

POLICY PAPER

Volume 5, Issue 3

June 12, 2008

COMPLACENCY IS NOT AN OPTION: KANSAS NEEDS TO DROP ITS DROPOUT RATE

BY JOHN R. LAPLANTE

Executive Summary

A recent report from America's Promise Alliance focused the nation's attention on graduation rates in America's 50 largest cities. According to "Cities in Crisis," the national graduation rate in 2003-04 (the latest year for which comparable data are available) was 70 percent. The graduation rate of the average urban district was 60 percent. Even worse, the rate in the largest districts of the largest metropolitan areas was a mere 52 percent.

This policy brief relies on the same database used by "Cities in Crisis" to present the graduation rates of the 20 largest school districts in Kansas. Together, these 20 districts enroll half of all students in the state. The median graduation rate of these districts was 74 percent.

USD 497 Lawrence recorded the highest rate of the districts here, at 100 percent. On the other end of the scale, USD 501 Topeka graduated only 39 percent of its students on time. USD 457 Garden City scored just as badly. We also find that the situation may be worse than thought, since the numbers here are generally lower than reported by the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) in the Kansas Building Report Card.

Kansas has already tried to improve the performance of its schools by giving them more money. Between the 1994-05 school year and the 2003—04 year, spending went up 50 percent statewide, and doubled in some districts. Due to the *Montoy* lawsuit and other factors, spending has increased even more since then.

It's now time to try new approaches. Virtual schools, which let students go online to take classes at their own pace, are growing in popularity. Nationally, charter schools are vital contributors to the educational landscape. They allow innovative teachers and committed parents to try new approaches. Kansas law hinders their growth, and threatens virtual schools.



Introduction

A recent report published by the America's Promise Alliance called "Cities in Crisis" has drawn new attention to the fact that too many American students do not graduate from high school on time.¹ The graduation rate in large cities ranged from 77 percent in Mesa, Arizona; San Jose, California; and Nashville, Tennessee to a low of 25 percent in Detroit, Michigan.

According to that report, the national graduation rate is 70 percent. This means that 3 out of 10 students do not earn a regular diploma within 4 years, a large waste of taxpayer dollars and more importantly, human potential. The performance of the nation's largest urban schools is even worse, with a graduation rate of only 52 percent. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell, who along with his wife Alma Powell founded the Alliance, said the large number of dropouts each year—approximately 1.2 million—is "more than a problem, it's a catastrophe."²

Kansas Graduation Rates

It's easy for Kansans to dismiss the new report, thinking that their schools are doing just fine. According to the Kansas Building Report Card, a KSDE publication, graduation rates in the state are on the rise, going from 83 percent in 2002 to 90 percent in 2005 and staying there ever since.³ Yet the calculations of the Alliance call into question any complacency that Kansans may have.

The Alliance pegged the Kansas graduation rate at 74 percent. That is better than the national average but lower than the 88 percent calculated by the Report Card.⁴

As with the nation, the performance numbers in Kansas look more interesting—and discouraging—when you look at specific districts. *Education Week*, the trade magazine of public schools everywhere,

assembled the data used by America's Promise Alliance. That data, now available online for all to see, lets concerned citizens and policymakers explore the dropout rates not only of big cities, but of nearly all school districts across the country.⁵ For each district, the database presents graduation rates for each of the last 10 years and describes the grade levels at which the greatest numbers of students are lost.

For this policy brief, we look at the 20 largest school districts in Kansas, as determined by head count.⁶ These districts, with enrollments ranging from nearly 49,000 (USD 259 Wichita) to just over 4,500 (USD 232 DeSoto), enroll 52 percent of all public school students in the state.

The median graduation rate for these 20 districts is 74 percent. USD 497 Lawrence had the highest rate possible rate of 100 percent. Three districts had a graduation rate of less than 50 percent: USD 500 Kansas City (49 percent); USD 501 Topeka (39 percent); and USD 457 Garden City (39 percent).

In 16 of the 20 districts, the graduation rate was higher when calculated by KSDE, by an average of 16 percentage points. In only 4 cases did *Education Week* calculate higher rates than did the state. In those cases, the difference was only 3.5 percentage points.



Graduation rates in the 20 districts in Kansas 2003-04				
USD	USD Name	Head count	Graduation Rate (percent)	
			Education Week	KSDE
259	Wichita	48,894	60	66
512	Shawnee Mission	29,389	82	93
233	Olathe	22,917	92	92
500	Kansas City	20,868	49	79
229	Blue Valley	19,055	99	97
501	Topeka	14,049	39	66
497	Lawrence	10,022	100	93
457	Garden City	7,736	39	83
305	Salina	7,594	63	88
260	Derby	6,695	80	92
475	Geary County	6,645	66	84
443	Dodge City	5,960	75	89
266	Maize	5,815	90	87
383	Manhattan-Ogden	5,383	85	87
437	Auburn Washburn	5,179	78	96
308	Hutchinson	5,025	71	85
253	Emporia	4,981	73	83
261	Haysville	4,690	73	82
480	Liberal	4,592	63	70
232	DeSoto	4,545	80	94

Sources: Editorial Projects in Education Research Center (Education Week); Kansas State Department of Education

year. The *status dropout rate* reports people in an age range who are not in school and do not have a diploma or GED. The *status completion rate* covers people in an age range who have earned a diploma or GED, even if they took more than four years to do it. Finally, the *averaged freshman graduation rate*, or *cohort rate*, estimates the percentage of students who complete high school in four years. *Education Week* used this last approach, which tends to yield the lowest graduation rates. The event rate, by contrast, tends to produce the highest rates.

There are various reasons why one office or organization may choose one method over the other. Laws, particularly No Child Left Behind, give school district, state, and federal officials incentives to choose the method that minimizes the number of dropouts and maximizes the number of graduates. According to a fact sheet distributed by KSDE, for example, school districts must graduate a certain percentage of students each year to make the “Adequate Yearly Progress,” or AYP, required by No Child Left Behind. The fact sheet asks the question “How Does a School or District Make AYP?” One answer is that “Graduation rate must be 75% or increase from previous year.”⁷

Education Week, meanwhile, defines the “leaver rate” as the:

Percent of students leaving high school with a standard high school diploma, expressed as a proportion of all those documented leaving with a diploma *or other completion credential* or as a dropout. (Emphasis added)

Note that this definition allows a school, district, or state to claim as a graduate anyone who earns a *completion credential*. That credential may be a diploma, but it can also be a GED. In real-life terms, however, a GED is not the same as a diploma. As one education researcher has observed, “By

Discrepancies in Rates

The discrepancy between the two reports suggests that Kansas high schools are not doing as well as we might first think. A key reason for the discrepancy is that there are several ways of calculating graduation rates.

For example, in its publication “Dropout Rates in the United States: 2005,” the National Center for Education Statistics recognized four different methods of calculating dropout rates. The *event dropout rate* measures students who leave school during a single



almost every measure, the life outcomes of GED recipients are more like those of high school dropouts without GEDs than those of graduates.”⁸

In response to “Cities in Crisis,” U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings announced federal efforts to standardize reporting requirements for graduation rates. Her desire is understandable: How can the federal government do its part in administering No Child Left Behind if Ohio uses one reporting method, Texas uses another and Kansas uses a third?

There are arguments to be made for each of the formulas. But the cohort rate, used by *Education Week*, has several merits. It recognizes that graduation is not simply an event, but a process. It calculates the proportion of students who enter and then leave each grade of high school. Unlike some methods, it places a four-year limit on who counts as being a graduate. For the five-year graduate, “better late than never” is true. But if a student requires more than four years to complete high school, something’s not working right.

Conclusion

How should Kansas citizens and lawmakers respond to the numbers, especially when they show that graduation rates may be overstated? One unhelpful approach is to assail the messenger or deny that a problem exists. *Education Week* is the establishment magazine of the American public school system. Its interest is in producing data that people can use to compare districts within a state and across states.

A second unhelpful approach is to accept the challenge but simply redouble current efforts by increasing spending yet again.

Community and political leaders should instead advocate for and implement institutional changes. One change is to give school principals the task of being more accountable for results and entrepreneurial in achieving them. Federal law imposes much red tape on schools, but state and local leaders should take the initiative as far as they can. Another avenue is to let students in troubled school systems use vouchers to obtain an education elsewhere. Lawmakers and educational entrepreneurs should invigorate the charter school idea so that parents, teachers, and administrators can gain freedom to serve students with new models of governance, curriculum, and teaching methods. Virtual schools should be given appropriate oversight, but also allowed freedom to operate across the state.

Cities in Kansas may not be in crisis to the extent that some cities in the U.S. are in crisis. But the losses incurred by the problem of dropouts are such that complacency is not an option.

About the Author



John R. LaPlante is an Education Policy Fellow with the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy. He has a Masters of Art in Political Science from The Ohio State University, where he studied the politics of economic development, social movements, and international relations. Mr. LaPlante has worked in the field of public policy since 1998, assisting lawmakers across the country in promoting consumer-driven, cost-effective solutions to the public issues of the day, particularly in regards to education. His commentaries have been widely published online and in publications such as *The Wichita Eagle*, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, the *Detroit News*, and the *Salina Journal*. He can be reached at john.laplante@flinthills.org.



Notes:

¹ "Cities in Crisis," America's Promise Alliance, April 1, 2008, available at www.americaspromise.org.

² Ken Thomas, "Report: Low Grad Rates in US Cities," Associated Press, April 1, 2008, available at <http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5heUgDfYJ5ytrg1mE6JqQliCiBXOgD8VOS5RG0>.

³ "Kansas Building Report Card," Kansas State Department of Education, available at http://online.ksde.org/rcard/state_grad.aspx?org_no=D%.

⁴ The "District Graduation Rate Map Tool" can be found at <http://www.edweek.org/apps/maps/>. The graduation rate is calculated by a four step process. The number of 10th grade students in year 2 is multiplied by the number of 9th grade students in year 1. A similar calculation is made for students in 11th grade and 12th grade. Also, the number of diploma recipients in year 2 is divided by the number of 12th grade students in year 1. Each of these ratios is multiplied to obtain the final graduation rate. As the Education Research Center says, "The [Cumulative Promotion Index] represents graduating from high school as a process rather than a single event." It thus projects the likelihood that the typical student entering the ninth grade will graduate with a diploma four years later. See also Christopher B. Swanson, "Cities in Crisis," Education Research Center, available from America's Promise Alliance at www.americaspromise.org.

⁵ See <http://www.edweek.org/apps/maps/> for information on specific districts in Kansas, including those not listed in this paper.

⁶ We identified the 20 districts with the largest enrollments by consulting the Comparative Performance & Fiscal System, a product of the Kansas State Department of Education, available at <http://cpfs.ksde.org/cpfs/>. In keeping with "Cities in Crisis," we used headcount numbers for the school year 2003-04.

⁷ "Adequate Yearly Progress 2007-08," Kansas State Department of Education, available online at the KSDE web page "No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)," <http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=397>.

⁸ Jay P. Green, *Education Myths*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, p. 97.

MORE ABOUT THE FLINT HILLS CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY

The Flint Hills Center for Public Policy is a Kansas think tank created as an independent voice to help political decision makers make informed choices. The Flint Hills Center for Public Policy is a non-profit, nonpartisan policy think tank. While not involved in the implementation or administration of government policy, our goal is to inform and raise public awareness of policy issues. For more information, visit our website at www.flinthills.org.

Flint Hills Center for Public Policy

250 N. Water, Suite 216
Wichita, KS 67202-1215
(316) 634-0218
information@flinthills.org
www.flinthills.org

