

State Graduation Rates and the No Child Left Behind Act

Public school graduation rates at the state level represent vital indicators used to analyze the development of the United States public education system. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA), in efforts to increase standards and accountability of primary and secondary public schools, requires that each state report their graduation rate on an annual basis.

Although the intentions of the NCLBA are laudable, the federal program has received ongoing criticism for its failure to create and enforce a single definition of the graduation rate that must be used by all states. The NCLBA currently defines the graduation rate as the calculation of “the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). However, many states continue to provide unreliable if not misleading figures on graduation rates, blaming lack of data access and analytical capacity.

The graduation rates reported by states are almost always overestimated when compared to calculations made by independent sources. There are several reasons why a state may overestimate their graduation rates when reporting them to the federal government:

- Avoid embarrassment
- Lack of data-tracking technology
- Low graduation rates may decrease federal funding through the NCLBA

So how do states overestimate their graduation rates? One method would be to find ways to weed out low-achieving students from the education system early, creating the illusion that the percentage of graduates is higher than it is in reality. Clearly, this type of behavior is not what the NCLBA was intended to encourage.

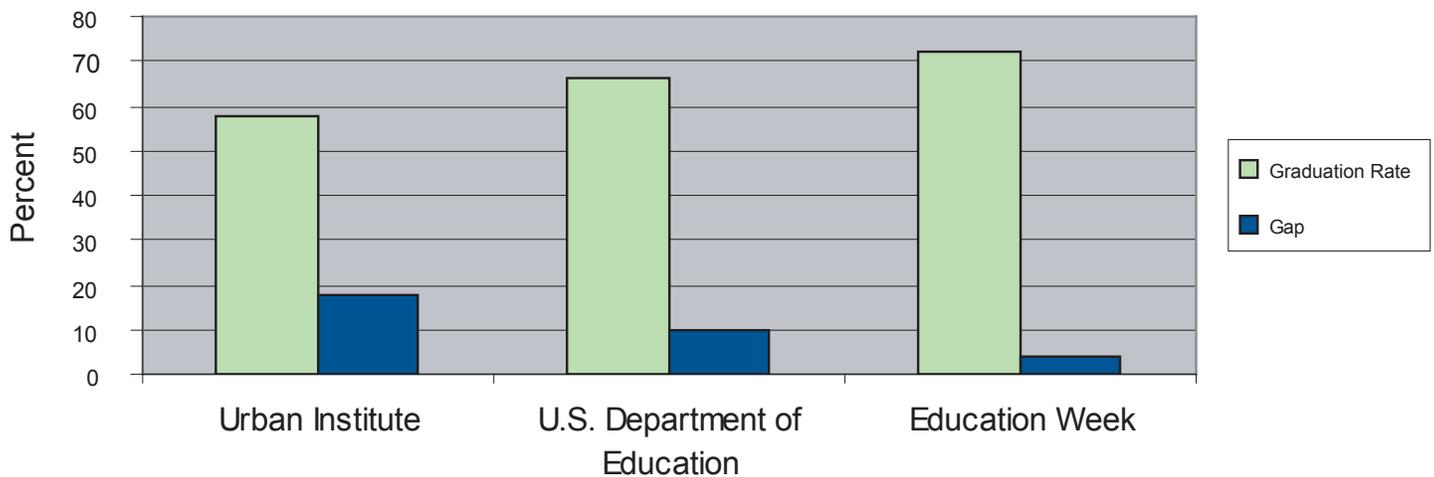
Without establishment and enforcement of a well-defined nationwide formula, researchers are concerned that progress in public schools cannot be monitored appropriately: “Common, accurate graduation rate calculations are a critical first step toward understanding and addressing the nation’s graduation rate crisis. In 2005, the National Governors Association’s Graduation Rate Compact was signed by all fifty of the nation’s governors and pledged to adopt accurate and consistent measurements for high school graduation” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008).

A disappointing 70 percent of all students in the U.S. graduate from high school with a regular diploma. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2008), the average gap between state reports and independent sources is around 11 percent, but reaches as much as 30 percent in some cases. In other words, some states have posted near perfect high school graduation rates.

Tennessee is among the states with the largest gap between reported graduation rates and graduation rates as calculated by independent sources. Tennessee reported a graduation rate of 76 percent in 2002-2003, while various sources indicate that this number is overestimated. As illustrated by Table 1:

- The Urban Institute calculated the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI), which calculates the “probability that a student entering the 9th grade will complete high school on time with a regular diploma.” For Tennessee, they found the CPI to be 58 percent, a gap of 18 percentage points (The Education Trust, 2005).
- The Department of Education calculated the graduation rate to be 66 percent, a 10 percentage point gap (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008).
- Education Week calculated Tennessee’s graduation rate to be 72 percent, a gap of 4 percentage points (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008).

Independent Graduation Rate Calculations for 2002-2003 and their Associated Gaps in Comparison to the State Reported Graduation Rate of 76 percent



Tennessee is also among several states that only require positive improvement in graduation rates from one year to the next in order to meet the “Adequate Yearly Progress” provisions of the NCLBA. While some states, like New Mexico and South Carolina, do not require any progress, other states, like California and Maryland require an increase in the graduation rate of at least 0.1 percent (The Education Trust, 2005).

In order to improve the gap in graduation rates, the U.S. Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, promised on April 1, 2008: “In the coming weeks, I will take administrative steps to ensure that all states use the same formula to calculate how many students graduate from high school on time, and how many drop out. In addition, we will make this data public so that people nationwide can compare how students of every race, background, and income level are performing” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

If Spellings’ efforts are successful, there will be a better understanding of where the public education system in Tennessee ranks in comparison to the national average.

Sources:

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/20/education/20graduation.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>

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