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## High School Graduation Rates “A Catastrophe” Says Colin Powell

In 1983 “A Nation at Risk” launched a new era of school reforms. Millions of dollars and almost 25 years later, we have, according to a new report on high school dropouts, “Cities in Crisis.” The more things change ....

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell said, “When more than 1 million students a year drop out of high school, it's more than a problem, it's a catastrophe.” His group, America's Promise Alliance ([www.americaspromise.org](http://www.americaspromise.org)), issued the report on April 1.

The report has received a lot of attention. One reason is the sheer scope of the problem: 1.2 million students should graduate with a diploma each year, but don't. Dropouts as a whole tend to create tremendous social costs.

While dropouts occur everywhere, author Christopher B. Swanson focused on the 50 largest cities and their surrounding metropolitan areas, whose dropouts are twice the share of student enrollment as a whole. Both Kansas City, Missouri (447,306) and Wichita (357,698) made the list.

Here are some of the most significant findings of the report:

*The graduation rate for all students was 70 percent.* Three out of ten students don't graduate on time. Most of those don't graduate at all.

*Urban districts had worse rates.* Among the principal districts serving the largest 50 cities, the graduation rate was 52 percent.

*Girls were much more likely to graduate than boys.* The graduation rate was 74 percent for girls but only 66 percent for boys.

*Graduation rates were much higher in suburban districts.* The rate in the suburbs was 75 percent—nothing to crow about—but 60 percent in urban districts.

*The racial gap is significant.* Graduation rates vary greatly across groups, from 49 percent for Native Americans to 80 percent for Asian-Americans.

The graduation rate for Kansas City, Missouri, was only 40 percent, while Wichita did much better. Then again, it still managed to graduate only 60 percent of its students, or 3 out of 5, on time. In the Kansas City metro area, 77 percent graduated on time, while in the Wichita area, only 71 percent did. Wichita's gap between urban and suburban students (21 percentage points) was greater than the national average; the gap in Kansas City, by contrast, was 14 points.

As interesting (and distressing) as the results of the report were the reactions of various public officials.

Some districts disputed the numbers. The superintendent of the Cleveland Public Schools said, “these numbers are not accurate.” (In Ohio, officials count as graduates those who have to attend summer school after their graduation ceremony). Administrators in Minneapolis and Atlanta said their rates were 8 percent higher than the ones calculated by Swanson.

School officials might be motivated to say such things because their budgets and jobs are on the line. But they can make these claims because there are various ways of counting students in these statistics. Are special education students included or not? What counts as “completing high school?” It is completing a diploma in four years? Four years plus an extra summer school session? Is a GED good enough?

The National Center for Education Statistics recognizes four different methods of calculating graduation rates. In brief, the differences depend on whether you take a snapshot or a movie. The new report is like a movie. It estimated the likelihood that a child entering the ninth grade would graduate on time.

In addition to pointing to their interpretation of the numbers, some state and school officials pointed to their good intentions. An official with the Kansas City, Missouri schools said, “It’s not the place where we want to be. What matters is where we are going.”

Others emphasized recent actions they’ve taken. Officials in Kansas City, Kansas, said they have taken moves in recent years to deal with dropouts. Leaders of the Boston school district said they did their own study last year, and have started new efforts.

Certainly, some schools have seen improvements, and graduating three months late is better than not graduating at all, even if that does imply extra public spending.

Regardless of who you count or how you crank the numbers, there are still far too many students who aren’t completing high school on time. What can be done about it? Various and competing proposals abound, but I hope that we won’t have to read a similar report in another 25 years.

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