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High School Graduation Rates “A Catastrophe” Says Colin Powell

By John R. LaPlante

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

America’s Promise Alliance, headed by former Secretary of State Colin Powell, issued the report. 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.”

The report turned up a few hard truths, starting with the fact that the on-time graduation rate for all students is 70 percent.

Here are a few more: Urban districts have a graduation rate of 52 percent. In other words, a coin toss.

Boys are much less likely to graduate. The graduation rate for girls is 74 percent but only 66 percent for boys.

Graduation rates are higher in suburban districts, but still not great. Their rate is 75 percent.

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

Closer to home, the graduation rate for Kansas City, Missouri, is only 40 percent. In the metro area, 77 percent graduate on time. In Wichita, only 60 percent of students on time. In the Wichita area, 71 percent do.

A related project calculated rates for smaller districts: 80 percent in Hays and Pittsburg; 75 percent in Dodge City; 71 percent in Hutchinson; 64 percent in Salina; and 40 percent in Topeka and Garden City.

How did public officials react? Sometimes they disputed the results. Administrators in Minneapolis and Atlanta said their rates are 8 percent higher than the ones calculated by the report. Officials in Ohio, meanwhile, include students who take summer school classes after they should have graduated.

Officials can play that game because the National Center for Education Statistics recognizes four different methods of calculating graduation rates. The differences depend on whether you take a snapshot or a movie. The new report is like a movie. It estimates the likelihood that a

child entering the ninth grade will graduate on time.

Some officials, meanwhile, tried to divert attention from miserable performance 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."* True enough. But how many lives will be harmed until we get there? Others officials emphasized that they have taken steps to fix the problem. Leaders of the Boston school district said they did their own study last year, and have started new efforts in response. Still other leaders say that a lot has happened since 2004, the last year for which the researchers from Education Week had adequate data from all districts. School and state officials can have honest disagreements with researchers and each other about how to crunch the numbers. On the other hand, they also have financial and professional reasons to use the methods that put them in the best light. Budgets and jobs are on the line.

Regardless of whose numbers you use, there are still far too many students who aren't completing high school on time.

What can be done about the catastrophe? 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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