

EDUCATION WEEK

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Amanda Morales, (212) 725-7000 ext. 105, amandamorales@epe.org

New High School Models Abound as Graduation Rate Hits All-Time High ***Gaps Narrow, But Black, Latino, and Native American Students Lag Behind***

New Report Profiles Innovative High Schools From Across the Country

WASHINGTON—June 2, 2016—Even as the nation’s graduation rate has reached an all-time high of 82 percent for the class of 2014, remaking the American high school is a challenge that has perplexed generations of education leaders. A [new report from *Education Week*](#) draws on the field’s decades-long reform history to identify lessons learned about what it takes to provide a high school experience that meets the needs of today’s students.

“Graduation rates have steadily improved during the past decade, a period where the federal government, states, advocates and many others brought heightened attention to state of the nation’s high schools,” said Christopher B. Swanson, Vice President of Editorial Projects in Education, the nonprofit organization that publishes *Education Week*. “Inequities remain, even as we have seen some narrowing of the gaps that divide the nation’s educational haves and have-nots. But the overall picture is one of progress.”

High schools are complex institutions that must meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. And they must do this at a time when some type of postsecondary education or training has become a crucial first step on the path toward a successful adult life for all young people, not just a select few. Decades of reform have met with mixed results, and experts and practitioners can point to a long list of best practices that may characterize high-performing high schools. But how can we make sense of these varied and sometimes-contradictory approaches?

Education Week’s [Diplomas Count](#) report highlights two factors that stand out: coherence and diversity. There is a growing recognition that attempts to create a single, one-size-fits-all school model are likely to result in frustration or failure. Rather, any number of strategies may prove effective, provided they take a thoughtful approach to coordinating various elements of policy and practice and are also grounded in a deep understanding of youth development. While all high schools should be great, they do not all need to be great in the same way.

REMAKING HIGH SCHOOLS

Few high schools, if any, have found successful designs that incorporate each and every principle that research suggests is sound. But many are focusing intently on specific ideas that drive their improvement agendas. This work has gradually added diversity to the supply of American high schools and has better enabled the nation to meet the varied needs of its 15 million high school students.

Diplomas Count shares stories from schools and districts across the country, with each putting its own spin on innovation. A rural Vermont high school, for example, has remade itself around the idea of “student voice,” giving teenagers a powerful role in deciding the most important things about school life, from the way courses are taught to which teachers are hired. Schools in El Paso, Texas, are shaping their strategy around pathways to college, working closely with the state university system to ensure that students’ coursework carries them seamlessly from grade school to the college campus. A network of early-college high schools on the Texas border is nudging first-generation students onto the path to college.

A school in Omaha, Nebraska, is working hard to expose its students to career ideas, arranging for them to work outside the traditional classroom in a variety of industries, from transportation logistics to zookeeping, in the hope that something will spark their imaginations and drive them into job training or college. And, in Cleveland, a STEM-focused high school has taken the idea of community partnerships to a new level, literally moving entire grades of students out into the city to work and take classes at the science museum, at a local business, and on a university campus.

Ambitious ideas don't always come off without a hitch, though. *Education Week* spent a year following Denver's effort to create a comprehensive high school of the future, featuring the elements that researchers have found to be best for teenagers, including a challenging curriculum for all students, a diverse population, competency-based grading, and starting class at a civilized hour. But leadership changes and compromises have watered down or delayed the original vision.

GRADUATION RATES RISE, GAPS NARROW

When *Education Week* published its first edition of *Diplomas Count* 10 years ago, high school graduation rates were all over the map. At a time when there was little consensus or consistency around those rates, *Diplomas Count* sought to bring more clarity to the issue by using a common measure to calculate graduation rates for every school district in the country and reporting those results for the nation, states, and the largest school systems. Today, the national picture is vastly different. All states are now required to use a common yardstick to calculate high school graduation rates—the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate. The U.S. Department of Education started reporting results using the new method in 2012.

The most recent federal data, for the class of 2014, find that 82 percent of the nation's students graduate with a regular high school diploma within four years. This marks a new high, with the rate increasing by a full percentage point from the prior year and by 3 points since 2011. Graduation rates are also on the rise in most states, roughly half of which reached or exceeded the 85 percent mark for the class of 2014. Even so, a gap of 30 percentage points separates the states with the highest and lowest rates. Iowa leads the nation, with 91 percent of its students graduating on time, while only 61 percent graduated on time in the District of Columbia, which is treated as a state for this analysis.

Consistent with long-term trends, members of the class of 2014 from historically disadvantaged racial or ethnic groups and those with distinct educational needs are much less likely to finish high school. But, because gains among lower-performing groups have been particularly strong in recent years, the gaps separating black and Latino youths, students with disabilities, and English-language learners from their peers have narrowed considerably.

DIPLOMAS COUNT ENDS ITS RUN

Even as more work remains to be done to build on this progress across the entire nation, advances in state and federal reporting practices have made the need for the type of uniform, independent analysis long provided by *Diplomas Count* less urgent. As a result, the 2016 edition of *Diplomas Count* will be its last. *Education Week* remains committed to highlighting issues critical to the goal of ensuring that all students get an equal opportunity to earn a high school diploma that prepares them for further education, training, and rewarding careers. Reporting on these issues will continue in [Education Week](#), both in print and online, and is a main focus of the recently launched "[High School & Beyond](#)" blog.

The full *Diplomas Count 2016* report and a variety of interactive features can be found online at: www.edweek.org/go/dc16.

###

Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) is the independent, nonprofit publisher of *Education Week* and other print and online products serving educators, researchers, policymakers, and the public with high-quality reporting and analysis on K-12 education. EPE's mission is to raise awareness and understanding of critical issues facing American schools. Online at www.edweek.org.