

August 2005

Commentary: It's About Time

No one should underestimate the significance of the announcement at the recent National Governors Association (NGA) meeting that governors from 46 states, together with a host of education leaders, have agreed to implement a common, and common sense, definition of high school graduation rates.

Once implemented, communities in every state will have more accurate and comparable data about the performance of their school systems, ending a widespread practice of masking embarrassingly low graduation rates with [woefully inadequate indicators](#). With a current nationwide graduation rate of about 70 percent and rates as low as 50 percent in many inner city schools, governors are right to take action. Good data will shine a spotlight on states and communities making the greatest gains, as well as those lagging furthest behind.

Notwithstanding the formal signing ceremony at the NGA meeting, this new measure will not be implemented by the stroke of a pen. Most states are only in the early stages of building a data system that can generate the indicators the governors agreed to. Governors now must work with state legislatures to make sure that the political will and resources are available to get the job done.

This agreement was an important step, but it was a very long time in coming. In 1989, a different set of governors and a different President Bush met in Charlottesville, VA, for the first National Education Summit. There they agreed to a set of National Education Goals. One of those goals called for increasing the national high school graduation rate to 90 percent. Sixteen years later, we are unfortunately no closer to reaching that goal. But we do finally have a way to accurately gauge our progress toward meeting it.

In contrast, think of how dramatically the world economy has changed since then. *New*

News Clips

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1. **Good news/bad news from NAEP.** The recently released long-term trend [report](#) from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) gave elementary and even middle schools across the nation reason to cheer. As was [widely reported](#), 9-year-olds scored higher in reading and math in 2004 than in any previous year, while 13-year-olds scored higher in math. Elementary and middle schools also made significant progress on closing the achievement gaps between minority and white students, though there is clearly more work to be done in that area. That's the good news. The bad news is that high school students have not shown any appreciable gains since the tests were first given in 1971, further evidence that states are right to make high school reform a top priority.
2. **Spotlight on dropouts.** Although [Texas](#) is one of the four states that have not joined NGA's graduation rate compact, the state is considering adopting one of the recommendations -- eliminating students who receive a GED from district accountability ratings, an effort they hope would encourage more students to earn a diploma. Another recommendation -- student identification numbers that allow states to follow students through their school careers -- was implemented in [Colorado](#) last

York Times columnist Tom Friedman told the NGA conference participants that the flattening of the globe began in November 1989 when the Berlin wall came down, signaling the destruction of a significant political barrier to acting globally. That event occurred just two short months after the Charlottesville summit. We have seen a revolution in telecommunications, manufacturing, trade and work processes in the time it has taken to agree on a decent measure of high school graduation rates. No wonder business leaders are growing impatient with the pace of change and improvement in education.

Of course, the point here is to dramatically improve the graduation rate -- not just measure it -- while raising the standards so that when young people earn a high school diploma they are well prepared for college, work and citizenship. In most communities, this will take a concerted effort by teachers, principals, local superintendents and school boards, working closely with higher education and business leaders and with governors and other state education officials -- each of whom must bring a greater sense of urgency to this agenda than we have collectively demonstrated thus far.

Related Resources

Download a PDF of the [governors' compact](#) or the NGA [press release](#).

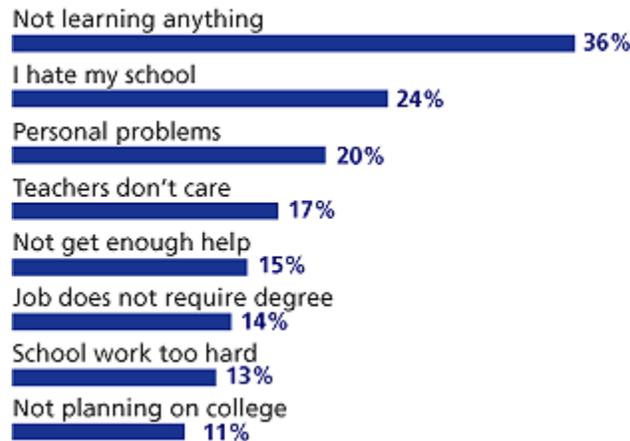
View related coverage from [The Washington Post](#) and an op-ed on the graduation rate crisis from [The New York Times](#).

View a related article about the [U.S. Department of Education](#) publishing a common graduation rate for every state.

- year, and already the state has learned that 34 percent of the 18,342 students that local school districts labeled as "transfers" last year were actually dropouts.
3. **KY rising to the challenge.** A prescient [Kentucky](#) columnist prescribes tougher coursework in every subject in high school and calls on her state to ensure the high school diploma represents proficiency in a college-preparatory curriculum so that students will be prepared to meet challenges in today's jobs. But Kentucky officials are already on a path toward this -- the P-16 Council and the Council on Postsecondary Education have endorsed adopting a single rigorous college- and workplace-readiness curriculum for all students.
 4. **States of honor.** Last month, [NGA](#) named 10 states "Honor States" for committing to the action agenda from the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools, which was co-sponsored by Achieve and NGA. Seven of the 10 Honor States are part of Achieve's ADP Network. They will receive up to \$2 million in grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to implement new policies. [Louisiana](#) has a bold reform plan to stem dropouts, expand college opportunities and better prepare students for high school as well as for work or college.
 5. **Dual enrollment.** [Oregon's](#) governor is poised to sign a bill that will allow juniors and seniors to take college classes while taxpayers pick up the bill. Another successful way that some cash-strapped [Massachusetts](#) cities have found to provide college-level courses is by offering them online to students. This is good timing, according to Education Commission on the States president [Piedad Robertson](#), who writes of the importance of supporting such dual enrollment

Did You Know?

Dropouts Do not See High School as Relevant, Valuable *Reasons Teens Leave High School Early or Are Thinking about It*



Source: National Governors Association, *Summary of RateYourFuture.org Survey Findings*, 2005.

A recent [NGA survey](#) of U.S. teenagers found that the most commonly cited reason teens give for dropping out of high school is that they do not feel they are learning anything relevant to their futures. Other factors, such as family problems and bad feelings about school climate, were cited as well, but doubts about the value of what they are learning clearly tops the list of student concerns. Only 13 percent said that school work was too demanding. A follow-up question asked those same teens what would have made them stay in school, and nearly two-thirds said they would have stayed if they knew that earning a diploma would guarantee them a better job and better salary.

New Resources

- To inform discussions on how to improve teacher quality, a new report from The Finance Project, [Preparing and Training Professionals: Comparing Education to Six Other Fields](#), compares professional development requirements for education to those of other fields: law, accounting, architecture, nursing, firefighting and law enforcement. The similarities and differences can be used to highlight important areas for further study and policy development.
- Because students who make a successful transition into high school are far more likely to graduate, the Consortium on Chicago School Research developed an indicator for Chicago Public Schools to determine within a year whether students are on track to graduate. The consortium's recent study, [The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation](#), finds that the new indicator is a more accurate predictor than students' 8th grade test scores or background characteristics.
- The Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) new study, [Getting Serious about High School Graduation](#), examines data on graduation rates and GED

attainment in SREB states.

- As the focus on improving high schools intensifies, middle schools also are coming under increasing scrutiny, and more are being placed on the federal government's "needs improvement" list, according to a new brief from the [Center on Education Policy](#). Part of the center's series on implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, the brief examines reasons for this trend.

Perspective is sent to you monthly by Achieve, a bipartisan, non-profit organization founded by the nation's governors and CEOs to help states raise standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability to prepare all young people for postsecondary education, work and citizenship. Please feel free to circulate this e-newsletter to your colleagues.

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