

High School Dropouts in America

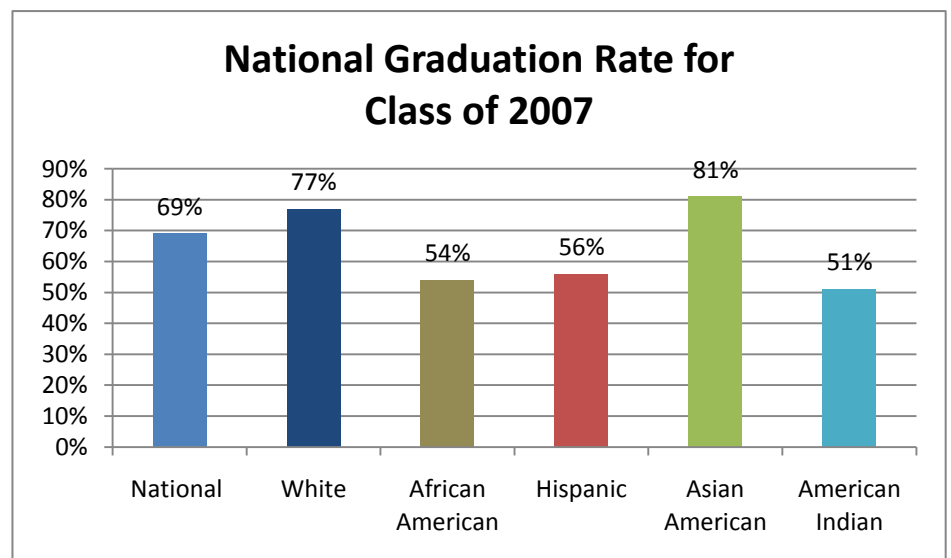
Nationwide, about seven thousand students drop out every school day. This statistic may not have been noticed fifty years ago, but the era during which a high school dropout could earn a living wage has ended in the United States. By dropping out, these individuals significantly diminish their chances to secure a good job and a promising future. Moreover, each class of dropouts is responsible for substantial financial and social costs to their communities, states, and country in which they live.

Although graduation rates are a fundamental indicator of how schools are ultimately performing, only recently have those rates been rigorously scrutinized, revealing the extent of the crisis in America's high schools. For decades, schools and districts published misleading or inaccurate graduation rates, and as a result, the American public knew little of the scope and gravity of the problems faced by far too many of the nation's high schools. Reputable, independent research has exposed alarmingly low graduation rates that were previously hidden behind inaccurate calculations and inadequate data.

Who Is Dropping Out?

Overall, far too many students are not graduating on time with a regular diploma; low-income and students of color fare the worst in the dropout epidemic.

- Each year, approximately **1.3 million students** fail to graduate from high school; more than half are students of color.¹ The graduation rate among students of color is as much as twenty-five percentage points below their white peers.
- A student within the age range of sixteen to twenty-four years old who comes from the lowest quartile of family income is about **seven times more likely** to have dropped out of high school than his/her counterpart who comes from the highest quartile.²

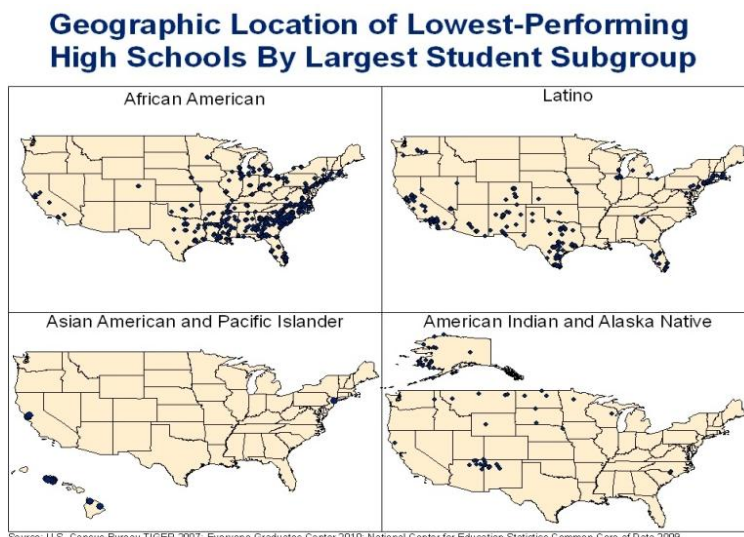


Source: Editorial Projects in Education, "Diplomas Count 2010: Graduating by the Number: Putting Data to Work for Student Success," special issue, *Education Week* 29, no. 34 (2010).

Where Are Students Dropping Out?

A relatively small number of chronically underperforming high schools are responsible for more than half of the nation's dropouts.

- Approximately two thousand high schools (about 12 percent), known as the nation's lowest performing high schools, produce nearly half of the nation's dropouts. In these schools, the number of seniors enrolled is routinely 60 percent or less than the number of freshmen three years earlier.³
- The nation's lowest-performing high schools produce 58 percent of all African American dropouts and 50 percent of all Hispanic dropouts, compared to 22 percent of all white dropouts.⁴



Why Do Students Drop Out?

While there is no single reason for why students drop out, research indicates that difficult transitions to high school, deficient basic skills, and a lack of engagement all serve as prominent barriers to graduation.

- **Low attendance or a failing grade can identify future dropouts, and in some cases as early as sixth grade.**⁵ Most dropouts are already on the path to failure in the middle grades and engage in behaviors that strongly correlate to dropping out in high school. Various researchers have identified low attendance or a failing grade as specific risk factors.
- **Up to 40 percent of ninth-grade students in cities with the highest dropout rates repeat ninth grade; only 10 to 15 percent of those repeaters go on to graduate.**⁶ Ninth grade serves as a bottleneck for many students who begin their first year only to find that their academic skills are insufficient for high school-level work.
- **Over one third of all dropouts are lost in ninth grade.**⁷ Academic success in ninth-grade coursework is highly predictive of eventual graduation; this is even more so than demographic characteristics or prior academic achievement.⁸ Unfortunately, many students are not given the extra support they need to make a successful transition to high school and are lost in ninth grade.
- **The six million secondary students who comprise the lowest 25 percent of achievement are twenty times more likely to drop out of high school than students in the top-performing quartile.**⁹ Among high school students whose test scores were in the top quartile of their senior class, less than one percent dropped out. Among the high school students whose test scores were in the bottom quartile of their senior class, twenty percent dropped out.
- **Research shows that a lack of student engagement is predictive of dropping out even after controlling for academic achievement and student background.**¹⁰ Both academic and social engagement are integral components of successfully navigating the education pipeline.



What Are the Costs of Dropping Out of High School?

Dropouts suffer from reduced earnings and lost opportunities; there are also significant social and economic costs to the rest of the nation.

- Over the course of his or her lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about **\$260,000 less** than a high school graduate.¹¹
- Dropouts from the Class of 2010 alone will cost the nation more than **\$337 billion** in lost wages over the course of their lifetimes.¹²
- If the United States' likely dropouts from the Class of 2006 had graduated, the nation could have saved more than **\$17 billion** in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured health care over the course of those young people's lifetimes.¹³
- If U.S. high schools and colleges were to raise the graduation rates of Hispanic, African American, and Native American students to the levels of white students by 2020, the potential increase in personal income would add more than **\$310 billion** to the U.S. economy.¹⁴
- Increasing the graduation rate and college matriculation of male students in the United States by just 5 percent could lead to combined savings and revenue of almost **\$8 billion** each year by reducing crime-related costs.¹⁵

Endnotes

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- ¹ Editorial Projects in Education, "Diplomas Count 2010: Graduating by the Number: Putting Data to Work for Student Success," special issue, *Education Week* 29, no. 34 (2010).
 - ² U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2009* (NCES 2010-013) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010).
 - ³ T. Tucci, "Prioritizing the Nation's Lowest-Performing High Schools," (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).
 - ⁴ Ibid.
 - ⁵ C. Jerald, "Dropping Out is Hard to Do," (Washington, DC: The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2006).
 - ⁶ R. Balfanz and N. Legters, "Closing 'Dropout Factories': The Graduation Rate Crisis We Know and What Can Be Done About It," *Education Week* 25, no. 42 (2006): 42–43.
 - ⁷ Editorial Projects in Education, "Diplomas Count 2007: Ready for What? Preparing Students for College, Careers, and Life After High School," special issue, *Education Week* 26, no. 40 (2007).
 - ⁸ E. Allensworth and J. Easton, *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures and Attendance in the Freshman Year* (Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, University Publications Office, 2007).
 - ⁹ A. Carnevale, *Help Wanted...College Required. ETS Leadership 2000 Series* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2001).
 - ¹⁰ R. Rumberger, "Why Students Drop Out of School," in *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis* ed. G. Orfield, 131–155 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2004).
 - ¹¹ C. Rouse, "Labor Market Consequences of an Inadequate Education," paper prepared for the symposium on the Social Costs of Inadequate Education," October 24, 2005, New York.
 - ¹² Alliance for Excellent Education, "The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools," (Washington, DC: Author, 2008).
 - ¹³ ———, "Healthier and Wealthier: Decreasing Health Care Costs by Increasing Educational Attainment," (Washington, DC: Author, 2006).
 - ¹⁴ ———, "Demography as Destiny: How America Can Build a Better Future," (Washington, DC: Author, 2006).
 - ¹⁵ ———, "Saving Futures, Saving Dollars: The Impact of Education on Crime Reduction and Earnings," (Washington, DC: Author, 2006).

