



Opinion Editorial

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Our Report Card's In: Graduation Rate A Vital Measure

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Across the state of Arkansas this month, about 30,000 Arkansas students will march to “Pomp and Circumstance,” receive their diploma, and throw their hats up in the air in celebration.

While an 87 percent statewide graduation rate is an improvement over recent years and even exceeds the national average, it’s important to remember the consequences for the 13 percent of Arkansas students who did not earn a high school diploma last year.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, high school dropouts earned \$181 less per week than high school graduates in 2012. The median unemployment rate for dropouts was 12.4 percent, compared with 8.3 percent for graduates and 6.8 percent for all workers. In an era in which there is consensus that adults need post-secondary education to compete in the workplace, allowing students to leave our public education system without a high school degree becomes even more untenable.

Focusing on graduation rates is nothing new. Data on graduation rates have been collected for decades, and have formally been a part of state accountability systems since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2002. A few recent developments have put more heat on states, districts and schools to pay attention to graduation rates. First, in 2010, the U.S. Department of Education began to require that states calculate rates using the more accurate “four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate,” allowing for transparency and comparison across the nation. Second, with the granting of ESEA waivers to a majority of states, schools are now held accountable for a new high school completion measure: graduation rate for TAGG (Targeted Achievement Gap Group) students: economically disadvantaged students, special education students, and/or limited English proficiency students.

For all of these reasons, we at the Office for Education Policy are pleased to release our newest report, unimaginatively titled “Graduation Rates in Arkansas,” that provides an in-depth look at overall graduation rates in all Arkansas high schools. Importantly, we also examine how our state’s high schools are doing at graduating students who face economic or other disadvantages.



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This report is important because it provides a first look at a very important, but often overlooked, outcome measure in K-12 education. For years, we have considered standardized test results indicators of student outcomes and even school effectiveness. However, all of us connected with schools realize that students learn much more in school than academic content and problemsolving skills; they learn soft skills such as persistence, time management, and the ability to juggle multiple tasks and deal with numerous unique individuals.

Perhaps one measure, albeit imperfect, of the ability of schools to improve the soft skills of students is the extent to which schools successfully graduate their students. Furthermore, it is quite clear that students benefit immensely from earning high school diplomas. For these reasons, it is critically important that we learn as much as possible about which students are graduating in Arkansas and which schools are graduating them.

The data presented in this report are simply the initial step, and we seem to have at least one clear finding from this first step: We consistently find that larger high schools and schools serving more economically disadvantaged students have lower graduation rates. It is perhaps somewhat surprising that high school size, or enrollment, is consistently negatively correlated with both overall graduation rates and the rates for a school's disadvantaged students. This is interesting in Arkansas because the largest high schools and districts often boast relatively high test score results.

While these results by no means provide scientific proof of the effectiveness of small schools, they do remind us that smaller high schools in the state may provide environments that are conducive to keeping students in school through graduation. Indeed, small-school advocates have consistently made the claim that small schools provide greater opportunities for student involvement, student engagement, and meaningful interactions between students and educators. Students in larger schools, on the other hand, may be at greater risk of "falling through the cracks" and disappearing from the school community and thus not making it through to graduation.



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Perhaps these findings can provide some food for thought for school leaders in various communities in Arkansas who must make decisions regarding school sizes and school configurations for their students.

While our analysis identifies trends and patterns in the graduation-rate data, it is equally important to share the rates for all schools in the state and recognize those schools in which good things are happening. Thus, we are pleased to publish the database of graduation rates for all

Arkansas high schools (www.officeforeducationpolicy.org/arkansas-schools-data-graduation-rate) so that observers can look up the rates for any and all schools across the state.

Finally, we use a statistical model to highlight schools whose graduation rates are well above what would be expected based on the community social and economic characteristics. We highlight and congratulate these high performing schools in our full report at <http://www.officeforeducationpolicy.org>.