

COMMENTARY

California's Increasing Graduation Rate Outpaces the Nation

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California's efforts to raise the high school graduation rate appear to be paying off. On April 9 the [California Department of Education](#) released figures showing in 2011–12 the state's dropout rate declined from the previous year while the high school graduation rate increased. Of the half million students who first entered ninth grade in 2008–9, 78.5 percent graduated by 2011–12, while 13.2 percent dropped out and 7.5 percent were still enrolled. The graduation rate increased 1.4 percentage points over the previous year and 3.8 percentage points over the last two years.

Longer-term trends are even more impressive. The current formula that California uses to calculate graduation rate requires individual-level data from the state's data system, [CALPADS](#), which has only been available for the past three years. The federal government—using a different, less-accurate formula, but over a longer period of time—shows that California's high school graduation is now higher than it's been in at least 20 years. The most recent federal report released in January showed that California had the largest increase in its high school graduation rate among the 50 states. Overall, California accounted for fully one-third of the increase in high school graduates in the United States while enrolling only 13 percent of all high school students.

This good news should be tempered by the fact that the federal government underreported the number of California high school graduates the prior year, which depressed the estimated graduation rate that year. But even using corrected figures would still leave California with an above average increase and accounting for a quarter of the national increase in high school graduates.

Both the California and the federal figures showed bigger improvements among African American and Hispanic students than among Asian and White students. Nonetheless, a sizeable achievement gap remains, with Hispanic students twice as likely and African American students three times as likely to drop out of high school in California as White students.

What accounts for increased graduation rates? And are they likely to continue?

It would be nice to say that the improvement came about because of the federal and state accountability systems. But that is unlikely.

The federal [No Child Left Behind](#) legislation enacted in 2002 required states to use graduation rates for federal accountability, although many states used formulas that inflated their rates and required minimal improvement. California was one of these states. Now states have to report a common, four-year cohort graduation rate, but recently approved waivers in 25 states that include different ways of meeting graduation-rate accountability threaten this consistency. The California state accountability system, based on the Academic Performance Index (API), is supposed to include graduation rates, but will not do so until at least

next year.

It is more likely that the improvement came about, at least in part, due to the widespread attention and efforts to address the problem at the national, state, and local levels. Numerous organizations have come together to support a national campaign, [*Grad Nation*](#), with a goal of raising the nation's graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020. One of the major supporters [*America's Promise*](#), [has sponsored more than 100 state and local summits on the dropout crisis](#). President Obama has highlighted the problem in several major speeches, including his first speech to a joint session of Congress in 2009. And the federal government has invested more than \$3 billion in turning around low-performing schools.

In California, Senate Pro-tem [Darrell Steinberg](#) has been a public leader on the issue since he was first elected in 2006, sponsoring legislation and holding numerous [public hearings](#) before the Senate Select Committee on High School Graduation that he established in 2006. The [California Dropout Research Project](#) has distributed more than 100,000 copies of its reports on the nature, consequences, causes, and solutions to the state's dropout crisis. Many organizations—including the California Mayors Education Roundtable, [The Education Trust–West](#), and [California United Way](#), among others—have informed and supported state and local efforts to improve rates. But the real credit for improving California's graduation rate rests with the students, parents, teachers, administrators, principals, superintendents, and school board members of California's 1,000 public school districts.

How much more California's graduation rate can improve remains to be seen. The key lies in efforts not only to engage students and improve schools, but also to strengthen families and communities that support positive youth development. California's high unemployment and poverty rates represent significant challenges to those efforts.

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