

LOSING OUR FUTURE:  
How Minority Youth are Being Left  
Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis

*A Joint Release By:*

*The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University  
The Urban Institute  
Advocates for Children of New York  
The Civil Society Institute*

*Executive Summary*

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<http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu>

## CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

**The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (CRP)** was founded in 1996 by Professors Christopher Edley, Jr. of Harvard Law School and Gary Orfield of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Its central mission is to help renew the civil rights movement by bridging the worlds of ideas and action, and by becoming a preeminent source of intellectual capital and a forum for building consensus within that movement. We achieve this by interweaving strategies of research and policy analysis, and by building strong collaborations between researchers, community organizations, and policy makers. Our dual objectives are to: (1) raise the visibility of, and attention to, racial justice national policy debates; and (2) arm local and national civil rights and educational organizations with credible research to inform their legal, political and public education efforts. *CRP wrote the narrative and worked closely with the Urban Institute to analyze the data contained in the report.*

**The Urban Institute**, a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy research and educational organization, examines America's social, economic, and governance problems. It provides information, analyses, and perspectives to public and private decisionmakers to help them address these problems and strives to deepen citizens' understanding of the issues and trade-offs that policymakers face. Its Education Policy Center conducts research on education reforms involving accountability, school vouchers, standards, after-school programs, technology, teacher quality, and the new increased flexibility in using federal funds. *The Urban Institute created the indicator for graduation rates used in this study (the Cumulative Promotion Index), conducted all data analysis contained in this report, and contributed to preparation of the narrative.*

**Advocates for Children of New York (AFC)** Founded in 1971, AFC is New York's leading educational advocacy and legal services organization. Our mission is to make sure that New York's children get access to a quality and appropriate education. AFC does this work through direct service, training, policy reports, impact advocacy and information dissemination. In the past 33 years, we have helped hundreds of thousands of New York City children obtain the resources they need to succeed in school. *For this report AFC reached out nationally to document the individual and systemic stories about why children are being pushed out or dropped out of school.*

**Results for America** is a project of the nonprofit **Civil Society Institute**, (CSI) which is based in Newton, Massachusetts. The mission of the Institute is to serve as a catalyst for change by creating problem-solving interactions among people, and between communities, government and business, that can help to improve society. A key goal of Results for America is to shape and tap the tremendous amount of community-level knowledge, experience and innovative action that could solve America's problems in education under its initiative on Great Kids, Great Schools, Great Communities. Results for America supports investing in public schools, making sure parents have more of a say in their schools and creating conditions that will lead to learning and success for every child. *CSI is supporting the efforts to disseminate this report in order to bring more voices and perspectives, particularly those of students, into the debate about the costs and benefits of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Losing Our Future: How Minority Youths are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis**

#### **An Invisible Crisis**

Every year, across the country, a dangerously high percentage of students—disproportionately poor and minority—disappear from the educational pipeline before graduating from high school. Nationally, only about 68 percent of all students who enter 9<sup>th</sup> grade will graduate “on time” with regular diplomas in 12<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>1</sup> While the graduation rate for white students is 75 percent, only approximately half of Black, Hispanic<sup>2</sup>, and Native American students earn regular diplomas alongside their classmates. Graduation rates are even lower for minority males. Yet, because of misleading and inaccurate reporting of dropout and graduation rates, the public remains largely unaware of this educational and civil rights crisis.

Recently, Congress took a first step in recognizing the severity of the dropout problem by including graduation rate accountability provisions in the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), enacted in 2002. Unfortunately, the Department of Education has issued regulations that allow schools, districts, and states to all but eliminate graduation rate accountability for minority subgroups. By doing so, Department officials have rendered these accountability measures virtually meaningless.

The implications for individuals, communities, and the economic vitality of this country are far-reaching and devastating. High school dropouts are far more likely to be unemployed, in prison, and living in poverty. Many studies estimate significant losses in earnings and taxes with economic and societal effects that last generations.

#### **Report Purpose and Methodology**

Our goal in issuing this report is to raise public awareness of the issue, and to make improving high school graduation rates a more central component of national educational reform efforts. We believe that the first step must entail highlighting the severe racial disparities in high school graduation rates that exist at the school and district levels.

Because that goal has been impeded in the past by grossly inaccurate and misleading official dropout data, this report spells out in some detail how we arrived at our figures, and why we assert that the methods we used provide far more accurate information than is currently officially reported by both the federal government and by most states. This

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, the term graduation rates refers to the percentage of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students who graduate with a regular diploma with their 12<sup>th</sup> grade class.

<sup>2</sup> The term Hispanic is used throughout in tables because the data are collected and reported under that category.

analysis draws on the expertise of Dr. Christopher Swanson of the non-partisan The Urban Institute, one of the nation’s leading experts on enrollment and graduation rate data. As co-author, Dr. Swanson calculated the graduation rates employed throughout the report using the “cumulative promotion index” (CPI). CPI is a method he independently developed and tested to provide more accurate graduation rate estimates.<sup>3</sup>

The report combines findings of a comprehensive review of graduation rate accountability derived from each state’s website, along with interviews of state education officials. Finally, the report provides recommendations on how both the federal government and individual states can act to address this crisis.

Woven throughout this report are narratives about students who have either dropped out or felt “pushed” out of school, often due to the pressure experienced by officials to raise their schools’ overall test profiles. Collectively, these stories highlight the critical need to provide individual schools and school districts with positive incentives to hold onto more students through graduation.

#### **Four Lowest State Rates By Group**

	<b>Worst</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Worst</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Worst</b>	<b>4<sup>th</sup> Worst</b>
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>State : Rate</b>	<b>State : Rate</b>	<b>State : Rate</b>	<b>State : Rate</b>
Black	NY : 35.1	Ohio : 39.6	Nevada : 40.5	Florida : 41.0
Hispanic	NY : 31.9	Mass. : 36.1	Michigan : 36.3	Iowa : 40.5
White	Florida : 57.9	Nevada : 62.0	Georgia : 62.4	Miss. : 63.3

*(Derived from Urban Institute Analysis of 50 states. All states listed in Tables A-F)*

#### **Major Findings**

Our analysis reached three general findings grounded in research:

- 1. The racial disparities in graduation rates that exist at the federal, state, district, and school levels are pervasive and deep.**
  - **Nationally, only an estimated 68% of all students who enter 9th grade will graduate with a regular diploma in 12th grade.** For whites the rate is 75% but rates are significantly lower for most minority groups, and particularly for minority males. According to the calculations used in this report, in 2001 only 50.2% of all Black students, 51% of Native American students, and 53.2% of all Hispanic students graduated from high school.

<sup>3</sup> The reported rate estimates used in this table are based on enrollment data. No estimates are flawless, but as discussed later in this report, the rates reported here are among the most accurate available.

Black, Native American, and Hispanic males fare even worse: 43%, 47%, and 48% respectively.

- Graduation Rates for Black and Hispanic Males are averaging under 50% nationally.** Black, Native American, and Hispanic males fare even worse: 43%, 47%, and 48% respectively. The gender differences within racial groups can be as large as 20 points, with males of every racial group consistently faring worse than females. The data on minority males are rarely reported although they are clearly experiencing the deepest crisis.
- At the national and state level, the racial gap in graduation rates between Whites and most minority groups<sup>4</sup> is pronounced:** The national gap for blacks is 24.7 percentage points; For Hispanics 21.7 percentage points; for Native Americans 23.8 percentage points. Despite wide ranges within some states, nearly every state shows a large and negative gap between whites and at least one minority group. As the chart below reveals, these racial gaps are sometimes much larger within a given state.

<b>The 10 States with Largest Racial Gaps</b>			
		<b>White/Hispanic</b>	<b>White/Black</b>
<b>Rank</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Gap</b>	<b>Gap</b>
1.	New York	43.4	40.2
2.	Wisconsin	28.0	41.3
3.	Pennsylvania	40.4	35.4
4.	Michigan	40.3	n/a
5.	Iowa	38.8	31.3
6.	Massachusetts	37.6	24.3
7.	Nebraska	34.8	36.5
8.	Ohio	32.7	36.3
9.	Illinois	25.1	35.1
10.	Connecticut	31.8	21.2

*For many states the available data provided information for less than 75% of a particular student subgroup. These are included in the report but excluded from this summary. As a result, no gaps at the state level between Whites and Native Americans or Asian American/Pacific Islanders are described here.*

- At the district level:** Districts characterized by high poverty, districts that are located in central cities and districts with high percentages of minority

<sup>4</sup> Asian American/Pacific Islanders are included in the tables in the appendix but excluded here because their average graduation rate was higher than Whites.

students, students with disabilities, or English language learners—all are far more likely to have low graduation rates.

- **At the district and school level:** Low graduation rates show a strong relationship with indicators of school segregation and this relationship is independent of poverty. Moreover, in every state, districts with high minority concentrations had lower graduation rates than districts where whites were the majority. In Ohio, for example, the minority composition difference is pronounced even among the state’s largest districts, with a graduation rate gap of over 50 points between the majority white district of Westerville (81.0) and the majority minority districts of Cleveland (30.0). This suggests that the growing segregation of our public schools will likely contribute further to low graduation rates.

## **2. Officially reported dropout and graduation rates continue to be misleading, but more accurate measures are readily available.**

- **Dropout data mislead the public into thinking that most students are earning diplomas.** There is little, or no, state or federal oversight of dropout and graduation rate reports for accuracy. Incredibly, some states report a 5% dropout rate for African Americans, when, in reality, only half of their young adult African Americans are graduating with diplomas.
- **Most official graduation rates are estimates based on inaccurate data.** Both the two most commonly used measures—the modified National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) formula and the Census Bureau CPS data—produce data that often dramatically underestimate the numbers of students who leave school without high school diplomas. The NCES is what most states use to calculate their graduation rates. However, large numbers of students that leave school and are unaccounted for are often left out of the NCES calculations. Most districts do no “chase” students who disappear, often assuming they have relocated.
- **Using the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) developed by The Urban Institute, this report provides more accurate graduation rates.** We assert that the CPI, which relies on actual enrollment and diploma data, is the most accurate of current methods for estimating graduation rates. The CPI allows comparisons across years, across districts, and across states using a common metric and a constant statistical treatment. While an estimate may not be more accurate than a very thorough individualized tracking system, individualized tracking systems exist in only a few jurisdictions, and are no guarantee of accuracy. For example, in Texas the state’s tracking system systematically excludes GED enrollees from graduation rate calculations for NCLB and treats them as if they never enrolled in high school, thereby inflating their diploma-completion rate.



- **Enrollment-based data are a necessary check on possible unscrupulous accounting.** Anecdotal evidence suggests that the exclusive focus of many states and school districts on test-based accountability systems has led to a rising incidence of students who are being “pushed out” in order to raise a school’s overall test profile. Whether individualized tracking or other methods are used, enrollment-based estimates that examine cohorts of students over time provide a good reality check on official reports.
- 3. Despite great potential, The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) graduation rate accountability provisions are being rendered almost meaningless.**
- The graduation rate accountability provisions inserted into NCLB were designed to improve outcomes and create an incentive for school officials to hold onto, rather than push out, struggling and disadvantaged students.
  - The United States Department of Education has taken steps that effectively weaken the graduation rate accountability provision. In a controversial decision, Secretary of Education Rodney Paige issued regulations that allow schools and districts to all but eliminate graduation rate accountability for minority subgroups.
  - 39 states set a “soft” Adequate Yearly Progress [AYP] goal for graduation rates, meaning they can avoid sanctions simply by exhibiting even the smallest degree of improvement from one year to the next. For example, California sets a goal of 100 percent graduation and yet acknowledges AYP for “any improvement” —even for a 10<sup>th</sup> of a single percentage point. Given current graduation rates for Native Americans, Blacks, and Latinos in that state, under this system, California’s 100 percent goal could take over 500 years to achieve if the state disaggregated its graduation data and required progress by all major racial groups.
  - Only 9 states hold schools and districts accountable for the low graduation rates of minority students despite congressional intent. If there were a minimum graduation rate requirement of 66%, **every** state but Hawaii would fail to meet this benchmark for the education of at least one major racial or ethnic student subgroup if the CPI measure were used.<sup>5</sup>

## **Recommendations:**

1. **Immediate action must be taken to ensure that accurate graduation rates are reported to the public,** and that these rates are disaggregated for all major student subgroups. Currently, the CPI estimates provide the most accurate data.

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<sup>5</sup> Based on a review of disaggregated CPI rates for every state that reported disaggregated data to CCD for major racial and ethnic groups.

2. **States should be strongly encouraged to institute longitudinal tracking of all students through a unique common identifier system that would follow students throughout their schooling including when they relocate.** Even when such a system is in place, the CPI should be used as a check for accuracy.
3. **Graduation rate accountability systems must include a reasonable graduation rate floor.** A pass for accountability purposes should be available to some schools and districts falling under the floor, but there must be a far more rigorous standard for such exceptions, one that is tied to significant and steady improvement over a period of years.
4. **The regulations that specifically removed the requirement of disaggregation of graduation rates for determining adequate yearly progress and sanctions should be rescinded.** Graduation rate accountability should apply to minority and other NCLB subgroups, just as test scores do. The unequal treatment for graduation rate accountability means that minority students are left without adequate protection against unscrupulous attempts to boost their sub-group test scores by removing, rather than teaching, low achieving minority students.
5. **Incentives to push students out of school should be replaced with rewards for keeping students in school.** We recommend increasing the use of Title I funds in high schools for dropout and intervention programs and the establishment by the federal government of a research priority in this area, with a focus on improving high school graduation rates for poor and minority students. Diluting such accountability also defeats the congressional intent that school officials feel pressure to address the risk that increasingly widespread use of high-stakes testing will discourage students and lead to higher drop-out rates.
6. **The extremely low graduation rates of Black, Latino, and Native American males cries out for immediate action informed by research.** While the plight of minority male children is no secret in America, there is little research, intervention, or accountability directed specifically at subgroups of minority males. Education policymakers need to use research and proven interventions more proactively to address the unacceptably high rates of school failure experienced by Black, Latino, and Native American males.