to 24-year-olds were not in education, employment, or training.**

*https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/Promising%20Gains%20Final.pdf*
Given limited resources, it’s important to focus on pathways that meet both student and employer needs.

and other work-based learning options. “We’re agnostic,” says Jessica Nojek, executive director of Mission: Graduate.

For students, it’s important for the adults who work with them to be realistic about pathways and what it takes to meet career aspirations. “You don’t ever shoot down a dream,” says JMG’s Blanzy, but it’s important to provide information about the time and cost of prolonged programs so students “can make an educated decision,” she says.

Intentionally address external barriers.

Some young people face significant barriers to completing their education, including jobs, children of their own, and other challenges. Alternative programs like Greeley’s, which offer multiple shifts, help students “work around their schedules to find out how to get back on track toward sustainable work,” says Haniford.

To that end, it’s also important to recognize the impact of these barriers on their ability to graduate. Greeley’s Next program has attendance rates hovering just below 50 percent—low by district standards, but more than double that of disconnected youth in traditional high school settings.

Build relationships with employers.

A key focus of Acceleration Initiative communities is fostering partnerships through strong adult-to-adult relationships (see the third issue brief in this series), and fostering individual relationships with employers is equally critical. “It’s no different than how you would build a relationship with a student or family,” says Haniford.

Given limited resources, it’s important to focus on pathways that meet both student and employer needs. In Greeley, district officials identified 33 potential career pathways based on the region’s largest industries with the greatest workforce needs and prioritized five with the help of city officials and other stakeholders.

In some cases, it’s possible to bring something to the table. In Michigan, for example, JMG leverages funding from the state workforce program to support paid internships and other work experiences for participating students. In others, flexibility is key. While Greeley is focusing on building out apprenticeship and internship programs, district officials tell employers they can also provide job-shadowing experiences or lunch and learns.

A common theme, says Haniford, is sharing information. “They have their own idea of K-12 from their experiences or their children’s,” she says. “My knowledge of industry is also limited. We have to learn from each other.”
NEXT STEPS

Communities seeking to build stronger pathways that foster college and career readiness could begin in the following ways:

• **Bring work experiences into the school week.** A key strategy for maintaining engagement in the high school years is to create space for experiences during the school week that bridge education to the world of work. These experiences increase young people’s sense of possibility.

• **Make explicit connections between careers and graduation.** As students explore work experiences and map out future plans, it’s vital to ensure that these efforts reinforce the importance of completing high school and connecting to the postsecondary education or training required to enter viable careers.

• **Bring back youth who have left school.** Too often graduation-related work focuses on the young people still in school. Communities must act on a commitment to re-engage young people who leave school and support their return to education.

• **Build strong relationships with employers and encourage them to welcome and support young people.** Many young people get internships or first jobs that don’t feel meaningful, decent, or relevant, and they have a hard time sticking with their job. Employers who are willing to hire young people should commit to providing ongoing support to those young people.
APPENDIX: GRADNATION ACCELERATION INITIATIVE STATE AND COMMUNITY SUMMARIES

In February 2017, America’s Promise Alliance announced partnerships with three communities and two states to improve graduation rates for specific groups of young people. The sites were selected because they demonstrated a strong understanding of their data and young people’s lived experience, the collective will and track record to collaboratively serve young people, and a clear vision of how to support youth in reaching the graduation milestone. Over the last two years, each site has participated in a learning process that surfaced the themes highlighted in this series of issue briefs. This appendix includes descriptions of each site as well as data tables that depict changes in their graduation rate data over the past several years.

BOYLE HEIGHTS ENGLISH LEARNER ACCELERATION PROJECT
Promesa Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, California

Proyecto Pastoral is a community-based organization in Los Angeles, California and the backbone agency for Promesa Boyle Heights, a collaborative serving the city’s Boyle Heights neighborhood. Promesa aims to improve conditions at the individual, school, and systems levels by building a movement of partner organizations, students, and families collaborating to close the opportunity gap and strengthen supports for students from cradle through college and career. The English Learner (EL) program was launched to support EL students and their families in two traditional high schools and one continuing education high school in light of particularly low completion rates for newcomer and long-term English learners. The program is focused on helping the students reach EL proficiency, develop life skills, and achieve their personal goals through a near-peer mentoring program.

The GradNation Promesa programming has helped schools build capacity while strengthening partnerships with other community organizations. To support students, Promesa has overseen three main initiatives to increase the EL graduation rate, focusing on: parent and family engagement, peer mentoring and tutoring for students who are off track to meet graduation requirements, and school relationship and capacity building.

Promesa serves English learners, students from low-income households, and Hispanic-Latino students. About 80% of the district’s student population are from low-income households, 74% are Hispanic-Latino, and about 20% are English learners.

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<tr>
<th>Data Point</th>
<th>2011</th>
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PROJECT GRADUATE 2.0: UNLOCKING THE POWER AND POTENTIAL OF GEORGIA’S FOSTER YOUTH
Georgia Division of Family and Children Services and Multi-Agency Alliance for Children

Project Graduate is a collaborative effort between the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) and the Multi-Agency Alliance for Children (MAAC) to improve graduation rates for young people in foster care. MAAC brings together leaders and staff at local and state agencies to achieve a common goal: supporting youth in foster care. MAAC assigns every young person an education coordinator who assists with the academic, financial, and emotional support necessary to navigate through the high school years. DFCS is the state agency that oversees youth in care and connects them with MAAC supports.
Project Graduate 2.0 has been a cross-sector effort to improve outcomes through a variety of direct services and indirect policy and practice changes; MAAC oversees several youth-led leadership initiatives and works with DFCS to bring those youth leaders to statewide advisory council meetings, peer-to-peer exchanges, and youth town halls.

MAAC serves youth in foster care across the state of Georgia. MAAC’s educational support programming reaches between 500 and 700 students annually across the state. Youth in foster care receiving MAAC services have been referred via state agency partners.

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<tr>
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EVERY STUDENT MATTERS: ACCELERATING GRADUATION RATES AND DECREASING DROPOUT RATES

Greeley-Evans School District 6, Greeley, Colorado

Greeley-Evans School District 6 oversees six high school campuses, including the Greeley Alternative Program (GAP), which provides an alternative school environment for students who face barriers to graduation in a traditional school model. The district identifies students who are off-track to graduate (based on credit accumulation), need more intensive supports, or are facing social or emotional challenges in their traditional schools and enrolls them at the dedicated alternative campus, which offers a competency-based curriculum, wraparound services, real-world internships, and college credit courses.

GAP has expanded college and career advising through paid internships, work-based learning opportunities, and concurrent enrollment. GAP also focuses on providing wraparound services that address non-academic factors so young people can focus on learning.

GAP serves predominantly Hispanic-Latino and students from low-income households. Six percent of the district population attends GAP.

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*The schools with no data in this column did not exist in 2011.

JOBS FOR MICHIGAN’S GRADUATES

Youth Solutions Inc.

Jobs for Michigan’s Graduates (JMG) is a state affiliate of Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG), whose objective is to equip young adults with the skills they need to succeed in the workplace and in life. JMG supports low-income students and students of color at predominantly low-graduation rate high schools through an in-school classroom instructional model and an out-of-school re-engagement model. JMG seeks to increase
young people’s sense of purpose and belonging by connecting their high school and youth experiences to their postsecondary and career goals. JMG has implemented trauma-informed care as its staff saw a need in the community to be responsive to the life experiences of its students.

Through this trauma-informed lens, JMG’s specialists teach and act as mentors. They are guided by a competency-based curriculum that emphasizes work-ready skills, career exposure and training, and a year of follow-up services after high school graduation.

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<tr>
<td>State Graduation Rate</td>
<td></td>
<td>74.33%</td>
<td>80.18%</td>
<td>80.64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*In 2011, JMG had not yet expanded to these schools.

MISSION: GRADUATE
United Way of Central New Mexico

Mission: Graduate is a collective impact effort that focuses on cradle to career outcomes for youth facing barriers to graduation in the Albuquerque area of New Mexico. To reach the goal of adding 60,000 new graduates to postsecondary programs, the initiative identified three key strategies to get more youth to high school graduation: increase school attendance and engagement, improve college and career readiness, and provide teacher support.

Mission: Graduate’s focus for the Acceleration Initiative has been Rio Grande High School, and the initiative improved school capacity to expand the use of early warning systems, provided college and career exploration opportunities, and connected off-track students with peers and mentors to improve attendance.

Mission: Graduate serves students in a predominantly Hispanic-Latino high school. About 66% of the district’s student population are Hispanic-Latino.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Point</th>
<th>2011*</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Graduation Rate</td>
<td>52.1%</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Graduation Rate</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
<td>67.9%</td>
<td>69.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Graduation Rate</td>
<td>63.0%</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate among Hispanic Students (school-level)</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
<td>61.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate among Hispanic Students (district-level)</td>
<td>65.8%</td>
<td>67.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate among Hispanic Students (state-level)</td>
<td>70.5%</td>
<td>73.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The missing data in this column were not able to be collected in 2011.