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Dropout Rate

Robert Keiner



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Brandon Campbell, 20, studies online at the Boston Re-engagement Center on Jan. 8, 2013, for courses he needed to get his high school diploma. Dropout rates are highest among students who are poor, disabled or still learning English, and those who are black or Hispanic. In today's demanding job market, dropouts could be doomed to what Education Secretary Arne Duncan calls continued "poverty and misery."

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The nation has achieved a "profound milestone," Secretary of Education Arne Duncan told a Washington audience in April — the national on-time public high school graduation rate is at its highest level ever. "As a country we owe a debt of gratitude to the teachers, students and families whose hard work has helped us reach an 80 percent graduation rate," he said.¹

However, the assembled educators, researchers, policy advocates and high school students also heard words of caution. "We cannot coast when we have big hills to climb," said Alma Powell, chairwoman of America's Promise Alliance, an education foundation started by her husband, retired Gen. Colin L. Powell, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.²

As Duncan explained, the 80 percent graduation rate translates into one in five students dropping out — 718,000 high school students a year.³ That's nearly 4,000 students every school day. Even though the U.S. graduation rate has been improving for more than a decade, rising from 71.7 percent in 2000, it's still one of the lowest in the developed world. And it is still short of the long-held government goal of 90 percent by 2020.

Overwhelmingly, dropout rates are highest among those who are poor, disabled or still learning English. Today's dropouts, many of whom may be unemployable in an ever-more-demanding job market, could be doomed to what Duncan called continued "poverty and misery." They will also become an increasing economic and societal burden on the rest of the nation because a technical and global economy has little room for workers without high school diplomas, many say. The search for solutions to the U.S.

cities the statistics were even more dismal. For example, only 59 percent of students in the largely black Washington, D.C., public school system graduated.¹⁰

- Graduation rates also varied widely among states; while 93 percent of Vermont's students graduated, only 59 percent of Nevada's did.¹¹

Dropouts cost the nation in a variety of ways. Over a lifetime, a typical high school dropout earns an estimated \$260,000 less than a graduate.¹² Those lower earnings cost federal and state governments more than \$50 billion annually in income tax that would have been paid if all dropouts graduated.¹³ High school dropouts live shorter lives — by six to nine years — than graduates and are disproportionately affected by heart disease, diabetes and obesity; 80 percent of dropouts depend on government for health care assistance.¹⁴ Dropouts are 67 percent of the inmates in state prisons, 56 percent of federal inmates and 69 percent of inmates in local jails.¹⁵

The global nature of the economy magnifies the cost of the dropout problem, according to Robert Rothman, a senior fellow at the Alliance for Excellent Education, a Washington education policy and advocacy group. "Students from Baltimore and Boston no longer compete against each other for jobs; instead, their rivals are well-educated students from Sydney and Singapore," he wrote. "But as globalization has progressed, American educational progress has stagnated. . . . Given that human capital is a prerequisite for success in the global economy, U.S. economic competitiveness is unsustainable with poorly prepared students feeding into the workforce."¹⁶

Rothman cited an estimate from the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which conducts economic research on industrialized countries, that if the United States brought all students up to a minimum level of

proficiency, the country would add as much as \$72 trillion to its gross domestic product over the lifetime of a child born in 2010.¹⁷

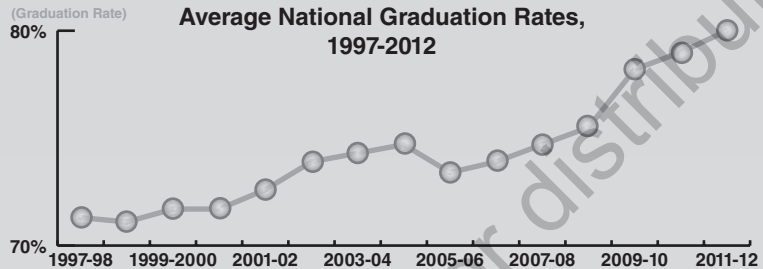
Even with the recent improvement in graduation numbers, the United States ranks 21st among 28 industrialized countries in the proportion of youth who complete high school, according to the OECD.¹⁸ In the 1970s, the United States ranked first.

Experts agree that a large part of the dropout problem can be traced to social, economic and cultural factors that adversely affect some students, such as poverty, a troubled home atmosphere and dangerous neighborhoods. High dropout rates can't necessarily be blamed on the education system, says Maria Ferguson, executive director of the Center on Education Policy at George Washington University. "Often they are caused by other factors." Until problems such as extreme poverty and high crime are remedied and the special needs of at-risk students are addressed, some education experts say, too many students will drop out.

Some national and state programs, such as one-on-one intervention and mentoring for at-risk students,

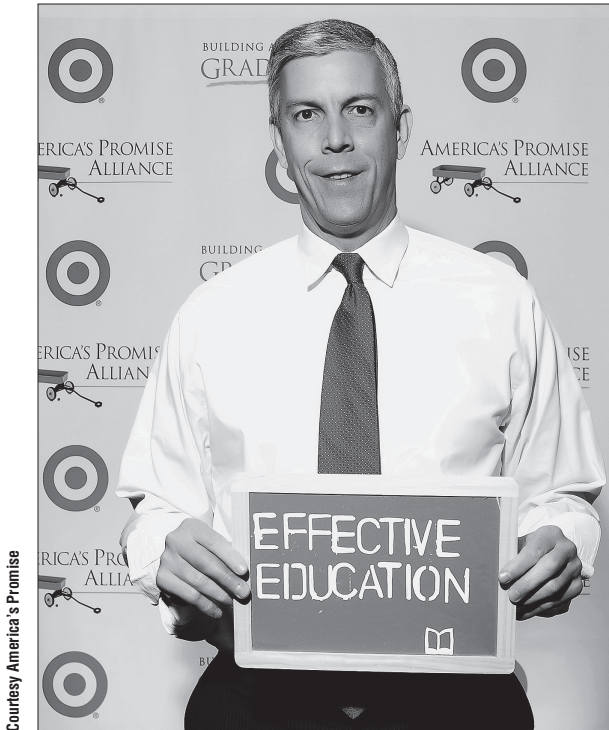
Graduation Rate Peaks in 2012

The public high school graduation rate climbed nearly 10 percentage points during the past 15 years to a high of 80 percent in 2011-12.



Note: The methodology for reporting graduation rates was standardized nationally in the 2010-11 academic year; earlier calculations used a slightly different definition of a freshman class.

Sources: "Digest of Education Statistics, Table 124," U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, October 2012 (1997-2010 data), <http://tinyurl.com/jvonwls>; Marie Stetser and Robert Stillwell, "Public High School Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates: School Years 2010-11 and 2011-12," U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics, April 2014 (2010-12 data), <http://tinyurl.com/km2k6jp>



Courtesy America's Promise

Education Secretary Arne Duncan is upbeat about the nation's efforts to improve secondary education. "The progress, while incremental, indicates that local leaders and educators are leading the way to raising standards and achievement and driving innovation over the next few years."

have produced improved graduation rates. However, many such programs are expensive and time-consuming, and experts question whether they can be duplicated across the country.

Officials in the Obama administration, the latest in a long line to attempt to solve the high school dropout problem, have frequently spoken out on the issue. Indeed, in his first State of the Union address, President Obama declared that "dropping out of high school is no longer an option" and described the nation's high dropout rate as "a prescription for economic decline."¹⁹

He has continued to discuss the problem in subsequent speeches. In an effort to cut the number of dropouts, he has suggested all states raise the legal dropout age to 18, although the suggestion has not gained much traction.²⁰ Eighteen states allow students to leave school before the age of 18.²¹

However, education legislation is stalled in Congress, despite pleas for action on key issues. Because of political gridlock and other factors, "most policy makers and education leaders have little hope any of these will be passed soon," says Ferguson.

As politicians, researchers and educators look for ways to raise the graduation rate, here are some of the questions they are asking:

Is societal change needed for graduation rates to rise?

Poverty is the strongest predictor of a school's dropout rate. Students from low-income families are five times more likely to drop out than students from high-income families.²² In all but six states, the graduation rate for low-income students is below the national average.²³ Education experts say that in many cases, especially among minority and poor communities, sociological and cultural factors — such as disinterested or overburdened parents, crime and safety issues — also lead students to drop out.

Since the mid-1960s, when Congress enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to fund schools based on the proportion of low-income children enrolled, educators have been debating whether graduation rates can improve without a corresponding improvement in poverty and related issues.

"Graduation rates may be inching up, but there are still huge gaps between underserved students and students in richer school systems," says Ferguson at George Washington. "The reality is that we have a ZIP code-funded public education system and will never have a truly level playing field." Much of U.S. school funding comes from locally collected property and other taxes, so funding varies widely, depending on the incomes of families in a school's district.

Mary Clare Reim, a research assistant at the Center for Policy Innovation at the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank in Washington, wrote, "Too many young students are trapped in failing public schools simply because of where they were born. Place of birth should not be a life sentence to low economic mobility."²⁴

Ferguson says, "We have to do the best we can to improve our lowest-funded school systems or we won't see real increases in graduation rates." Available

“Why We Dropped Out”

High school dropouts from high-poverty areas cite a variety of reasons for leaving school, including gang influence, street violence, boredom, family health issues and a lack of support from parents or teachers. Researchers from the Center for Promise at Tufts University conducted group interviews last year with more than 200 dropouts in 16 high-poverty urban communities across the country. Here are excerpts:

“Seeing my homeboy stabbed to death, multiple deaths, having a cousin that was murdered when I was 5, just a lot of things. I started hanging around with the wrong people, gang members getting into crap like . . . just a lot of stuff.” — Sara

“I eventually dropped out just ‘cause the bills weren’t getting paid and I knew I could pay the bills, step up. I never took on responsibility like that before in my life.” — Aaron

“Never had my mom in my life; she was always on drugs. It was just me growing up watching over my little brothers while she was out in the street doing her thing. So me and my other brothers grew up too quick, took responsibility, we just — it was too late to go back to school.” — Thomas

“I just didn’t like school. It wasn’t because I’m dumb. I get sick just entering the building. I feel like I’m in prison. It’s how the school was set up.” — Jeff

“I got shot in my leg, and they started sending me homework from school . . . and I was doin’ it and all of a sudden I started drinking and I got a little bit depressed, and just tired of it, you know, I don’t want to do it no more, and I just quit.” — Paul

“Everybody I was around smoked weed. Everybody I was around didn’t go to school. So it was either go to school by yourself or stay around here and smoke with my friends.” — Ernest

Source: “Don’t Call Them Dropouts: Understanding the Experiences of Young People who Leave High School Before Graduation,” America’s Promise Alliance and its Center for Promise, Tufts University, May 20, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/mpawcm7>

“I learn really hands-on and if it’s shown to me in a really creative way then I get it right away. But, in traditional high school you sit down and read a book and hopefully you learn this. . . . Once I got into high school and that’s all I was doing, I started hating reading.” — Sharif

“The gangs showed me love, showed me the ropes, showed me how to get money. After that I was like, what do I need school for?” — Carl

The teachers “weren’t sure what to do with me, how to help me. . . . I was moving around foster homes a lot so it’s like you didn’t get any support anywhere. After a while I just stopped going to class, stopped doing homework, skipped school and got into doing drugs and things like that.” — Denise

“Even though I was taking extra-credit classes and doing after-school work, they didn’t give me any of my extra credits or any credits from the credit-recovery program. So, then I just kind of fell off, I figured there was no point in trying.” — Donald

“The teachers wouldn’t even acknowledge me. I would say I’m behind, can you do this for me? . . . A lot of teachers didn’t even know my name, it got really bad and came to the point where I wasn’t going to graduate.” — Arielys

“In school I was reckless because no one cared and no one said anything. If someone was there to push me, maybe we would have all stayed in school.” — Vivian

“When I turned 18 I [aged out of foster care] and became homeless and that’s where it all started. It just went downhill. I withdrew myself because I had nowhere to go.” — Mandy

funds should be concentrated on low-income schools, she says.

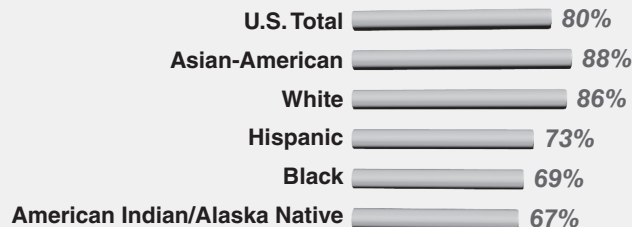
But increased funding is not always the answer, argues Martha Bruckner, superintendent of schools in

Council Bluffs, Iowa, where nearly 70 percent of the district’s approximately 9,000 students are from low-income families, and graduation rates have jumped from 68 percent to 84.5 percent over the last eight

Blacks, Hispanics Lag Behind Whites, Asians

In the 2011-12 school year, 80 percent of public high school students graduated within four years. However, the graduation rate was considerably lower for American Indians, blacks and Hispanics than for whites or Asian-Americans.

Four-Year Graduation Rates, by Race/Ethnicity, 2011-12



Source: Marie Stetser and Robert Stillwell, "Public High School Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates: School Years 2010-11 and 2011-12," U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics, April 2014, pp. 9-10, <http://tinyurl.com/km2k6jp>

years. "Poverty is a problem, but it's not insurmountable," she says.

Six years ago the Council Bluffs school district put in place a strategic plan with the objective of "guaranteeing" every student a high school diploma. It included a range of targeted programs that appointed "graduation coaches" for mentoring at-risk students, such as those who became pregnant or had poor attendance. This one-on-one intervention made students more accountable to their teachers and, Bruckner says, helped them learn the value of completing school. In addition, an attendance facilitator worked with each of the district's schools to increase school attendance.

"We also reached out into the community and enlisted the aid of concerned parents as volunteers," Bruckner says. "A lot of what we are doing is instilling pride in students, and their parents, in earning a high school diploma. I think too many people have used poverty as an excuse for our nation's high dropout rates. Instead of waiting for the government to cure poverty, we say education is the key to reducing poverty."

Some educators say asking schools to solve or even merely compensate for societal problems may be asking too much. "No matter how much we improve our public schools, they alone cannot solve the deeply rooted, systemic problems of our society," according to New York

University's Ravitch, who once advocated conservative-backed reforms such as school choice but has since become a vocal opponent of such policies. "The failure of public policy is not the failure of the public schools."²⁵ Her 2013 book *Reign of Error* denounces what she calls "the hoax of the privatization movement" — or what she sees as an effort by school reformers to turn public education over to the private sector.

Others say that schools must find ways to deal with the situations that students face. "High school dropout rates are often not the main problem but an indicator of other problems," says Rumberger at UCSB. "These are often examples of society failing kids, not kids failing schools. The

challenge is to improve schools so they can better compensate for the inequalities or handicaps of these at-risk students. That's a way to raise graduation rates." In his book *Dropping Out: Why Students Drop Out of High School and What Can Be Done About It*, he advocates targeting help to the poorest schools and most vulnerable students early in elementary school, among other steps.

Bob Wise, former governor of West Virginia and now president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, says the nation cannot use economic and social problems as an excuse to avoid trying to improve the educational system. "Certainly, low-income children need improved health care and better support systems, but we cannot wait for these societal fixes to be done to work on education," he says. "We have to get on with working on education. If all we do is provide better housing and health care for people who don't have an education, they will remain in the economic straits they are in."

Some point to the improvement in graduation rates over the last decade as evidence that the situation can improve despite poverty and in the face of other socioeconomic problems. "Poverty matters, but schools and teachers can make a lot of difference in the face of poverty," says Frederick M. Hess, a resident scholar and director of education policy studies at the American

Enterprise Institute (AEI), a conservative Washington think tank.

“We lived through a powerful recession, and [graduation] rates still went up,” says Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University, who has worked with low-performing schools nationally, many in poor neighborhoods. He points to successful programs designed to support at-risk students and says, “Poverty is admittedly a significant driver of these low graduation rates, but the evidence shows that things can happen at the school level that can modify that to some extent.”

Bruckner in Council Bluffs agrees. “Teachers, working in tandem with their students, parents and the local community, can make a quantifiable difference,” Bruckner says. “Our district is proof of that.”

Are successful local dropout programs viable nationwide?

Hundreds of programs to reduce dropout rates have been created over the last decade. These include big-budget, statewide education reform programs such as Florida’s, which raised the state’s graduation rate 21 percent between 1999 and 2010. They also include big-city programs such as Children First in New York City, where schools are graded A through F based in part on student progress, and the high school graduation rate rose 42 percent in eight years; as well as district- or local-level programs such as those in Council Bluffs and Darlington County, S.C., with 10,500 students.²⁶

While some of these programs have shown promising results, it is still unclear whether they could be sustainable and scalable nationwide. Funding can be difficult to obtain, and there is little research on which programs are most effective.

In Darlington County, a rural, low-income region where 22 percent of the population is below the national poverty level and per capita annual income is only \$20,000, turnaround has been dramatic.²⁷ In five years the county has boosted its graduation rate from 70 percent to 93.4 percent, the highest in South Carolina.²⁸ The county’s education reforms included one-on-one intervention for struggling students plus a dropout-prevention facilitator in each school who focuses on at-risk students. The district also introduced a more comprehensive K-12 reading curriculum, self-directed learning at the high

school level (where students may choose from various courses in a curriculum) and a strict attendance policy.

“Happily, we are seeing models that are duplicable nationwide,” says Wise, the former West Virginia governor. But there’s no magic formula that can be applied to any high school. “You have to look carefully at what’s happening in a community and what each school’s particular needs are,” he says. For example, while one school could use non-union staff in an intervention program, another might be restricted to employing only union personnel and thus face higher costs. Also, programs can be duplicated more successfully if demographics are similar.

Funding is a frequently cited problem. “These programs are inevitably costly, and many are most needed in under-funded school districts with low tax bases,” says George Washington University’s Ferguson. “Teachers, mentors and tutors cost money, and it is often difficult to convince taxpayers to pay up.”

In Council Bluffs, Bruckner says, dropout prevention programs are funded by a \$2.5 million per year state grant, plus a foundation grant of \$250,000, which works out to about \$300 per student. In Darlington County, Eddie Ingram, the superintendent of schools, says that they spend \$383,000 per year on salaries for people whose primary responsibility is dropout intervention.

Unreliability of funding is also a problem. UCSB’s Rumberger notes that programs featuring expensive advocates or monitors for at-risk students are often paid by federal or state grants, rather than from local school funds. “What happens when that grant money runs out, as it usually does, in a year or two?” he asks. “Governments and foundations need to better focus on how these programs can be sustained in the current fiscally restrained climate after the funding expires.”

For example, the federal government in 2010 funded the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Program, meant to help states develop literacy programs. “Congress in its wisdom funded the program, then a year later eliminated it and restarted it the following year,” says Phillip Lovell, vice president for policy and advocacy/comprehensive school reform at the Alliance for Excellent Education. “No business would ever do such a thing.” The level of uncertainty created by Washington’s gridlock “is a real impediment to reform.”

It’s wrong to focus on short-term costs, says Wise. “We cannot not afford to transform our schools. It’s a case of

'pay me now or pay me later.' If we don't fund education now, we'll pay later in the form of increased health care costs, social welfare costs, low earnings and more."

While programs such as Darlington County's might succeed in other school systems, there is a lack of research on which dropout prevention programs work best, says Rumberger. "The federal government is very weak on measuring the effectiveness, and especially the cost effectiveness, of many intervention programs." Citing a lack of research funding, he notes, "We educators don't do enough research on those factors." Ferguson, too, says a shortage of research funding prevents more schools from adopting reform programs.

But Haskins at Brookings disagrees, noting that the federal Institute of Education Sciences "is well-funded, and they are doing high-quality education research, as are the schools taking part in the federal program Investing in Innovation." In that program, school districts and nonprofits compete for grants to develop and test new ideas.

Some education officials praise the federal government for its role in pressing states to agree to a standardized, uniform calculation of graduation rates. "It's impossible to know how you're doing if you don't have good numbers," says Lovell.

While the initial call for this statistical reform came in a 2005 report from the nation's governors, the federal government took the lead in the ensuing years by making use of that method a part of state education-accountability systems linked to federal aid.²⁹ Says Balfanz, at Johns Hopkins, "This reform would have died if the federal government didn't push it forward."

Complaints about the lack of research aren't new. A 2008 report from the National Education Association (NEA), the nation's largest teachers union, noted, "For at least a decade, researchers have reported the dearth of rigorous evaluations of the effectiveness of educational programs in general, and of dropout prevention and intervention programs in particular. This makes it difficult to identify high-quality model programs or the components that make them effective."³⁰

Says AEI's Hess, an advocate of local control of schools, "I'd rather that Congress increase funding for education research instead of funding federal programs that seek to dictate how states and local governments run their schools."

Are the federal government's efforts to raise graduation rates working?

Between 2009 and 2013, the Obama administration distributed \$5.1 billion to states to improve academic performance at about 1,500 struggling high schools. These School Improvement Grants constitute the largest-ever federal aid targeted at failing schools, many of them so-called dropout factories.

Results have been mixed, however: Students at a third of the schools did the same or worse than before the funding; the others improved, but at a rate similar to that of all U.S. students during the same time.

"You can't help but look at the results and be discouraged. We didn't spend \$5 billion of taxpayer's money for incremental change," said Andrew Smarick, a former federal education official and a partner at Bellwether Education Partners, a Massachusetts consulting firm.³¹

Education Secretary Duncan disagreed: "The progress, while incremental, indicates that local leaders and educators are leading the way to raising standards and achievement and driving innovation over the next few years."³²

Balfanz, whose research was largely responsible for identifying the phenomenon of dropout factories and helping to popularize the term, says the federal money helped prove that troubled schools could be reformed. "We used to think these problems were intractable," he says. "Now we can see some of these schools can be turned around." The number of dropout factories fell from 2,007 in 2002 to 1,359 in 2012.³³

While some applaud Washington's funding for education programs, such as the School Improvement Grants and other initiatives, others claim these programs are the latest in a succession of actions that give Washington too much say in education policy, historically a state and local matter. "One of the biggest questions that will affect education policy is how big a role do we want the federal government to have in education," says Ferguson. Debate over the issue often splits along ideological lines, with Republicans generally calling for a reduced federal role and Democrats a larger one.

Critics of Washington's education-reform efforts claim that with the advent of No Child Left Behind, the federal school reform law that went into effect in 2002, and the more recent Race to the Top programs, which tie federal money to adoption of national education standards, the federal government has taken a direct hand in

mandating education policy. Over time, “the U.S. secretary of Education became the nation’s superintendent of schools, telling every district and every school what was required of them to receive federal funding,” said critic Ravitch at NYU.³⁴

Critics also note that Washington provides only about 10 percent of the nation’s education budget, while state and local governments fund the rest. “We’ve seen 50 years of federal attempts to move the needle on graduation rates with little results,” says Lindsey Burke, a policy analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank in Washington. “There’s a pattern of large-scale federal education reform programs, such as Head Start and others, that are failing in their stated mission. This is an issue better left to the states and local districts, especially because Washington is only a 10 percent stakeholder in education.”

Ravitch and others say federal “interference” in state and local education policy harms the national graduation rate instead of helping it. They say the galaxy of practices often lumped together as “school reform,” many supported by the Obama administration — practices such as charter schools, performance-based pay for teachers and extensive standardized testing — are distractions. It’s time, they say, to let teachers teach. “If Uncle Sam is going to be involved in schooling, his role should be constructive and constrained. And recently it hasn’t been,” says Hess at AEI.

Brookings’ Haskins counters, “Schools just haven’t been doing their job for decades. I think politics is driving some arguments. I don’t see any danger that the feds are going to take over the schools; they may have been a little heavy-handed . . . but leaving the performance of the schools to the states and localities does not do the job.”

Lovell of the Alliance for Excellent Education says, “If schools could fix this problem by themselves, why are we now applauding a graduation rate where one-fifth of our students are [still] failing to graduate?”

While the graduation rate has been inching up, it is still too early to determine the effects of relatively recent federal programs, such as Race to the Top. Says George Washington’s Ferguson, “Until we sort out the federal role, it will be difficult to make any lasting progress.”

BACKGROUND

Early Origins

Although the history of U.S. schools goes back to 1635, when the Boston Latin Grammar School opened, early schools were vastly different from those today. The first high schools were private and reserved for the privileged few in a time when most people had little schooling.

The nation’s first public high school, Boston’s English Classical School, did not open until 1821; others followed in New England and New York. Still, at a time when jobs generally didn’t require high school diplomas, only a small part of the population attended high school and fewer graduated. In 1870, 50,000 students were attending 500 public high schools across the country, and just 2 percent of the nation’s 17-year-olds graduated.³⁵

“It can be said that the modern public high school was born when the Michigan Supreme Court ruled in 1874 that taxes could be levied to support public high schools as well as elementary schools,” according to a history of high school prepared for the U.S. Department of Education.³⁶ Tax-supported schools became common, enrollment was opened to girls and working-class children attended to learn skilled trades.

By 1940, for the first time in the nation’s history, half of all high school students were graduating. A decade later, that number had jumped to about two-thirds.³⁷ With these higher numbers, the high school diploma came to be seen a valuable credential and for many jobs, a requirement.

“Waste We Cannot Afford”

As more students attended high school, more inevitably left school before graduating, but the issue of “dropouts” did not receive major national attention until the 1960s. “Educators and others may have been worried about attrition before 1960, but few defined it as a crisis,” according to Sherman Dorn, an education professor at the University of South Florida in Tampa who has written about the history of the issue.³⁸

The Soviet Union’s 1957 launch of *Sputnik*, the first spacecraft to orbit Earth, began the space race and fueled concerns that America and American education were slipping behind the Soviet Union. The failure of many students to graduate from high school soon became a national issue. “How American education solves the

C H R O N O L O G Y

1940s-1980s *With high school open to all, concept of “dropout” emerges.*

1940 Almost 80 percent of high-school-age teens are enrolled, and half of 17-year-olds are high school graduates.

1954 Supreme Court’s landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision holds racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional.

1962 The National Education Association’s Project on School Dropouts is one of the first to explore the dropout issue.

1963 President John F. Kennedy initiates campaign to publicize the dropout issue.

1965 Congress passes Elementary and Secondary Education Assistance Act, first broad federal funding for public schools, targeted largely at the poorest schools.

1983 The widely discussed report “A Nation at Risk” depicts the U.S. education system as failing and students lagging behind those in other industrialized countries, but does not directly deal with dropouts.

1988 George H. W. Bush elected president; vows to be the “education president.”

1989 Congress kills Bush education initiative; president’s “education summit” produces few concrete results. Bush pledges to raise the graduation rate to 90 percent by 2000.

1990-2000 *Nation’s focus on education and dropouts sharpens.*

1991 Congress kills Bush’s America 2000 legislation, which calls for national standards and student assessments.

1994 Congress passes President Bill Clinton’s Goals 2000 initiative calling for states to develop education standards. . . . Improving America’s Schools Act ties federal funds to adoption of standards.

1997 Former presidents hold President’s Summit on America’s Future, drawing attention to the dropout crisis. . . . America’s Promise Alliance, a partnership of groups focused on education policy, evolves from the summit.

2000 U.S. Army launches Operation Graduation ad campaign to encourage at-risk students and dropouts to complete high school.

2001-Present *Reform movement goes national, creates backlash.*

2001 No Child Left Behind Act, centerpiece of national school reform, calls for annual testing in reading and math, with penalties for failing schools. Schools must comply in order to receive federal funds. Launched with bipartisan support, the law becomes increasingly controversial over time.

2004 Johns Hopkins University researchers publish report that describes “dropout factories” with graduation rates below 60 percent.

2005 All states agree to use a single method to track graduation rates. . . . Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation steps up dropout program funding.

2008 Barack Obama elected president after campaigning on education platform. . . . Review of 22 dropout-prevention programs finds none raise graduation rates.

2009 In his first State of the Union speech, Obama says, “Dropping out of high school is no longer an option.” . . . Congress approves \$4.35 billion for Race to the Top grants for states with education reform plans; 41 states compete for grants.

2010 America’s Promise Alliance launches Grad Nation Initiative, focusing on dropout prevention.

2011 With changes to No Child Left Behind stalled in Congress, Obama administration grants waivers of the law’s requirements to states that make changes such as tying teacher evaluations to test scores. Opponents say the administration is using federal money to impose its policies.

2013 Administrators of the GED, the widely used high school equivalency test, announce tests will increase in price and have to be taken on computers; some states drop the GEDs.

2014 National high school graduation rate hits 80 percent in 2012.

problem of school dropouts . . . may well determine America's future," said Daniel Schreiber, who in the early 1960s was director of the National Education Association's Project on School Dropouts.³⁹

The term "dropout" entered the national consciousness. In 1960, *Life* magazine described the consequences: "Leaving school is usually one more step on a treadmill of discouragement, failure and escape. But the individual tragedy is also a national waste."⁴⁰

Sociologist Lucius F. Cervantes saw even more dire consequences, writing in 1965, "It is from this hard core of dropouts that a high proportion of the gangsters, hoodlums, drug addicted, government-dependent-prone, irresponsible and illegitimate parents of tomorrow will be inevitably recruited."⁴¹

Concern extended beyond academic researchers. President John F. Kennedy initiated a national campaign in 1963 to publicize the dropout issue and help local school districts identify and help potential dropouts. Noting that four out of 10 fifth-graders did not finish high school, he called the dropout problem a "waste we cannot afford."⁴² In 1965, as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, Congress enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to allocate federal funds to schools and districts based on the proportion of low-income children enrolled, thus aiming to improve the chances that poor children would graduate.

However, few of the dropout prevention programs in the 1960s were successful. "The programs rarely fulfilled their advocates' wishes, either in scope or in nature of programs. Constrained by budget limits, informal protocol, and often contradictory demands of sponsors and clients, programs failed to eliminate dropping out," according to Dorn.⁴³

Although the U.S. Department of Education was created in 1979, at a time of growing discussion about the importance of education, the dropout issue did not receive as much attention during the 1970s and '80s as it had during the 1960s. Indeed, the 1983 "A Nation at Risk" report, which many educators cite as the impetus for the modern era of education reform, warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity" in the public schools "that threatens our very future as a nation and a people." It called for more rigorous graduation requirements, but did not even mention the dropout issue.⁴⁴

Between 1988 and 1995 only 89 of the nation's approximately 15,000 school districts won federal grants for dropout prevention.⁴⁵ Even some generously funded dropout prevention programs recorded poor results. For example, New York City's school system spent more than \$120 million between 1985 and 1989 on a prevention program. More than half of its participants left school by the third year of the program, and fewer than 40 percent improved attendance.⁴⁶ As the Heritage Foundation noted, "The study's most significant finding is that it made no difference whether students participated only one year or for the full three years. . . . At a cost of more than \$8,000 per student, this program failed to assist even half of the participants."⁴⁷

However, beginning in the 1980s, the mission of high school had begun to shift, according to Johns Hopkins researcher Balfanz. "In response to the nation's transition from an industrial to an information economy, academic preparation once again became a priority. No longer an end point in the public education system, the American high school is now being asked to prepare all its students for postsecondary schooling and training required for full economic and social participation in U.S. society. In short, it is being challenged to make good on its potential and become an avenue of advancement for all."⁴⁸

Seeking Solutions

In 1989, newly inaugurated President George H. W. Bush, who had promised during his campaign to become an "education president," organized an education summit of the nation's governors. The meeting resulted in a commitment to a set of "national performance goals" to be achieved by 2000. Among them was raising the graduation rate to 90 percent by 2000, announced in Bush's State of the Union address in 1990, when the graduation rate was 71 percent.⁴⁹

Graduation rates did not improve markedly, however, and education reform received little support during the remainder of the Bush administration. "Four years into his presidency — and three years after expectations had been raised with the education summit — no substantial education legislation had been enacted," according to a summary of the history of federal education policy prepared by the New York State Archives for a continuing research project on the history of education policy.⁵⁰

GED Gets a Modern Makeover

Critics say the venerable high school equivalency test is on borrowed time

The General Educational Development (GED) test, the 72-year-old measure of high school equivalency for dropouts, recently underwent a major transformation — more than a decade since it was last revised.

The new version, introduced early this year, was designed to better align the GED with the new Common Core curriculum standards, be more rigorous and better evaluate “career and college readiness skills” than its predecessor.

However, some educators say the revised test is too difficult, expensive and inconvenient to take, and recent research has many questioning its value.

Created in 1942 and largely used after World War II by veterans who had not had a chance to finish high school, the “second-chance” test since then has helped both veterans and civilians qualify for jobs, higher education and education loans. One out of seven high school credentials is a GED certificate, and in 2011 about 723,000 students took the tests; their average age was 26.¹

The revised test emphasizes critical thinking and includes more questions on science and more writing than the previous version. For example, test-takers will now have to analyze literature and form arguments to answer essay questions.

Some adult educators worry that it will take at least a year to prepare students for the overhauled test. As one education writer noted, teachers “worry that their students, who are already beaten down and vulnerable, will give up.”² One potential test-taker told *USA Today*, “We’re already trying to cram in four years of education. Now you’re trying to cram in more.”³

Proponents of the new GED say it is an improvement on the previous version because it promotes critical thinking — for example, by requiring essay answers instead of relying solely on multiple choice. “How many apples and oranges? That’s not the kind of question that employers ask anymore,” said Lynn Bartlett, at Sunrise Tech Center near Sacramento, Calif. “Our instructional model is changing to match the new reality, the new vocabulary. . . . So when students earn the GED, it says they’ve accomplished something that’s needed in today’s economy and workplace.”⁴

The new GED will better prepare students for jobs, maintains C. T. Turner, director of public affairs at the GED Testing Service. “If we don’t provide them something of value, and they don’t have the information and skills they need, we are setting them up for failure.”⁵

The test will also be more expensive, with fees jumping in some states from \$65 to \$120 (Massachusetts), \$35 to \$130 (North Carolina) and \$95 to \$160 (Georgia). Jeff Putthoff, a Jesuit priest who is founder and executive director of Hopeworks N’ Camden, a New Jersey-based youth development organization, wrote, “The monetary hurdle is now huge. Besides having to travel significant distance and incur the cost of trains, tolls or parking, the fee to take the test has increased by nearly 300 percent. For the poorest among us the challenge to become employable is that much harder. How does one get the money to take the test needed to get a job to earn money?”⁶

The new test also will be offered exclusively on computers, which some educators say will create a barrier for some students, especially those lacking ready access to a

Like Bush, President Bill Clinton, during his 1992 campaign, emphasized education. His Goals 2000: The Educate America Act, signed into law in March 1994, reiterated the target of a 90 percent graduation rate by 2000. The measure also called for states to develop educational standards but gave them control over the content of those standards. Initially the law required

the federal government to approve standards, but that condition was dropped after critics said Washington was trying to impose a nationwide curriculum on local school districts.⁵¹

Another 1994 law, the Improving America’s Schools Act, which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, required states to adopt education standards

computer. “For someone who doesn’t have access to technology on a daily basis, we have to spend a lot of time on just the basic mechanics of using a mouse and moving around the screen,” said Leicester Johnson, executive director of the Academy of Hope, an adult education center in Washington, D.C.⁷

In addition, some researchers question the value of getting a GED. According to a study by James Heckman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist at the University of Chicago, typical GED holders don’t earn any more during their lifetimes than the typical high school dropout. His study also showed that the availability of the GED may influence capable students to drop out and apply for the less-onerous GED exam instead of studying for a high school diploma. (One-quarter of the nation’s 673,000 GED recipients in 2012 were 18 or younger.) He recommends raising the minimum age for taking the GED from 17 to 20 to dissuade students from dropping out of school in hopes of taking the “easier” GED.⁸

Given concerns about the difficulty, cost, inconvenience and value of the GED, it’s not surprising that at least nine states have decided to stop offering GED testing as an alternative to a high school diploma.⁹ Meanwhile, some private companies are offering less expensive pencil and paper alternatives to the GED.

States determine which tests they will offer, according to Brian Belardi, director of media relations for McGraw-Hill, which publishes one of the competing tests. His company’s test is recognized in seven states as an official equivalency test, he says — in three exclusively instead of the GED, and in four as one alternative.

“Angst is the good word” to describe the current GED situation, said Lennox McLendon, executive director of the National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium.¹⁰

— Robert Kiener



Cetty Images/The Denver Post/K. Scott Olsner

Graduates move their tassels after receiving their GED certificates from a Denver Rescue Mission education program. Participants typically overcome such obstacles as homelessness or unemployment.

¹Caralee J. Adams, “New GED tests stir concerns, draw competitors,” *Education Week*, June 6, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/nohbv44>.

²Kavitha Cardoza, “The GED test is about to get much harder, and much more expensive,” *The Atlantic*, Oct. 8, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/m8hkdua>.

³Michael Auslen, “GED test takers to study harder, pay more,” *USA Today*, July 24, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/pzqb8xq>.

⁴Loretta Kalb, “New GED test requires computer skills, more knowledge,” *The Sacramento Bee*, Jan. 13, 2014, www.sacbee.com/2014/01/13/6069988/new-ged-testing-requires-computer.html.

⁵Cardoza, *op. cit.*

⁶Jeff Putthoff, S.J., “GED overhaul diminishing hope,” *The Huffington Post*, April 2, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/o759dea>.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Whet Moser, “How to fix the GED,” *Chicago Magazine*, April 10, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/kjxfjre>.

⁹Kimberly Hefling, “GED test overhauled; some states opt for new exam,” *The Associated Press*, Jan. 1, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/lohqv3q>.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

in order to receive federal funds. The act also required assessments of students at some point between grades three and five and again in high school. The two laws gave the federal government authority to enforce teaching standards, but the Clinton administration never used its power to take money away from states that did not comply.⁵²

Research examining the dropout issue also evolved during the 1980s and ’90s. Much early research had been based on the belief that dropping out was the student’s fault and supported this belief with an examination of demographic and behavioral characteristics of these students.⁵³ In the 1990s, however, researchers broadened the scope of their research, in particular to



AFP/Getty Images/Saul Loeb

President George W. Bush proposed the No Child Left Behind Act three days after his Jan. 20, 2001, inauguration. Passed with bipartisan support, the law called for annual testing in reading and math, with penalties for schools that failed to achieve “adequate yearly progress.” The law greatly expanded the federal government’s power over the nation’s education system. Above, the president speaks on the law at the public Gen. Philip Kearny School in Philadelphia on Jan. 8, 2009.

include longitudinal studies — based on data collected over time — to see how students fared in different environments. By following students over time, researchers gained greater insight, for example, into the weight of economic and social factors on dropping out.

By the late 1990s, with rising interest in school reform, numerous private organizations, think tanks and university-based research institutes had been established to formulate and help implement school-reform programs, including dropout prevention efforts. Among these were the Center for Educational Innovation-Public Education Association, Colin Powell’s America’s Promise Alliance, the Council for Basic Education, the Manhattan Institute’s Center for Civic Innovation, the Center for Education Reform and many more.

Research and Action

Federal attention to education policy increased in the 21st century. Three days into his presidency, in January 2001, President George W. Bush announced his first legislative proposal — the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which passed that year with bipartisan support. The law, signed by Bush in January 2002, called for annual testing in reading and math with penalties for schools that failed to achieve “adequate yearly progress.” Federal funding was tied to the law’s requirements. The

NCLB greatly expanded the federal government’s power over the nation’s education system. A primary objective of the legislation was increasing high school graduation rates. Continuing debate over the measure, its requirements and its effects still shapes the national discussion about education.

Philanthropic organizations, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walmart Foundation and the Carnegie Foundation, invested in reform strategies that sought to increase high school achievement and improve graduation rates. In February 2005, the Gates Foundation pledged \$15 million to improve the nation’s “obsolete” high schools over time. As Microsoft cofounder-turned-philanthropist Bill Gates explained, “By obsolete, I don’t just mean that our high schools are broken, flawed and underfunded — though a case could be made for every one of those points. By obsolete, I mean that our high schools — even when they’re working exactly as designed — cannot teach our kids what they need to know today. . . . The poor performance of our high schools in preparing students for college is a major reason why the United States has now dropped from first to fifth in the percentage of young adults with a college degree.”⁵⁴

In President Obama’s first State of the Union address, in February 2009, when he declared that dropping out was “no longer an option,” he called for efforts to increase the graduation rate. That month, Congress approved \$4.35 billion in federal stimulus money for a competitive school grant program called Race to the Top, which offered schools and districts federal grants for reform programs that were innovative and could be measured for their effectiveness.⁵⁵ Likewise, the federal Investing in Innovation fund, created at the same time, provided \$650 million to schools to expand innovative reforms.

Because the administration required states and school districts to enact certain education policies to qualify for the funding, such as promising to adopt formal standards for content and testing in subjects such as math and English, some critics claimed that Race to the Top gave the federal government even more control over education matters.

Said New York University’s Ravitch, “The Obama administration pretended that states participated of their



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Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates and his wife, Melinda, head the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a major contributor of funding for education initiatives. In 2005 the foundation pledged \$15 million to improve the nation's "obsolete" high schools. "The poor performance of our high schools in preparing students for college is a major reason why the United States has dropped from first to fifth in the percentage of young adults with a college degree," Bill Gates said then.

own volition, thus maintaining the fiction that Race to the Top was 'voluntary' and that the federal government was not calling the tune."⁵⁶

Although educators, politicians and others say NCLB should be changed, they sharply disagree on how. Although the law has not been reauthorized since 2007, its provisions remain in force.⁵⁷

Beginning in 2011, the administration permitted states to apply for waivers from NCLB requirements and still receive federal funding. To get a waiver, a state must agree to adopt policies such as tying teacher evaluations to good test scores. Forty-two states and the District of Columbia had received waivers as of early 2014.⁵⁸

Republicans complained that the waivers were a violation of executive power and accused Education Secretary Duncan and the administration of circumventing congressional authority. They also argued the program forces states to adopt education policies favored by the administration. In 2011 Duncan said he was offering waivers because Congress had failed to rewrite NCLB, which he termed a "slow motion train wreck." He added, "The current law serves as a disincentive to higher standards, rather than as an incentive."⁵⁹

CURRENT SITUATION

Washington Gridlock

As with legislation on numerous other issues, several federal education policy measures are stalled in the gridlock among the Democratic administration, the Democratic-controlled Senate and the Republican-controlled House of Representatives. In addition to reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), stalled legislation includes funding for measures that support children with disabilities, career and technical education, educational research and more.

"Despite the president's request during his recent State of the Union address that Congress get moving on passing education legislation, it doesn't look like anything will be happening soon," says Ferguson at George Washington.

Education experts cite a growing disconnect between the administration and Congress, and within Congress itself, regarding the extent of the federal role in education. Broadly speaking, Republicans favor little federal involvement in education policy while Democrats believe the federal government has a role in telling states how to identify and fix low-performing schools.



AFP/Getty Images/Mandel Ngan

President Obama examines a student project at the Pathways in Technology Early College High School, in Brooklyn, part of the New York City public school system, on Oct. 25, 2013. If the United States brought all high school students up to minimum proficiency levels, as much as \$72 trillion would be added to the country's gross domestic product over the lifetime of a child born in 2010, an international research organization estimated.

Should all states raise the high school dropout age to 18?

YES**Bob Wise***President, Alliance for Excellent Education; former governor, West Virginia*Written for *CQ Researcher*, June 2014

All states should raise the legal high school dropout age to 18, but not because it will automatically increase graduation rates — it won't. Rather they should do it because of the message it sends students, parents, the public and the state about the critical importance of a high school diploma in today's global economy.

Fifty years ago, high school dropouts could still land well-paying jobs and support their families. But times have changed. Today, jobs that require relatively little education are disappearing. According to research from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, only about 10 percent of jobs are open to high school dropouts, compared with more than 30 percent in 1973.

Still, hundreds of thousands of students continue to drop out of high school every year. But passing a law that forces students to continue going to school must be only a first legislative action, not the final one. In fact, research from the Brookings Institution finds that states with higher compulsory school attendance ages do not have higher graduation rates than states with lower age requirements. Raising the compulsory age does little to address the root causes of why students drop out, which include difficult transitions from middle school to high school, an absence of basic reading and math skills and a lack of engagement.

As states debate whether to increase the compulsory school age, they must also provide the kind of education that engages students and give them a reason to want stay in school. Requiring compulsory attendance also means that state legislators need to plan for the additional classrooms, teachers and other resources needed to serve additional students who are now staying in school. Ensuring that all students have access to effective teachers and rigorous and engaging content is a good place to start — as is additional support, both academic and social — for students who have fallen behind.

Raising the compulsory attendance age can be a powerful motivational tool to express commitment to high school graduation, but only if it's accompanied by supporting policies and resources. While a legislative mandate increasing the compulsory school age can force students to attend school, it can't force them to learn. Provided that policymakers understand this important distinction, raising the dropout age to 18 can be one of the tools in their toolbox to increase high school graduation rates.

NO**Franklin Schargel***Schargel Consulting Group; author of 12 education reform books including Creating Safe Schools: A Guide for School Leaders, Teachers, Counselors and Parents*Written for *CQ Researcher*, June 2014

If America is to be globally competitive, it must have a high-performing, highly trained, technologically prepared workforce. And that means, at minimum, a high school diploma. I believe all students should stay in school until they graduate. However, that does not mean that all states should require that students remain in school until they are 18.

U.S. education is primarily a state and local responsibility. But President Obama and a number of state legislatures believe that the dropout age should be raised to 18. There is little data to indicate that will reduce dropout rates, according to a report by the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy. "Our review revealed that there is little research to support the effectiveness of compulsory attendance laws in achieving these goals," said the report.

Some states that require students to stay in school until age 18 have some of the nation's highest graduation rates (such as Nebraska and Wisconsin, both with 88 percent graduating) and some of the lowest, such as New Mexico (70 percent) and the District of Columbia (59 percent). So it is not the age of mandatory attendance that determines the dropout rate, but other factors. Simply mandating that young people remain in school without addressing the causes for their leaving will accomplish little.

There are five reasons children leave school prior to graduation:

- The childrens' bad decisions — getting pregnant, becoming involved in alcohol or drugs, committing crimes.
- The families they come from — low income, dropouts themselves, a clash of cultures between families and schools.
- The communities they come from — places where there are gangs, violence and drugs.
- The schools they attend, which are toxic to learning.
- The teachers they have — we give the least experienced, least trained teachers the most difficult students.

If we wish to eliminate dropouts we need to deal with these causes. By raising the dropout age, we add additional costs, for additional classrooms, teachers, support personnel and alternative online courses. This is foolhardy, especially when so many states have already cut into the marrow of education. Changing the dropout age is a simplistic, sound-bite solution to a complex problem.

“We sorely need a smarter, more coherent vision of the federal role in K-12 education,” wrote Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), and Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor of education at Stanford. “Yet both parties find themselves hemmed in. Republicans are stuck debating whether, rather than how, the federal government ought to be involved in education, while Democrats are squeezed between superintendents, school boards and teachers’ unions that want money with no strings, and activists with little patience for concerns about federal overreach.”⁶⁰

Two recent pieces of legislation illustrate the ideological differences. The Republican-sponsored Student Success Act seeks to reduce the federal role in education policy. As its backers said, “House Republicans are determined to put an end to the Obama administration’s overreach in our nation’s classrooms and empower communities to fix our broken education system. For too long, states and school districts have been inundated with federal intervention and bureaucratic red tape that has done little to improve student performance.”⁶¹

The Senate bill, the Democratic-sponsored Strengthening America’s Schools Act of 2013, includes federal oversight of school programs and would establish requirements that schools and districts must meet in order to receive federal funding. Unlike the House bill, the Senate measure gives the federal government a supervisory role.

“There’s a world of difference between the two bills,” says Lovell at the Alliance for Excellent Education.

Congressional Republicans have complained that by offering NCLB waivers, Education Secretary Duncan and the administration are “leapfrogging” Congress to create their own version of the law. Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., the top Republican on the Senate Education Committee and a former secretary of Education (1991-93), recently said, “Too often, this administration has turned competitive grants into federal mandates.”⁶²

However, Duncan said, “To avoid getting bogged down by the dysfunctionality of Washington, I had to go directly to the states who are teaching the kids and to the employers who are hiring them.”⁶³

“Maybe Duncan has not helped by offering waivers, but what was he going to do?” asks George Washington’s Ferguson. “Congress was doing nothing about education reform to improve graduation rates, and he wanted to act. The Congress said ‘How dare you!’ and we have a stalemate.”



Courtesy America’s Promise

A student addresses a meeting in Washington in April to discuss the 2014 “Building a GradNation” report, an annual update on dropout prevention efforts issued by America’s Promise Alliance, an education policy organization started by retired Gen. Colin Powell, and other policy groups. This year’s report underscored the differences in nationwide graduation rates. Blacks, for example, graduate at a 69 percent rate and Hispanics at 73 percent, compared with whites at 86 percent and Asian-Americans at 88 percent.

Fewer “Dropout Factories”

A bright point in the April 2014 “Building a GradNation” report was the continued decline in the number of what have been called dropout factories — high schools with graduation rates of 60 percent or lower. Over the last decade, such schools, which are responsible for an outsized proportion of students who do not graduate, have been targeted for reform or closure.

The number of these schools has declined from 2,007 in 2002 to 1,359 in 2012. There were still a million students attending the schools, but that was down from 2.2 million in 2002. Some schools improved their graduation rate, some closed and some had so many students transfer to other schools that they were no longer required to report graduation results to the government.

In 2004, almost half of the nation’s African-American high school students and nearly 40 percent of Hispanic students were enrolled in such schools. By 2012 those levels had fallen to 23 percent and 15 percent, respectively.⁶⁴

Balfanz of Johns Hopkins, who wrote a groundbreaking report on dropout factories in 2004, says, “Once the word got out about these dropout factories, there

was a concerted effort by the government, communities, businesses and foundations to make changes.”

Concern Over Standards

With the recent rise in graduation rates, many educators and administrators say they are cautiously optimistic about the state of the nation’s high schools. The caution stems from concern about the quality of the education some students are receiving. “The numbers tell us that more students are graduating, but we don’t know much about the quality of those diplomas,” says Rumberger at the University of California-Santa Barbara. “More students may have a diploma, but how prepared are they to enter the workforce? We don’t know if they are just barely passing or doing better.”

Some recent test results are causing educators concern. For example, average reading scores from the just-released 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) — the “Nation’s Report Card” — have not improved from 2009 — and are lower than results from 1992.⁶⁵ Based on approximately 92,000 students’ test results nationwide, the 2013 scores showed that only 38 percent of the country’s high school seniors were reading at or above the “proficient” level and that only 26 percent scored at or above “proficient” in mathematics.

According to David Driscoll, chairman of the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the content and operation of NAEP, the findings are particularly troubling for further student success. “Achievement at this very critical point in a student’s life must be improved to ensure success after high school,” he said.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, some states are reducing long-held requirements for graduation, a move that critics call “dumbing down” the high school curriculum. Florida stopped requiring students to study chemistry, physics and Algebra II to graduate, and Texas dropped its Algebra II requirement. Washington state dropped requirements that students study a foreign language. Nevada lowered the score needed to pass a high school math proficiency exam from 300 (out of 500) to 242.⁶⁷

Some see the state changes as a rebellion against the Common Core standards, a curriculum developed by the nation’s governors that is being phased in nationally.⁶⁸ Conservatives have charged that the standards — which set national benchmarks for what students should learn in reading, writing and math in each grade — interfere

with local control of education. Some educators complain that they put too much emphasis on testing.

Opponents of Common Core’s “college-prep” curriculum also say high schools should provide education suitable for all students, not just those who intend to go to college. Democratic New Mexico state Rep. Mimi Stewart, a retired teacher who introduced a bill to let students graduate without passing state exams or taking Algebra II, said, “We are supposed to be doing college and career readiness, not college and college readiness.”⁶⁹

Critics claim it is a mistake to lower standards. “If we are making it much easier for people to receive that diploma, I’m not confident it will translate into successful life outcomes,” says AEI’s Hess.

Others say that with American students falling further behind many of their counterparts in industrialized nations in subjects such as science, mathematics and reading comprehension, lower standards will widen the gap. “The U.S. system of education and training is inadequate in the new global environment,” wrote journalist Fareed Zakaria, who specializes in international affairs.⁷⁰ He and others warn that raising standards, not lowering them, is the only way the United States can compete globally.

OUTLOOK

Striving for 90 Percent

Some optimists say U.S. graduation rates are on track to improve. “Four successive presidents have set high goals for graduation rates only to see them fall short of the mark,” says Balfanz, the Johns Hopkins researcher. “But after years of flat-lining graduation rates, it looks like we finally have a shot at reaching that much-talked-about 90 percent graduation rate. Identifying, then improving, dropout factories was a start; now we have to keep working to increase how we support at-risk, low-income students.”

The stakes are huge. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, one of the sponsors of the “Building a Grad-Nation” report, reaching the 90 percent goal for high school graduates nationwide would create as many as 65,700 jobs and boost the national economy by as much as \$10.9 billion.⁷¹

But there is no way the nation can reach the goal without meeting several tough challenges. “The recent

numbers look good, but there is a lot of unevenness in the graduation rates,” says Lovell at the Alliance for Excellent Education. “We need to focus on accountability, awareness and reform if we want to get to 90 percent.”

According to Balfanz and other authors of the GradNation report, the country must:

- Close the opportunity gap. Graduation gaps between low-income students and their middle-to-higher-income peers reach nearly 30 percentage points in some states.
- Target students with disabilities, who represent 13 percent of all students.
- Reform or reinvent urban high schools so they help drive graduation rates higher than current 50- and 60-percent levels, so black and Hispanic students don't languish behind.
- Ensure big states, such as California, which has 13 percent of all students and 20 percent of all the nation's low-income students, continue to make significant progress.

“I think our chances are good,” says Wise, the former West Virginia governor. He is enthusiastic about models being developed to redesign high schools and to provide more individual intervention and guidance and more cooperation between educators and the business community. He is especially optimistic about how technology could boost graduation rates: “Technology will be a game changer. For example, tech will provide data systems to allow teachers to be like doctors, knowing exactly in what areas a student is strong and where they need help.”

The federal government's role will affect the future. “Funding is key, especially because the income gap between low-income school communities and high-income areas will probably keep growing,” says George Washington's Ferguson.

Others warn that as long as Washington is gridlocked, education will suffer. “The president's shining a light on the dropout issue has been a great start,” says Balfanz, “but Congress has to come together on education issues.”

The effect of the Common Core standards on dropout rates is still unknown. Some educators think that if the new curriculum is more rigorous than that offered in the past, more students will drop out. Speaking of the new

program's tests, Andrew Hacker, a political scientist and professor emeritus in the political science department at Queens College in New York City, said, “There's going to be a huge failure rate. It's going to exacerbate the . . . dropout rate we have among high school students already.”⁷²

Others disagree, predicting that while there may be a temporary decline in graduation rates at the beginning, as some students become frustrated, in time the effect will be fewer dropouts. The New York State Department of Education points to research that shows students want to be more challenged in school, saying that seven out of 10 students who dropped out said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard in high school.⁷³

Rumberger at the University of California-Santa Barbara stresses the need for more research on the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of intervention and reform programs. “Setting specific targets, such as [the] 90 percent graduation rate, is less useful than making a more fundamental commitment to improving the lives of children and strengthening the families, schools and communities that serve them,” he says.

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For More Information

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