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From “A Nation at Risk” to “Cities in Crisis”

John LaPlante

First we had “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 ... the more they stay the same.

This new report is from America’s Promise Alliance, a child-welfare advocacy organization founded by former Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The report has received a lot of attention. One reason is the sheer scope of the problem that it outlines: 1.2 million students should graduate with a diploma each year, but don’t. While some people do just fine without a diploma, dropouts as a whole tend to create tremendous social costs.

While dropouts occur everywhere, author Christopher B. Swanson focused on the 50 largest cities and their surrounding metropolitan areas, whose dropout rates are twice those of student enrollment as a whole. The cities range in size from New York City (population 8.2 million) to Wichita, Kansas (population 357,698). Minneapolis was the only Minnesota city on the list, coming in as the 47th-most populous city.

Here are some of the most significant findings of the report:

The graduation rate for all students was 70 percent. Three out of 10 students don’t graduate on time—and most of those 30 percent don’t graduate at all.

Urban districts had worse graduation rates. Among the principal districts serving the largest 50 cities, the graduation rate was 52 percent.

Girls were much more likely to graduate than boys. The graduation rate was 74 percent for girls but only 66 percent for boys.

Graduation rates were much higher in suburban districts. The rate in the suburbs was 75 percent—nothing to crow about—but 60 percent in urban districts.

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

In the Midwest, graduation rates for the largest districts ranged from 25 percent (Detroit) to 60 percent (Wichita). Minneapolis (44 percent) did worse than all but five other districts. The rate for the Twin Cities was 77 percent, putting it tied with or behind 8 other metro areas.

The reactions of various public officials were as interesting (and distressing) as the results of the report.

Some districts disputed the numbers. The superintendent of the Cleveland Public Schools said the numbers “are not accurate.” He got some support from the Ohio Department of Education, which includes graduates of summer school in its calculations.

Both Minneapolis and Atlanta administrators said their rates were 8 percent higher than the ones calculated by Swanson.

School officials might be motivated to say such things because their budgets and jobs are on the line. But they can make these claims because there are various ways of counting students in these statistics. Are special education students included or not? What counts as “completing high school?” It is completing a diploma in four years? Four years plus an extra summer school session? Is a GED good enough?

The National Center for Education Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov>) recognized four different methods of calculating rates in its publication “Dropout Rates in the United States: 2005.” The *event dropout rate* covers students who leave school during a single 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. Swanson used this approach, which produces the largest numbers. The event rate, by contrast, produces the smallest numbers.

In response to the report, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings announced federal efforts to standardize reporting requirements. Her position is understandable: How can the federal government do its part in administering No Child Left Behind if you can’t easily compare Ohio with Texas? The move to standardize calculations represents a further federal intrusion into what many people think should be a matter at the state level. Yet NCLB is the law of the land, and in the ways of government, one law tends to lead to another.

In addition to pointing to their interpretation of the numbers, some state and school officials pointed to their good intentions. An official with the Kansas City, Mo., schools said “It’s not the place where we want to be. What matters is where we are going.”

Others emphasized recent actions they’ve taken. Officials in Kansas City, Kan., said they have moved in recent years to deal with dropouts. Leaders of the Boston school district

said they did their own study last year, and have started new efforts. An official with the Minneapolis Public Schools told the StarTribune “We've improved a lot since then.”

Certainly, some schools have seen improvements, and graduating three months later (see Ohio) is better than not graduating at all, even if that does imply extra public spending.

Regardless of who you count or how you crank the numbers, there are still far too many students who aren't completing high school on time. What can be done about it? Various and competing proposals abound, but I hope that we won't have to read a similar report in another 25 years.