



## Raising Graduation Rates in an Era of High Standards

### Five Commitments for State Action

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#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a formidable challenge has presented itself: how to ensure that high schools succeed not just in graduating the students who enter their doors but also in preparing those students to succeed in college. Moving forward swiftly on both high school graduation and college preparation rates constitutes an ambitious and “dual” agenda.

Since the early 1990s, most states have taken the critical first steps of establishing both academic standards and assessments for measuring student progress in meeting those standards. For the most part, this commitment to standards-based education reform has resulted in a steady increase in the percentage of young people reaching at least the minimum benchmarks and a diminution of the achievement gap between different demographic groupings of students in reaching those benchmarks.

In 2005, Achieve, Inc., and the National Governors Association cosponsored a national education summit that for the first time ever focused exclusively on high schools. At the close of the summit an initial group of 13 states—now grown to 32 states—committed to raising standards and graduation requirements to a college- and work-ready level as part of Achieve’s multi-state American Diploma Project Network.

Yet even as a growing number of states joined this effort, more troubling news about high schools began to emerge. After remaining invisible for many years, dropouts became a topic of intense public interest and scrutiny. With the spotlight on high school graduation rates and dropout rates, the governors of the 50 states agreed to sign the National Governors Association Graduation Compact—an agreement to measure graduation rates as carefully as academic performance, and to do so with a common measure across states.

The Compact, in combination with the American Diploma Project Network, signals that more and more state leaders are grappling with one of the most difficult and important challenges of K-12 reform: *How to substantially increase the percentage of young people graduating from high school while also continuing to bring academic standards into alignment with the skills and knowledge required for success in higher education and employment.*

Addressing this challenge requires a new level of attention to the graduation and achievement gaps among different income and racial groups. Clearly visible is a chasm-like gap in high school graduation rates between students from low-income families with limited formal education and their peers from higher-income, more-educated families. Less



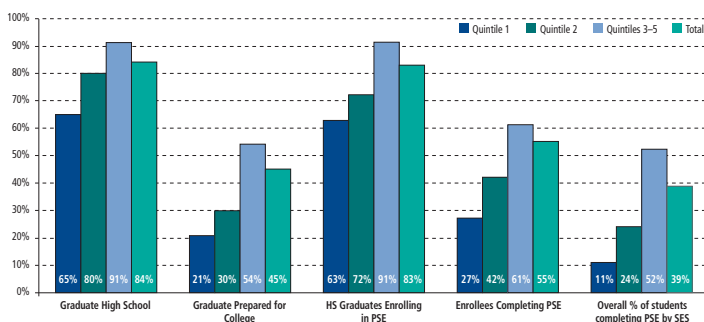
*Raising Graduation Rates in an Era of High Standards* is a Double the Numbers Publication from Jobs for the Future. It was prepared for *Staying the Course: High Standards and Improved Graduation Rates*, a joint project of Achieve and Jobs for the Future, funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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visible but no less important is the inadequate academic preparation of many high school graduates, especially those from low-income backgrounds.

**Figure 1:** The college completion gap between low-SES and high-SES students is the cumulative result of gaps in achievement along every step of the education pipeline.



**Percentage of eighth graders by SES status who attain different levels of education.** Source: Goldberger (2007). *“Doing the Math: What It Means to Double the Number of Low-Income College Graduates.”* In N. Hoffman, J. Vargas, A. Venezia, & M. Miller (Eds.), *Minding the Gap: Why Integrating High School with College Makes Sense and How to Do It.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

The young people who are on the wrong side of the achievement and graduation gaps do not have lower aspirations or less motivation than their more affluent peers. As Chicago researcher Melissa Roderick points out, they are “keen economists” who recognize the demands of the workforce and aspire to a college degree. In fact, the majority of them persist for years in seeking educational credentials. Yet many of these young people never reach their educational goals. The achievement and graduation gaps augur serious consequences for both the economic standing and social well-being of the nation.

## A Time for Action

The time is right for state action. The current attention to the scope of the dropout problem provides a critical opportunity to address the educational needs of low-income and minority students, especially those who are not on track to an on-time graduation or are out of school altogether. State policy and opinion leaders have key roles to play in ensuring that these young people graduate from high school and are on pathways to success in postsecondary education. At a time when the extent and character of the dropout challenge are becoming more visible, the necessary state policy push for college- and work-ready standards must be complemented by strong policies that make those standards achievable for *all students*.

*Raising Graduation Rates in an Era of High Standards* calls upon state policymakers to commit to five key outcomes, and it suggests strategies and action steps they can take to focus high school reform efforts on ensuring that these commitments are met.

**Commitment 1—A High School Diploma That Signifies College- and Work-Readiness:** A key challenge for states is to ensure equal access for all to high school programs of study characterized by high academic intensity and high quality. And states must do so without stifling local and school-based innovation and flexibility in curriculum design.

**Commitment 2—Pathways to Graduation and College Success for Struggling and Out-of-School Students:** Schools that are effective—particularly for low-income, African-American, and Hispanic young people—tend to be small and to emphasize relationships, relevance, and academic rigor. States need to establish school development vehicles, capacities, conditions, and funding to ensure that such schools are developed or replicated in communities with concentrations of struggling students and dropouts.

**Commitment 3—Turnaround of Low-performing High Schools:** The challenge for school districts and states is to develop strategies and policies that are powerful and comprehensive enough to interrupt patterns of poor performance. Among schools not making their performance targets, states need to be able to identify the subset of high schools that are the highest priority for assistance, and then work with those districts to turn the schools around or replace them with more effective options.

**Commitment 4—Increased Emphasis on Graduation Rates and College-Readiness in Next-generation Accountability:** As states begin to tackle the dropout crisis and prepare more students to succeed in college, they will need additional accountability indicators, recognitions, and incentives to encourage schools and districts to hold onto struggling students, get them back on track to a diploma, and increase student readiness for college and careers.

**Commitment 5—Early and Continuous Support for Struggling Students:** States need to support districts in developing accurate data on “early warning” indicators and in providing just-in-time interventions and supports that help get struggling students back on track to graduation.

Renewed attention to the scope of the dropout problem provides a critical opportunity to address the educational needs of young people who are not on track to an on-time graduation as well as those who are out of school altogether. By making and following through on the five commitments, policymakers can gain traction on raising graduation rates without compromising on high standards. Now is the time for state policymakers to commit to a combination of new policies and innovative strategies to address the dropout challenge in their high schools and, at the same time, ensure that low-income and struggling students are better prepared to earn a postsecondary degree or credential.