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# High School Graduation Rates in Washington State

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# Executive Summary

This study finds that:

- Only 67% of all Washington State public school students from the class of 2001 graduated from high school;
- This is significantly lower than the 82% graduation rate suggested by official Washington State statisitcs;
- Graduation rates are significantly lower for African-American students (53%), Latinos (47%) and Native Americans (47%). Graduation rates are higher for white (70%) and Asian-American (77%) students;
- Graduation rates vary widely by school district. Looking at the results for fifteen districts, graduation rates range from a high of 82% in Bellingham and Lake Washington to a low of 46% in Pasco;
- Graduation rates for some of the other largest city school districts include Seattle (71%), Spokane (71%), Vancouver (63%), and Tacoma (51%).

# About the Author

Jay P. Greene is a Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research where he conducts research and writes about education policy. He has conducted evaluations of school choice and accountability programs in Florida, Charlotte, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and San Antonio. He has also investigated the effects of school choice on civic values and integration.

His research was cited four times in the Supreme Court's opinions in the landmark *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* case on school vouchers. His articles have appeared in policy journals, such as *The Public Interest*, *City Journal*, and *Education Next*, in academic journals, such as *The Georgetown Public Policy Review*, *Education and Urban Society*, and *The British Journal of Political Science*, as well as in major newspapers, such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *Christian Science Monitor*. Most recently he published a piece on vouchers and school integration in the *Wall Street Journal*, analyses of problems with special education in *Education Week*, *National Review Online* and *The Education Gadfly*, and a defense of high stakes testing in *Education Next*.

Greene has been a professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Houston. He received his B.A. in history from Tufts University in 1988 and his Ph.D. from the Government Department at Harvard University in 1995. He lives with his wife and three children in Weston, Florida.

# Acknowledgements

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# High School Graduation Rates in Washington State

## Introduction

Graduating from high school is an enormously important predictor of how students will fare later in life. High school graduates are almost twice as likely as dropouts to be gainfully employed. The salaries that working graduates enjoy are nearly twice as high as those enjoyed by dropouts who work.[1] Students who fail to graduate from high school are also significantly more likely to become single parents and have children at young ages. And students who do not graduate from high school are significantly more likely to rely upon public assistance or be in prison.[2]

Given the importance of high school graduation in determining students' prospects later in life, examining the percentage of students who graduate from high school is an important indicator of school performance. It is at least as important as the much more common practice of examining standardized test scores. Unfortunately, graduation rates are not widely publicized. And when they are found, they are often unreliable or misleading.

A relatively simple and straightforward technique for estimating graduation rates is available, however, even when official graduation statistics are unavailable or suspect. This technique was used to produce last year's Manhattan Institute report, "High School Graduation Rates in the United States," in which the high school graduation rate for each state, the fifty largest school districts, and for the nation as a whole was calculated.[3] Roughly speaking, this technique for estimating graduation rates involves comparing how many students enter high school to the number of graduates when those students should be receiving their diplomas, making some adjustments for population changes in the graduating cohort. If we see roughly twice as many students entering high school as we see graduates four years later and we do not see a large number of students moving into or out of the school, it is reasonable to infer that the school graduates about 50% of its students.

## Results

Using this technique (described in more detail below) we find that 67% of all public school students in the state of Washington from the class of 2001 graduated from high school. For African-American students the graduation rate was 53%, while the figure for Latinos was 47% and for Native Americans was also 47%. The graduation rate for white students[4] was 70% and for Asian-American students was 77%. (See Table 1)

**Table 1**
**Washington State Graduation Rates by Race**

| | |
|---|---|
| Asian-American | 77% |
| Native American | 47% |
| Latino | 47% |
| African-American | 53% |
| White | 70% |
| **Total** | **67%** |

**Table 2**
**District Graduation Rates by Race**

| District | Asian-American | Native American | Latino | African-American | White | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bellingham | 100% | INS | 55% | INS | 84% | 82% |
| Enumclaw | INS | INS | INS | INS | 67% | 66% |
| Everett | 64% | INS | 27% | 36% | 53% | 51% |
| Evergreen | 75% | INS | 64% | 66% | 63% | 64% |
| Kennewick | INS | INS | 46% | INS | 81% | 77% |
| Lake Washington | 87% | INS | 67% | 65% | 82% | 82% |
| Mabton | NA | NA | 50% | NA | INS | 52% |
| Nooksack | INS | INS | INS | INS | 66% | 58% |
| Pasco | INS | INS | 31% | INS | 71% | 46% |
| Port Angeles | INS | INS | INS | INS | 66% | 63% |
| Richland | 74% | INS | INS | INS | 75% | 74% |
| Seattle | 83% | 56% | 49% | 63% | 74% | 71% |
| Spokane | 80% | 52% | 69% | 55% | 72% | 71% |
| Tacoma | 58% | 27% | 34% | 46% | 54% | 51% |
| Vancouver | 78% | 46% | 40% | 36% | 65% | 63% |
| **Washington State** | **77%** | **47%** | **47%** | **53%** | **70%** | **67%** |
| United States | | | 54% | 56% | 78% | 71% |

INS = Insufficient student count for calculating graduation rate
NA = Not applicable because there were no students of that race in the graduating cohort

Looking at the results for fifteen districts in Washington[5] we see a fair amount of variation, from a low of 46% in Pasco to a high of 82% in Bellingham and Lake Washington.[6] The graduation rates for ethnic / racial groups within districts sometimes differed greatly. Bellingham, for example, had a graduation rate of 55% for Latino students, while it appeared to graduate 100% of its Asian-American students.[7] In other districts the variation in graduation rates by race was less severe. Spokane, for example, had a graduation rate of 52% for Native Americans students and an 80% rate for Asian-American students, with all other groups having rates between these two figures. (See Table 2)

## Comparing Results to State Figures

In a report titled, "Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington's Counties, Districts, and Schools: School Year 2000-01,"[8] the state of Washington provides its own estimates for the graduation rate statewide as well as information that allows the same state method to be used to estimate graduation rates for all of the districts covered by this study.[9] The state's method simply involves counting the total number of students who officially dropped out of school across grades 9 though 12 in a given year divided by the total number of students enrolled in 9th grade in the same year, yielding what they call "the estimated synthetic cohort dropout rate." For easier comparison to our graduation rates, the state's dropout rate was converted into a graduation rate by subtracting it from 100.

In all instances the state estimates are higher than the estimates produced in this report. The estimate from the state puts the statewide graduation rate at 82% compared to 67% according to our calculations. According to the method used by the state, the graduation rate in Seattle is 79% compared to our estimate of 71%. The state method yields a graduation rate of 84% for Spokane, while we put the figure at 71%. In Tacoma the state method yields a graduation rate of 84% compared to our estimate of 51%. The comparison of the state numbers and our estimates for all of the districts can be found in Table 3.

Our graduation rates differ from the ones produced by the state method primarily because the state excludes students whose whereabouts are "unknown" from being classified as dropouts even though the state admits that many of these students are in fact dropouts. The state report recognized the limitations of this method, saying: "the rate underestimates the actual

**Table 3**
**Comparison of Graduation Rates Using State Method and Using Report Method**

| District | State Method | REPORT METHOD |
|---|---|---|
| Bellingham | 93% | 82% |
| Enumclaw | 96% | 66% |
| Evergreen | 84% | 64% |
| Everett | 81% | 51% |
| Kennewick | 87% | 77% |
| Lake Washington | 95% | 82% |
| Mabton | 75% | 52% |
| Nooksack | 88% | 58% |
| Pasco | 83% | 46% |
| Port Angeles | 77% | 63% |
| Richland | 87% | 74% |
| Seattle | 79% | 71% |
| Spokane | 84% | 71% |
| Tacoma | 84% | 51% |
| Vancouver | 82% | 63% |
| **Washington State** | **82%** | **67%** |

percentage [of dropouts] because it does not include some students who were listed as 'unknown' but probably dropped out of school at some point."[10] Only students for whom the paperwork necessary to withdraw from school has been completed are counted as dropouts in the calculating the graduation rate according to the state. Obviously many students who drop out of school do not bother to complete forms before they leave, leading to a great over-statement of graduation rates in the official numbers.

If we assume that all of the students whose whereabouts are unknown are in fact dropouts, then the state graduation rates would be even lower than our estimates, in many cases. If we made the more generous assumption that only half of the students whose whereabouts are unknown are in fact dropouts, the state graduation statistics are much more similar to the ones we report. For example, if we assume that half of the unknown students are actually dropouts, the state's estimated graduation rate would be 71% compared to our estimate of 67%. Making this "half-way" assumption would yield a state graduation rate for Seattle of 70% compared to our estimate of 71%. (See Table 4) But even counting half or all of the students whose status is unknown as dropouts still produces a higher

**Table 4**
**Comparison of Graduation Rates Using State Method with Different Treatment of "Unknown" Students and Using Report Method**

| | VARIATIONS ON STATE METHOD | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| District | Assuming 100% of Unknowns are Dropouts | Assuming 50% of Unknowns are Dropouts | Using Graduate Rather than Dropout Numbers | REPORT METHOD |
| Bellingham | 90% | 92% | 81% | 82% |
| Enumclaw | 94% | 95% | 59% | 66% |
| Evergreen | 54% | 69% | 63% | 64% |
| Everett | 67% | 74% | 53% | 51% |
| Kennewick | 81% | 84% | 77% | 77% |
| Lake Washington | 91% | 93% | 79% | 82% |
| Mabton | 33% | 54% | 56% | 52% |
| Nooksack | 35% | 61% | 64% | 58% |
| Pasco | 62% | 73% | 31% | 46% |
| Port Angeles | 60% | 68% | 54% | 63% |
| Richland | 68% | 78% | 78% | 74% |
| Seattle | 61% | 70% | 69% | 71% |
| Spokane | 71% | 77% | 64% | 71% |
| Tacoma | 67% | 75% | 43% | 51% |
| Vancouver | 60% | 71% | 64% | 63% |
| **Washington State** | **60%** | **71%** | **64%** | **67%** |

graduation rate than our estimate in several cases. This discrepancy may be the result of erroneous reporting of the number of dropouts from the districts to the state. It may also be produced by the fact that some districts have a large number of students who are classified as "continuing" in school or who complete high school with a special education degree rather than a regular diploma.

One more variation on the state's method for estimating graduation rates that would avoid distortion from these exemptions from being labeled a dropout would assume that all students who did not graduate with regular diplomas must have been dropouts. Focusing on graduate counts rather than worrying about how many unknown students or continuing students were in fact dropouts yields graduation rates very close to the ones reported here. This variation on the state's method yields a statewide graduation rate of 64% compared to our estimate of 67%. The relatively modest differences between our results and the results using this variation of the state method can be explained by the fact that our method adjusts for population changes in the graduating cohort while this variation in the state method does not. So it is clear that if the state did not make the unreasonable assumption that all students who they lost track of must still be in school somewhere or that all students who continue in school will graduate, the state method would have yielded graduation rates comparable to the ones we have calculated.

Washington State also reports something that it calls a "graduation percent," but these figures only describe the percentage of 12th graders who manage to graduate at the end of the year. Given that the vast majority of dropouts nationwide leave schools in earlier grades (usually between 9th and 10th grades), computing the percentage of students who leave during 12th grade is a highly inaccurate picture of how many students are actually graduating from high school.

## Methods

The method used in this report to calculate graduation rates is essentially the same as the one used in last year's "High School Graduation Rates in the United States," released by the Manhattan Institute and the Black Alliance for Educational Options, except that some refinements of the method have been made. The refinements should improve the precision of the estimates, particularly for smaller districts where imprecise adjustments are more problematic.

First, we needed to calculate the number of students who should be in a graduating cohort. That is, we wanted to know how many students were entering high school in 1997-8 and who we could expect to be graduating four years later in 2000-1. To calculate this we recorded the number of students enrolled in 8th grade in 1996-7, and then how many were present in 9th grade in 1997-8, and then 10th grade in 1998-9. The population in this cohort may change between 8th and 9th grades as some students transfer between the public and private sectors during the transition from middle to high school. Ninth grade enrollments are also inflated by the fact that a significant number of students tend to be held back in that grade. And 10th grade enrollments tend to drop following the artificially inflated 9th grade figures and because students often begin dropping out of school between 9th and 10th grades. To "smooth" these fluctuations in the enrollment in the cohort we take an average of the enrollments from the same cohort across 8th, 9th, and 10th grades.

The number of students in the cohort might also be influenced by students moving into or out of the school system. To adjust for these population changes we assumed that the net population change in the cohort would be the same as the net population change in high school during the same years being examined, between 1997-8 and 2000-1. The "smoothed" cohort enrollment was therefore increased or decreased by the same percentage as the change in high school enrollment. This produced a reasonable estimate of the number of students in the cohort who we could expect to be receiving diplomas in 2000-1.

Second, we obtained data on the number of graduates during the 2000-1 school year. Dividing the number of graduates by the number of students in the cohort who we could expect to receive diplomas, we are able to estimate the percentage of the cohort who in fact graduate, or a graduation rate.

To illustrate this method we can see how the graduation rate was calculated for the Enumclaw district. In Enumclaw there were 406 students in 8th grade in 1996-7. That cohort increased when they were in 9th grade in 1997-8 to 467 students. Such an increase is common because there can be some transfer of students from private schools into public schools between 8th and 9th grades. Also, 9th grade is a common grade for students to repeat a year, so 9th grade enrollment is almost always higher than 8th or 10th grade figures. In 1998-9 that cohort dropped to 399 students

in 10th grade. The drop could partially be the result of 9th grade just being artificially high, due to students repeating. It could also partially be a function of students starting to drop out of school between 9th and 10th grade, which is a common time for students to leave school.

To handle these fluctuations in the cohort population between 8th, 9th, and 10th grades we "smoothed" the cohort by taking an average of these three numbers. In Enumclaw that gives us a "smoothed" cohort of 424 students. We make one more adjustment to the number of students in that cohort to reflect the change in the total high school student population in the district between the 1997-8 school year and the 2000-1 school year. Enumclaw barely experienced a change in its high school population during these years (only a 1.5% increase), so we increase our cohort of potential graduates by 1.5% to 430.5. The idea behind this adjustment is that we are estimating that an additional 1.5% of students moved into the cohort before they should have graduated.

So our expectation is that there could have been 430.5 students graduating in Enumclaw in the spring of 2001. As it turns out, there were only 286 students who graduated in the spring of 2001. Dividing 286 by 430.5 we arrive at an estimated graduation rate of 66%.

This same method was used to produce the graduation rates for Washington State, as well as for each of the districts and for all of the results broken out by race. In some districts, particularly when breaking out results by race, the number of students in the cohort was very low. If the number of students in the cohort was fewer than 30 we decided that there was simply an insufficient number of students to calculate a graduation rate. And even when we did calculate a graduation rate, it was sometimes based on a relatively small graduating cohort. With a smaller cohort the imprecision in the adjustments we make may produce less reliable estimates. For this reason, all of the results, except for those from Spokane, Seattle, and Washington State, should be treated with some caution. The idea of this estimate is to provide independent information and to raise questions where results are worrisome. In Enumclaw, for example, we cannot know that the graduation rate is precisely 66%, but we can raise questions about why only 286 students graduated when there were clearly more than 400 students who could have graduated in that cohort.

In addition to the possible imprecision of the adjustments designed to produce the number of students who could graduate, there is some possible imprecision in the number of graduates. It is possible that some of the students from the cohort could take an extra year or two before graduating, meaning that they would ultimately graduate but were not counted among the graduates in 2000-1. While this is true, it is also the case that included in the graduates we are counting are some students from previous cohorts who took extra time to graduate. As long as there is no large change from year to year in the number of students who take extra time to graduate, our graduation count should yield relatively precise results.

## Advantages of This Technique for Estimating Graduation Rates

This technique for estimating graduation rates is appealing for several reasons. First, to calculate the estimate it is only necessary to have information about school enrollments and graduate counts. These data are usually readily available, making the calculation of graduation rates relatively simple. In addition, the availability of the information necessary to compute graduation rates by my technique makes it easy to verify graduation results independently.

Quite often official graduation rates, on the other hand, are calculated based on the attempt to track the whereabouts of individual students. Because of privacy concerns it is virtually impossible for outsiders to verify the official graduation statistics because non-school officials cannot gain access to information about the status of individual students. In addition, school-officials often lack the proper resources and incentives to track individual students accurately. The U.S. Census has a difficult enough time locating people and has considerably more money to do it. Worse yet, schools may be inclined to provide the most benign explanation for a missing student, falsely inflating their graduation rate. Calculating graduation rates by this technique avoids these problems by bringing transparency to what is normally an opaque process.

Second, the graduation rates produced by this technique are easy for people to understand and are consistent with their common-sense definitions of what graduates and dropouts are. Graduates are students who finish high school with a regular high school diploma while dropouts are students who fail to do so. Our technique estimates the percentage of

students who graduate from high school with regular diplomas.

Official graduation statistics, on the other hand, are too often based upon definitions or allow exemptions that prevent the results from conforming with our common-sense understanding of what a graduation rate should be. For example, in Washington State only students who have completed the paper work to drop out of school are counted as dropouts in their graduation rate statistics. Students whose whereabouts are unknown are not counted as dropouts even though the state admits that many of them in fact are dropouts. It is reasonable to think that students who did not graduate and who cannot be found ought to be counted as dropouts.

In other states, students who receive GED certificates are counted as graduates. Washington State does not count GED recipients as graduates but the state also does not count them as dropouts. This is misleading because GED recipients, properly speaking, are not graduates of the high school system. In fact, they are dropouts from that system who decided to return to formal education and receive a certificate from another system. If we want to assess the performance of high schools we should not be counting students who dropped out of their schools among their successes. In addition, a considerable body of research has developed to suggest that GED recipients have life outcomes that are much more similar to those of dropouts than of regular high school graduates, so counting GED recipients as graduates distorts graduation statistics.[11]

Many official graduation statistics are also plagued by jargon and are difficult to interpret. For example, school officials may release event dropout statistics, status dropout statistics, on-time graduation rates, completion rates, and promoting power numbers. Making heads or tails of this is difficult for policymakers, reporters, and researchers, let alone average parents. Like most jargon it can serve to obfuscate reality. Some states use the jargon to describe things that are not what people imagine they are from the title. For example, Washington State releases something that it calls a "graduation percent" that is actually the percentage of students enrolled in 12$^{th}$ grade who graduate by the end of the year. Of course, the vast majority of students who drop out of school nationwide do so in earlier grades, usually between 9$^{th}$ and 10$^{th}$ grade. This "graduation percent" therefore does not describe what most people probably assume it does—the percentage of all students that enter high school who graduate. Instead it describes the percentage of students who leave at the very end of high school after most students who dropout have already done so. Our graduation rate is much more straightforward and easy to grasp—roughly how many students who start high school manage to graduate. If we are going to use graduation statistics to assess schools, we need to use terms in common-sense ways that describe more than they obscure reality.

## Limitations of This Technique for Estimating Graduation Rates

Our method for estimating graduation rates is necessarily imprecise. Since we do not track the progress of individual students, we cannot know for certain whether each student has dropped out, graduated, moved to another school elsewhere, or remains in school working toward a later graduation. We make aggregate adjustments to attempt to correct for these possible alternative explanations for students' whereabouts. For example, to account for the possibility that students may move to another school elsewhere we adjust for the net student population change in high school during the years examined. But it is always possible that the population change in the student cohort for which we calculate a graduation rate could be different from the total high school population change.

In addition, our method assumes that students who fail to graduate because they are taking extra time to complete high school are replaced by students from previous cohorts who took extra time. Again, it is always possible that a dramatic change from year to year in the number of students who take extra time to graduate could distort the graduation estimates. Finally, this method is dependent upon reliable enrollment and graduation counts. Given occasional discrepancies between state and district numbers and occasional reporting errors, it is not frivolous to worry that mistaken inputs could lead to mistaken results.

The potential for error in this method is greater when the number of students being examined is smaller. The adjustments for population changes will be less precise when calculating graduation rates for smaller districts or for smaller ethnic-racial groups. When calculating graduation rates for larger populations, the potential errors of the adjustments are more likely to balance each other out, but with smaller populations an exceptional situation is liable to produce greater error.

While this method is necessarily imprecise, it is also unlikely to be very far off the mark. If it yields a graduation rate that is very different from other methods of calculating graduation rates, it is at least an indication that the issue has to be explored further. There has to be a compelling explanation for where students who entered high school went if we do not see them graduate a few years later.

## Conclusion

Using this reliable and straightforward method for estimating graduation rates we see that the state of Washington graduated 67% of the students who should have been receiving high school diplomas in 2000-1. This graduation rate is comparable to the national graduation rate of 71%, calculated for the class of 1998.[12] And like the national pattern, African-American and Latino graduation rates in Washington State are considerably lower than the rates for white and Asian-American students. The graduation rates for fifteen districts in Washington that were examined for this report vary from barely above one-half of all students graduating to more than 80% graduating.

Clearly, these graduation rates fall below what most people would expect from their schools. They also all fall below the national goal established by the Department of Education of a graduation rate of 90%. Having this information about how our schools are falling short of our goals helps us understand the nature and magnitude of the difficulties we face, much as test score results do. Until we have a clear understanding of the problems in education we are unlikely to be effective in addressing those problems. By generating and publicizing information on graduation rates, this report should help bring into focus the difficulties in Washington State's public education.

# ENDNOTES

1. See data from the U.S. Census comparing high school graduates and dropouts at http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032000/perinc/new03_001.htm

2. Phillip Kaufman, Jin Y. Kwon, and Steve Klein, "Dropout Rates in the United States: 1999," National Center For Education Statistics, Statistical Analysis Report, November 2000, p. 1.

3. See http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo.htm#13

4. I use the term "white" to refer to non-Hispanic whites.

5. The fifteen districts examined were those requested by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

6. In all cases except Bellingham the enrollment and graduation data were obtained from the state of Washington. In the case of Bellingham the district officials informed us that there was an error in the graduation figures that they reported to the state. We decided to use the district's corrected numbers. Enrollment and graduation data can be found at http://www.k12.wa.us/dataadmin/ . Additional data, especially broken out by race, was provided by Pete Bylsma, Director of Research and Evaluation, in e-mails.

7. Because of the population change adjustment the Asian-American graduation rate in Bellingham actually exceeded 100% but we capped the possible estimate at 100%.

8. Pete Bylsma and Lisa Ireland, "Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington's Counties, Districts, and Schools: School Year 2000-01," Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, May 2002. See http://www.k12.wa.us/dataadmin/reports/DG2000-01.pdf

9. The method for their calculation and their estimate for the statewide figure can be found on p. 6 of "Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington's Counties, Districts, and Schools: School Year 2000-01." The data for using the state's method to calculate similar figures for districts can be found in Section A of the report.

10. Pete Bylsma and Lisa Ireland, "Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington's Counties, Districts, and Schools: School Year 2000-01," Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, May 2002, p. 6.

11. See Jay P. Greene, "Not Quite High School," National Review Online, April 24, 2002. http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-greene042402.asp See also Jay P. Greene, "GEDs Aren't Worth the Paper They're Printed On," City Journal, Winter 2002. http://www.city-journal.org/html/12_1_geds_arent.html

12. See http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo.htm#13

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