A stylized map of the United States is shown in the background, composed of various shades of beige, tan, and light brown. The state of Indiana is highlighted in a solid blue color. The map is overlaid with several large, white, diagonal lines that create a grid-like pattern across the page.

# CLOSING THE GRADUATION GAP

*Progress and Challenge in  
Raising High School Graduation  
Rates in Indiana*

**Civic Enterprises**

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# Table of Contents

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Executive Summary ..... 3

Overview of Education Reforms in Indiana. .... 8

The State of High School Graduation in Indiana. .... 10

College and Career Readiness in Indiana. .... 18

Common Themes and Promising Practices Observed in Indiana Schools and Districts ..... 20

State Areas for Improvement ..... 27

Plan of Action to Continue Raising High School Graduation Rates in Indiana. .... 35

Conclusion ..... 39



# Executive Summary

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In 2015, Indiana had one of the highest high school graduation rates of any state in the nation at 87.1 percent, and the narrowest graduation gap – 4.5 percentage points – between low-income and non-low-income students. This landscape occurred in a state that was in the top five for closing the graduation gap between all and low-income students from 2011 to 2015 and in which well more than one-third of the cohort of students were low-income. Indiana also has a higher graduation rate than the national average for every student subgroup, except for Asian and Pacific Islander students. We wanted to understand what accounted for the progress in Indiana, what it might be able to teach the 34 other states that had low-income student populations of 50 percent or less, and what challenges remain for the Hoosier state. We also note that progress in closing graduation gaps in Indiana for some student populations has not been as strong, given that significant numbers of African American students, students with disabilities and English Language Learners are not graduating from high school.

This report provides a detailed look at Indiana's high school graduation rates, including in the state's urban area school districts, shares some promising practices from schools and districts within the state, and highlights areas of concern for the state moving forward. This report is not intended to be a comprehensive catalogue of graduation rates in schools and districts across the state, but a scan of progress and challenge in raising high school graduation rates in Indiana in an effort to continue to increase opportunities for more students to finish high school and move on to postsecondary education and employment in the state and across the nation.

## High School Graduation Rates and Gaps<sup>1</sup>

### State Averages and Subgroup Gaps

Like the nation, Indiana has seen a gradual increase in high school graduation rates since the early 2000s. Indiana's federal Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) stands at 87.1 percent as of 2015, a slight decline from 2014, but still nearly four points above the national average of 83.2 percent. There is concern, however, that when new accountability plans under the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* take hold in the 2017-18 school year, Indiana's graduation rate may take a hit. This is because, while students are defaulted into the Core 40 diploma, students may still earn a general diploma, and these less rigorous diplomas may be excluded from graduation rate counts. Recent data show that 12 percent of students earned a general diploma, and in many districts, that number is much higher. School, district, and state leaders will need to do more to put students on track for one of the three Core 40 diploma options to both ensure students are graduating with a high-quality diploma and maintain high overall graduation rates.

While nearly all student subgroups in Indiana graduated at higher rates than national averages, gaps between certain groups still remain. White students graduated at a rate nearly 15 percentage points higher than Black students (the national gap is 13 percentage points) and almost 7 points higher than Hispanic students (the national gap is 9 percentage points). The graduation gap between students with disabilities and those without stands at more than 18 percentage points – the largest subgroup gap in the state – and is at about the national average for such a gap. Yet, Indiana remained at the top of the list of states with the smallest graduation rate gap between low-income and non-low-income students for the second straight year with a gap of just 4.5 percentage points and in the top five states for closing the gap between low-income students and all students since 2011.

### Indiana Graduation Rates by District

Indiana has more than 300 school districts (including charter schools, which are considered their own “district”) that graduated students in 2015. Of those districts, 63 percent had graduation rates between 90 and 100 percent and another 24 percent graduated between 80 and 89 percent of students. Just 13 percent of districts reported

graduation rates below 80 percent, but of those, more than half graduated less than 60 percent of their students, which qualify them as “low-performing schools” under the new *Every Student Succeeds Act*, requiring them to be identified and subject to reform plans.

Indiana had 37 large school districts with cohorts over 350 students in 2015, the majority of which are concentrated around the major metropolitan areas of Indianapolis, South Bend, and Gary. These large school districts show significant segregation of students by race and income levels, with inner-city schools serving the majority of low-income and students of color, while districts outside the city center serve a majority of white students, and far fewer low-income students.

### Disparities by Race, Income, and Locale

Indiana has one of the highest overall graduation rates in the nation. A closer look at the data, however, shows significant disparities by student subgroup and locale.

White students comprised nearly 80 percent of public high school students graduating in Indiana in 2015, while Black and Hispanic students made up 12.4 and 8.8 percent, respectively (compared to 15.9 percent and 22.6 percent nationally). The demographic breakdown of students across school locale – city, suburb, town, or rural – however, shows that the 21 percent of students who were students of color in the state were overrepresented in schools in cities and suburban areas. One-quarter of the graduating cohort in Indiana's city schools were Black and 10 percent were Hispanic, while about 20 percent of students in suburban schools were Black or Hispanic. Comparatively, less than eight percent of the graduating cohort in small towns and less than five percent in rural areas were Black or Hispanic. A similar pattern can be seen in the number of low-income students in the various locale types. Nearly half of students in city schools were low-income – nearly 10 percentage points higher than in any other locale.

Gaps by income among rural, suburban, and urban areas are also apparent. Regardless of income-level in suburbs, small towns, and rural areas, students are graduating on time at high levels; however, both low-income and non-low-income students in city schools graduate at much lower rates. Roughly 78 percent of low-income students in city schools graduated on time in 2015, compared to 87 percent in suburbs and about 88 percent in small towns and rural areas. Similarly, 78.5 percent of non-low-income students graduated in four years in city schools, while between 92 and 94 percent of non-low-income students graduated on time in suburbs, towns, and rural areas.

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this section, we use federally-reported high school graduation rates. The federal ACGR is deemed to be the “gold standard” in graduation rate reporting, tracks individual students, and allows for both national and state-to-state comparison. Differences between AFGR and ACGR are due to measurement error in AFGR calculations that have been cleaned up in the ACGR. Differences between the federal rate reported here and state-reported graduation rates are discussed in the Areas for Improvement section.

## Promising Practices Observed

Raising graduation rates requires hard work on the part of schools and communities, and a steady focus on ensuring that more students stay in school and graduate prepared for the next steps of either postsecondary education or a career. With this goal in mind, districts in Indiana are turning to several practices that have long-established track records of preventing students from dropping out, or early stage evidence of success, and focusing on implementing those practices across the district.

First, districts are finding ways to use data for learning rather than just for reporting and accountability. This includes a strong focus on Early Warning Information and Intervention Systems (EWS), an approach backed by many years of research demonstrating its effectiveness. Schools use Early Warning Systems to keep track of students' Attendance, Behavior, and Course Performance (the ABCs). These metrics can then be used to rapidly identify students who are in need of support. Schools in Indiana are especially focused on tracking the attendance of individual students (not just average daily attendance across a school), and are using this measure as a warning to school counselors, teachers, and administrators for when intervention is needed. We have seen evidence of close collaboration among these educators and a relentless spirit to get students whatever supports they need to get back on and stay on track.

Second, school leaders are creating what some have described as an "Every Student Counts" culture that marries high expectations for student learning and engagement in school with an understanding of where students are in their development. Given the evidence base around the positive impacts of strong student relationships with caring adults, school leaders are prioritizing building strong relationships between school staff and students as a way to keep students in school and on track. District leaders shared their recognition that many of their students are in great need of positive adult role models, guides, and mentors as they struggle to stay in school despite the challenges they are experiencing at home. To help provide that stability and connection, schools have adopted a range of practices, from rearranging the school's schedule to allow teachers time to connect with their students each day and interdisciplinary teaming of teachers and students to implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practices within classrooms and providing quality alternative schools that enable students to stay on track to graduate and meet their real life needs, such as working to support themselves and their families. The prioritization of strong relationships

allows school staff to differentiate the supports they provide to students, better understand why they might be struggling, and give students a consistent adult presence at the school as a source of support and encouragement. As we saw in our national cross-sample of students who had dropped out of high school, this can be the difference between a student who stays in school, and one who drops out.<sup>i</sup>

Third, Indiana embraced the high school dropout challenge early, becoming one of the first states to pass legislation to raise its compulsory school age law from 16 to 18. A study showed that raising the compulsory school age acted as a constraint on dropping out of high school.<sup>ii</sup> The action by the state to raise the compulsory school age set a clear expectation from the state that graduating from high school was a clear norm. Indiana's action prompted Civic Enterprises to write a report on how Indiana developed and passed this legislation, which was shared with the dozen other states that eventually followed suit.<sup>iii</sup> Indiana also took up the challenge to set clear high school graduation rate goals and hold itself accountable for progress over time. It was one of the earliest states to begin reporting the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate and highlighting gaps between student subgroups, which prompted heightened awareness of the challenges the state, districts and schools faced. We have seen evidence in Indiana of how such heightened awareness prompted action to create cultures within schools and communities that embraced the high school dropout challenge.

Finally, districts are experimenting with a myriad of ways to connect school to future education and employment opportunities their students will encounter once they leave high school. Our national cross sample of students who had dropped out of high school, including in urban, suburban and rural areas, showed that the leading reason students left school was not academic challenge, but not seeing the connection between school and their future work. Districts have built those connections with local employers to create internship opportunities for their students; made large investments in Career and Technical Education classrooms and courses that will give students access to the careers of the future; and invested in hiring school staff to work with students who have dropped out to get them back into school through alternative programs that link directly to employment or higher education. In addition, Indiana is home to the Goodwill Excel Centers, which provide adult education and wrap-around supports to students who were unable to complete their high school diplomas in the past. The Excel Centers' approach is helping adult students get back in the game, complete their education, and take the next steps to employment

or further education. By connecting high school learning to future career and education opportunities, schools are able to show how learning in school relates to job opportunities in the future, and motivate students to persist.

## Areas for Improvement

Indiana has a great deal to celebrate in regards to its high school graduation rate, including for low-income students, and the important work being done in districts around the state to give students the highest-quality education possible. As with every state, however, there are also areas of concern that the state must continue to address if this progress is to continue. Since many of these issues stem from how the state now collects and reports data on high school graduation, in this section, all numbers come from state-reported data, not federally-reported data as were used at the beginning of the section. This allows for an examination of how the state graduation rate differs from the federal rate, as well as an opportunity to look at issues within the state that are not reported federally, such as waiver diploma rates and homeschooling.

### Data Issues

#### Federal/State Discrepancies

This section explores discrepancies found in Indiana's graduation rate reporting. In particular, differences between the published federal rate versus the state rate, which are in large part due to greater leniency states have in reporting and adjusting the four-year cohort graduation rate than what is acceptable in federal reporting. This leniency could ultimately allow students to be effectively taken off the books. In addition, analysis of the data raises the fear that some of these codes are being used solely as loopholes to remove students and illegitimately inflate graduation rates. This is cause for concern, and is something the state should pay close attention to.

#### Division Between State and Schools

There is a clear division on the collection, reporting, and overall use of data at the state and school levels. On one hand, the Indiana Department of Education has made efforts to improve the system schools and districts use to collect and report data, but there are still significant gaps in the training provided to the school- and district-level staff responsible for correctly inputting data in the state-wide system.

This has led to great confusion over what data the state requires schools and districts to report, how data is expected to be reported, and who the data is supposed to be submitted to – all of which can change from year to year.

### Reactive, Not Proactive Data Use

Another chasm between the state and districts lies in the purpose and ultimate use of the data being collected. For the state, data collection is primarily used for accountability measures. For schools and districts, however, data has become a critical tool for identifying students at risk of falling off track and providing them with the support they need. This difference looms large in many districts where teachers and administrators feel hindered by the data they must collect that doesn't align with what they see as necessary for improving outcomes for their students and is often collected in an unusable manner. This then puts the onus on schools and districts to not only make sure they are collecting and reporting state-required data, but to also devise their own systems – at their own expense – for collecting and analyzing the data that help them make critical decisions and support their students.

### Homeschooling

Homeschooling in Indiana is almost completely deregulated. Once a parent or guardian has removed their child from the public school system to be homeschooled, the accountability placed upon them for what is taught or learned is limited. This is troubling mainly in that as soon as a parent or guardian provides a signed statement to homeschool, there is no way of knowing whether or not the child actually continues to receive an education, and the data show that the use of "Removed by Parent" code (a proxy for homeschooling) is far more prevalent in some schools than others. Many in Indiana have questioned whether students who are off track to graduation are being counseled into homeschooling by their local public school, or if the pervasive knowledge of Indiana's lax homeschooling regulations gives parents and guardians an easy loophole to remove their children from public schools should they no longer wish to comply with public school regulations. Because regulations are so loose around homeschooling in Indiana, questions will continue to linger over whether or not children are being rightfully removed from public education or if the loopholes provided are a serious cause for concern.

### Diploma Waivers

Indiana students must complete the required course sequence and pass the Algebra I and English 10 end-of-course assessments (ECAs) to graduate with a high school diploma. If a student is unable to pass the Algebra I and/or English 10 ECA by the end of their senior year, however, they may be eligible for one of two state waivers – the evidence-based waiver or the work readiness waiver – to earn their diploma. Intended to help students who

may struggle with test taking, particularly students with disabilities and English language learners, the overuse of waivers by some districts has come under heavy scrutiny in recent years. There have been several efforts to address these concerns in recent years, and since attempts to reduce waiver diplomas went into effect, both the number and percentage of students across the state graduating with a waiver has dipped slightly, and the gap between the state statutory graduation rate (including waiver and non-waiver graduates) and the non-waiver graduation rate (excluding students with waivers) has narrowed. Still, in 2015, there was a 6.1-percentage-point difference in the *state-reported* statutory graduation and non-waiver graduation rate, which effectively drops the overall state-reported graduation rate from 88.9 percent to 82.8 percent.

### ***Influence of Shifting Standards on the Classroom***

Indiana is one of just 13 states in which the state superintendent of education is elected, rather than being appointed by the governor. This can streamline the education agenda when both the governor and superintendent have similar views on education policy. On the other hand, when these positions diverge, this can create an antagonistic environment, and lead to constantly shifting metrics by which schools and students are judged. Controversy over state assessments and core standards have had a large impact on the state's classrooms as students, teachers, and administrators have felt the impact of uncertainty created by the near-constant back and forth on these issues over the years. As one stakeholder pointed out, some feel that the schools in Indiana that are often working in spite of standards and legislation created at the state level, not because of it. It is therefore critical that state lawmakers remain aware of how their actions impact students and teachers and move beyond politics as usual so they can best serve the educational system.

### ***College and Career Readiness***

Overall rates of high school graduates who go on to directly enroll in postsecondary education has risen gradually in Indiana, with a low of 59.1 percent in 2004, rising to a high of 65.8 percent in 2010. The rate as of 2015 was 64.7 percent. This trend line is slightly above the national average.<sup>2</sup>

There is still much debate in the field over how to measure college and career readiness, and where schools should focus their energy in order to ensure that their students

graduate prepared for the future. The Indiana Commission for Higher Education provides data on college enrollment and remediation rates, and looking at those trends can provide some insight into how the state is doing in terms of ensuring its students are being prepared for the next steps of college and career. These figures do not tell the whole story (particularly in the case of remediation, where there are causes for concern around its accuracy as a readiness measure), but they can provide a starting point.

Data from the Indiana Commission for Higher Education shows consistently that students who graduate with an Honors or Core 40 diploma are more likely to go on to enroll in college, and less likely to require remediation when they get there, as compared to their peers who graduate high school with a waiver diploma. These data also show some significant gaps by race and ethnicity, as well as by socioeconomic status. This remaining achievement gap deserves careful attention.

### **Conclusion**

Indiana has much to be proud of in terms of its high graduation rate and narrow graduation rate gap between low-income and non-low-income students. In addition, districts within the state are learning, innovating, and improving their abilities to serve their students and prepare them for the next steps in life. Indiana has taken concrete action over many years, following the evidence of what works to improve student outcomes and it has benefitted as a result.

But while there are many positive examples of progress, there are also reasons for concern. Looking forward, the state must find ways to improve its communication with and relationship to schools and districts so they can work as partners, providing much needed support and consistent and clear guidance. In addition, while there is a large focus on accountability at the state level, there seems to be less of a focus on learning from the data being gathered, and using it to steer a clear and consistent course. The turnover of leadership and the politics at the state level have made it difficult for schools and districts to stay ahead of the changes, to the detriment of staff and students. As Indiana considers further changes, lawmakers must keep in mind that their decisions have a very real impact on the ground, and that a constantly moving target will be very difficult to hit. To ensure that *all* students in Indiana have the opportunity to engage in a great education, the state must tackle some of these tough challenges, and keep consistently moving forward with the pieces that have shown great success.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/?year=2010&level=nation&mode=-data&state=0&submeasure=63>

# Overview of Education Reforms in Indiana

Over the last several decades, the state of Indiana has made substantial changes to its educational system, and maintained a strong focus on improving the quality of high school education, as well as raising overall graduation rates. This focus has been maintained through the tenures of both Democrat and Republican governors, as well as through shifting ideas on how best to improve Indiana's educational system. The impacts of the shifting reform efforts on schools are discussed in more depth in the final section of this report, but an overview of major reform efforts are discussed below.

In 1987, Indiana Governor Robert Orr signed an education overhaul known as the "A+ Program" into law. It lengthened the school year to 180 days; created the ISTEP exams that still serve as the basis for state standardized tests today; began a system for rating schools that were tied to either financial penalties or rewards based on schools' ISTEP scores and tied these scores to school accreditation; required summer remediation and retention for students in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade who did not pass the ISTEP; and called for development of teacher evaluations to be tied into a school's accreditation alongside test scores, attendance, and graduation rates. The A+ Program moved many of these reforms into the mainstream of education in Indiana, but due to state budgetary issues in the early 1990s, funding for many of its key provisions dried up.

Though many of the reforms set by the A+ Program were mainly gone by the mid-1990s, the law served as the predecessor to many of the reforms that shape education in Indiana today. The A+ Program established the ISTEP assessment as the state's achievement measurement tool. The ISTEP has undergone many changes over the years (and is currently scheduled to be replaced in 2017), but it has served as the heart of the performance-based accountability system (now transitioned to the current A-F system) since its initial adoption.

In 2005 and 2006, the State of Indiana sought to address dropout rates through legislation that raised the compulsory school age to 18, with limited exceptions only after a formal withdrawal process involving the parents and principal that explicitly makes clear to the student the likely consequences of dropping out. This law recognized that raising the age will keep some but not all potential dropouts in school. Because many students at risk of dropping out start exhibiting "dropout-like behavior" before they actually leave school, Indiana's law placed early warning requirements on the state's high schools. Report cards must

show suspensions, absences, whether work or drivers licenses have been revoked on account of unexcused absences, and whether the student is earning enough credits to move to the next grade level. Counseling for students who fall behind on their career plans is required by law so that credit recovery options are available soon enough to make a difference in a student's life.

Another significant part of the accountability system, the Indiana Core 40, was created in 1994 after leaders in business, labor, higher education, and K-12 came together to identify and create a common set of courses that they believed would provide a solid foundation for success in college and the workforce. In addition to creating the Core 40, the Indiana Education Roundtable also ultimately formed in 1998 out of these initial gatherings, and was formalized by legislation in 1999 by the state legislature under Governor O'Bannon and Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Suellen Reed. The Roundtable worked with the Indiana State Board of Education to make recommendations for reforms in the state that would improve student achievement until 2015 when it was effectively dissolved after the state legislature chose to defund it. During its existence, however, it was instrumental in making the Core 40 the default diploma for all students and requiring completion of the Core 40 curriculum to be admitted into the state's four-year universities and receive state-based financial aid for those institutions.

The Education Roundtable was also essential in raising the state's academic content standards and ensuring alignment with college and career expectations. Indiana briefly moved away from the state-developed content standards in 2010 when the state signed onto the Common Core State Standards under the leadership of Governor Mitch Daniels and state superintendent Tony Bennett. Governor Daniels also signed into law an expansive school voucher program in 2011, and created a new statewide entity that could sponsor charter schools. This allowed private, nonprofit universities to sponsor charter schools, leading to a rapid expansion of charters within the state. Governor Pence would further expand the voucher system in 2013 by signing into law a bill that opened up eligibility requirements for scholarships, and removed a cap on the amount of available vouchers.

Governor Pence made several other major changes to Indiana education policy beyond expanding vouchers, including signing legislation making Indiana the first state to opt out of the Common Core State Standards in 2014,

which led to the adoption of revamped state-developed academic standards; approving a revamped A-F school grading system that de-emphasized the number of students passing the ISTEP and focused more on student improvement; and finally, in 2016, mandating that ISTEP be repealed and replaced by July 2017. This is intended to balance out the previous focus on standardized tests, and give equal weight to student achievement and growth.

Since the adoption of the A+ Program in 1987, Indiana has pushed forward education reforms that have now become the norm across the country. Though no direct correlation has been made between the major initiatives of the past 30 years, it is clear the focus on raising high school graduation standards by education, business, and community leaders starting under Governor O'Bannon have had an impact on the increased number of students

graduating from high school and moving into postsecondary and the workforce. The Indiana Commission for Higher Education, created more than 40 years ago to coordinate between institutions of higher education in the state and provide guidance and recommendations to improve higher education outcomes, has also played a key role in this effort. As leaders in Indiana have worked towards better alignment between K-12 and higher education, the Commission has been integral in providing resources on college readiness, completion, value, cost, and more to critical stakeholders. With a goal of reaching a 60 percent college completion rate by 2025, the Commission will continue to be a force for improvement in Indiana's high schools and universities, keeping up the work started more than three decades ago.



# The State of High School Graduation in Indiana

**H**igh school graduation rates are on the rise across the nation, as the focused efforts of educators and education stakeholders in states, districts, and schools have led to more students graduating on time and ready for the future than ever before. This has proven to be the case in Indiana, where a decades long concentration on getting more students to and through high school has placed the state among those with the highest graduation rates. Indiana has also achieved some of the highest graduation rates for nearly all of its student subgroups and the smallest graduation rate gap between low-income and non-low-income students. Much of this success can be attributed to the hard work and innovation happening in schools and districts across Indiana to build better relationships with students, use data as a learning tool and to get students the supports they need to keep them on track, and connect high school students to college and career pathways so they see the relevance of their education. This progress, however, is not without its challenges. There are still stubborn gaps between many of Indiana's subgroups, low graduation rates in many of the state's poorest and most diverse districts, and a lack of alignment between the state and schools on critical issues.

In this report, we provide a look at Indiana's high school graduation rate data, share promising practices from schools and districts, and highlight areas of concern for the state moving forward.

## High School Graduation Rates in Indiana Over Time<sup>3</sup>

Like the nation, Indiana has seen a gradual increase in high school graduation rates since the early 2000s. In that time, the four-year, on-time graduation rate (as measured by the federal Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate, or AFGR) hit its lowest point of 73.2 percent in 2005 before steadily climbing to 87.1 percent in 2015 (as measured by the current federal standard Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, or ACGR). Indiana embraced the high school dropout challenge early, becoming one of the first states to pass legislation to raise its compulsory school age law to

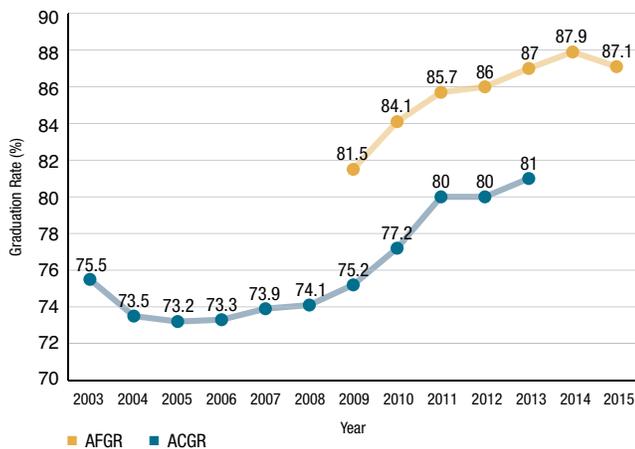
18 from 16. A study showed that raising the compulsory school age acted as a constraint on dropping out of high school.<sup>iv</sup> The action by the state to raise the compulsory school age set a clear expectation from the state that graduating from high school was a clear norm. Indiana's action prompted our report on how Indiana developed and passed this legislation, which we shared with the dozen other states that eventually followed suit.<sup>v</sup> Indiana also took up the challenge to set clear high school graduation rate goals and hold itself accountable for progress over time. It was one of the earlier states to begin reporting the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate and highlighting gaps between student subgroups, which prompted heightened awareness of the challenges the state, districts and schools faced. We have seen evidence in Indiana of how such heightened awareness prompted action to create cultures within schools and communities that embraced the high school dropout challenge.

Indiana's federal ACGR of 87.1 percent in 2015 is a slight decline from 2014, but still nearly four points above the national average of 83.2 percent. In a recent report from the Alliance for Excellent Education, Indiana was touted as one of only three states that automatically default students into a college and career ready diploma, putting the state ahead of the curve in terms of putting students on the right track for postsecondary.<sup>vi</sup> There is concern, however, that when new accountability plans under the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* take hold in the 2017-18 school year, Indiana's graduation rate may take a hit. This is because, while students are defaulted into the Core 40 diploma, students may still earn a general diploma, and these less rigorous diplomas may be excluded from graduation rate counts. Recent data show that 12 percent of students earned a general diploma, and in many districts, that number is much higher.<sup>vii</sup> School, district, and state leaders will need to do more to put students on track for one of the three Core 40 diploma options to both ensure students are graduating with a high-quality diploma and maintain high overall graduation rates.

Indiana's 2015 graduating cohort is reflective of the overall student population in the state – majority White and moderately low income. White students comprised nearly 80 percent of public high school students graduating in 2015, while Black and Hispanic students made up 12.4 and 8.8 percent, respectively. Indiana's 2015 graduating cohort was far less diverse than the national graduating class overall, in which 53 percent were White, 16 percent

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this section, we use federally-reported high school graduation rates. The federal ACGR is deemed to be the "gold standard" in graduation rate reporting and allows for both national and state-to-state comparison. Differences between AFGR and ACGR are due to measurement error in AFGR calculations that have been cleaned up in the ACGR. Differences between the federal rate reported here and state-reported graduation rates are discussed in the Areas for Improvement section.

### Change in High School Graduation Rate, 2003-2015

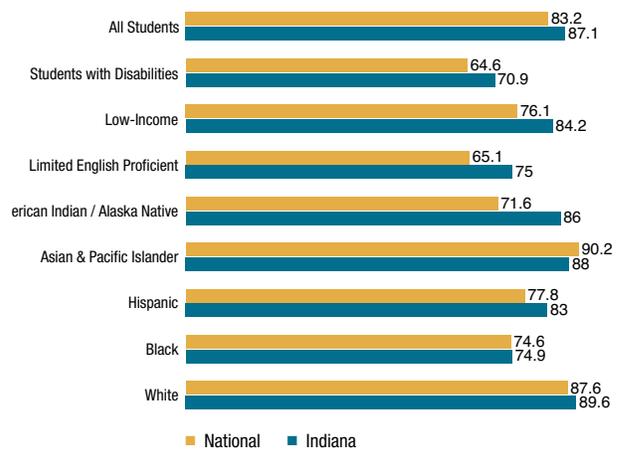


Source: Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

Black, and 23 percent Hispanic. About 40 percent of Indiana’s graduating cohort was low income, compared to 48 percent nationwide. Students with disabilities made up 13 percent of students in the class of 2015, which was comparable to the percentage nationally.

Every student subgroup in Indiana, with the exception of Asian/Pacific Islanders, outperformed their peers nationwide. White students, who historically have higher high school graduation rates, approached the 90 percent mark in 2015, and the combination of their high numbers and high graduation rates are a major reason for Indiana’s high overall rate. Black students recorded a 74.9 percent graduation rate, while Hispanic students had a graduation rate of 83 percent in 2015. Low-income students graduated at a rate of 84.2 percent – eight points higher than their low-income peers nationwide – and 70.9 percent of students with disabilities in Indiana graduated on time, compared to 64.6 percent nationally.

### High School Graduation Rates Indiana and the US, 2014-15 (%)



Source: Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics  
 Note: Low-income students are defined in this report as students eligible for free and reduced lunch

Though nearly all student subgroups graduated at higher rates than national averages, gaps between certain groups still remain. White students graduated at a rate nearly 15 percentage points higher than Black students and almost seven points higher than Hispanic students. The gap between students with disabilities and those without (89.3 percent) stands at more than 18 percentage points – the largest subgroup gap in the state. Indiana’s special education/non-special-education gap is lower than the national average and ranks them 15<sup>th</sup> among states. On a positive note, Indiana remained at the top of the list of states with the smallest graduation rate gap between low-income and non-low-income students for the second straight year with a gap of just 4.5 percentage points. Indiana is now one of only nine states in which the income-based graduation rate gap is less than 10 percentage points.

### Selected High School Graduation Rate Gaps, Indiana and the US, 2014-15

Cohort Groups	Indiana ACGR (%)	Indiana ACGR Gap (Percentage Points)	National ACGR Gap (Percentage Points)
Black Students	74.9%	14.7	13.0
White Students	89.6%		
ELL Students	75.0%	12.1	18.1
All Students	87.1%		
Low-Income Students	84.2%	4.5	13.7
Non-Low-Income Students	88.7%		
Special Education Students	70.9%	18.4	21.1
Non-Special Education Students	89.3%		

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

**Estimated Additional Graduates Needed to Reach a 90 Percent Graduation Rate in Indiana, by Subgroup, 2014-15**

I N D I A N A	All Students (N)	2,198
	American Indian/Alaska Native (N)	8
	Asian/Pacific Islander (N)	59
	Black (N)	1,328
	Hispanic (N)	436
	White (N)	225
	Two or More Identities (N)	168
	Students with Disabilities (N)	1,759
	Low-Income (N)	1,588
	Limited English Proficiency (N)	295

Source: 2017 Building a Grad Nation report

Indiana is on track to reach a 90 percent high school graduation rate – a mark set by four consecutive presidents and the goal of the GradNation campaign – by 2020; however, given the slight backsliding in the past few years, more work must be done to put the state back on track. Based on the 2015 cohort, Indiana needed roughly 2,200 more students to graduate on time to reach a 90 percent graduation rate. In the future, it will have to place greater emphasis on raising graduation rates for students of color, low-income, and special education students to meet that critical mark.

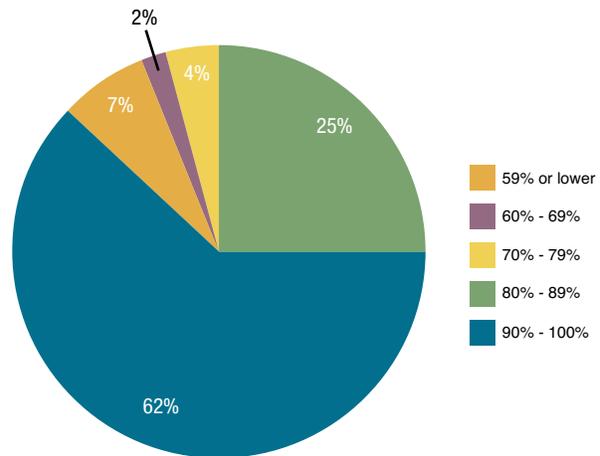
**Indiana Graduation Rates by District**

Indiana has over 300 school districts (including charter schools, which are considered their own “district”) that graduated students in 2015. Of those districts, 62 percent had graduation rates between 90 and 100 percent and another 25 percent graduated between 80 and 89 percent of students. Just 14 percent of districts reported graduation rates below 80 percent, but of those, more than half graduated less than 60 percent of their students.

According to the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states will soon have to begin identifying low-graduation-rate high schools (defined as having an ACGR of 67 percent or lower) for targeted intervention and support. Using the 2015 federal graduation rate data, 31 Indiana high schools currently qualify as low-graduation-rate schools. Of these schools, more than half (23<sup>4</sup>) are charter schools. Of these charters, seven serve non-traditional

4 Arlington Community High School was run by a charter school operator in 2015, but is now back under the control of Indianapolis Public Schools.

**Indiana District-Level Graduation Rate Ranges, 2014-15**



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

student populations, four are virtual schools, and 12 are brick-and-mortar charter schools. Of the eight district-operated schools, four are alternative education programs for off-track students, and the four others are traditional public high schools.

**Indiana’s 2015 Graduating Cohort Demographics and Locales**

As previously stated, White students comprised nearly 80 percent of public high school students graduating in 2015, while Black and Hispanic students made up 12.4 and 8.8 percent, respectively. The demographic breakdown of students across school locale – city, suburb, town, or rural – however, shows that the small number of students of color in the state were overrepresented in schools in cities and suburban areas. One-quarter of the graduating cohort in Indiana’s city schools were Black and 10 percent Hispanic, while about 20 percent of those students in suburban schools were Black or Hispanic. Comparatively, less than eight percent of the graduating cohort in small towns and less than five percent in rural areas were Black or Hispanic. A similar pattern can be seen in the number of low-income students in the various locale types. Nearly half of students in city schools were low-income – nearly 10 percentage points higher than in any other locale. City schools also served a greater number of English-language learners.

A closer look at the locale breakdown also provides a clearer understanding how Indiana has achieved such a narrow gap between non-low-income and low-income students. In suburban, small town, and rural schools, the graduation rate gap between low-income and

Overall, ECD, and Non-ECD ACGR Rates by Locale

Locale Code	Estimated ACGR Rate	Estimated ECD Rate	Estimated Non-ECD Rate
City	78.3%	78.3%	78.5%
Suburb	90.6%	87.0%	92.1%
Town	91.2%	88.3%	92.9%
Rural	92.1%	88.7%	93.5%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

non-low-income students reflects the overall state gap of 4.5 percentage points; in city schools, however, the gap is just 0.2 percentage points but the graduation rate for both low-income and non-low-income students is well below all other locales. Roughly 78 percent of low-income students in city schools graduated on time in 2015, compared to 87 percent in suburbs and about 88 percent in small towns and rural areas. Similarly, 78.5 percent of non-low-income students graduated in four years in city schools, while between 92 and 94 percent of non-low-income students graduated on time in suburbs, towns, and rural areas. So though the overall state gap between low-income and non-low-income students is narrow, the real income-based graduation gap lies between students in Indiana’s urban areas and everywhere else. Regardless of income-level in suburbs, small towns, and rural areas, students are graduating on time at high levels; however, both low-income and non-low-income students in city schools graduate at much lower rates.

This is also true for students of various race/ethnic backgrounds. White, Black, and Hispanic students in Indiana’s urban areas graduated at lower rates than their subgroup peers around the state. However, it is clear that Black students, primarily those in city schools, are at the greatest risk for not graduating on time. Just 71 percent of Black students in city schools graduated in four years, compared to 76.2 percent of Hispanic students and 81.6 percent of White students. Black students in other locales graduated at higher rates, but still had graduation rates lower than their White and Hispanic peers in almost all cases.

Based on this data, it is clear that the greatest challenge in improving high school graduation rates in Indiana will be raising rates for students in urban areas, and Black and low-income students in particular. This will be especially critical in Indiana’s largest urban areas which educate a large number of the state’s students. In the following section, we examine the state of high school graduation in Indiana’s largest urban school districts.

Select Race/Ethnic Graduation Rates by Locale, 2014-15

Locale Code	Estimated Black ACGR	Estimated Hispanic ACGR	Estimated White ACGR
City	70.9%	76.2%	81.6%
Suburb	83.5%	86.3%	92.0%
Town	85.9%	85.6%	91.4%
Rural	75.0%	81.6%	92.5%
Total	74.5%	81.6%	89.6%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

**Indianapolis/Marion County**

The city of Indianapolis merged with the government of Marion County in 1970 to create a consolidated city-county government system known as “Unigov.” The consolidation did not include the region’s schools, leading to a single large city with 11 school districts. With the majority of Black and low-income students residing in Indianapolis’ city center and a majority of White, and middle- and upper-class students in the surrounding areas, the schools in and around Indianapolis were largely segregated. Court-ordered busing between Indianapolis and school districts in surrounding townships began in 1981, but after 35 years, busing was ended at the end of the 2015-16 school year. According to recent reporting by Chalkbeat Indiana, WFYI, and the Indianapolis Star, the schools in Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) are more segregated today than pre-busing and students who are poor and Black or Hispanic are more likely to attend a low-achieving school (Cavazos, 2016).

The state’s open enrollment policy, allowing students to transfer between public schools with available space, along with its school choice policy, including both charter schools and vouchers, have blurred the traditional boundaries between schools and districts, especially in Indianapolis where there is a proliferation of both public district and charter school options. Indianapolis is unique among large urban areas in the state because of both its significant concentration of charter schools and because altogether, schools and districts in the county serve greater numbers of students of color than most other cities in the state.

Federal graduation rate data shows the breakdown of students from different subgroups in school districts across Marion County for the Class of 2015. Seventy-nine percent of students in Indianapolis Public Schools’ 2015 graduating cohort – the district with the lowest overall graduation rate in the county – were Black or Hispanic and 61 percent were low income.<sup>5</sup> Only one district, Pike

<sup>5</sup> Please note that demographics of graduating cohorts can vary from a district’s overall demographics due to students transferring in or out or dropping out during high school.

Class of 2015 ACGR and Student Demographics, Indianapolis & Marion County Schools

District Name	Cohort Size	All Students ACGR 2014-15	Asian Cohort Size 2014-15	Black Cohort Size 2014-15	Hispanic Cohort Size 2014-15	Multiple Races Cohort Size 2014-15	White Cohort Size 2014-15	Students w/Disabilities Cohort Size 2014-15	Low-Income Cohort Size 2014-15	English Language Learners Cohort Size 2014-15
Indianapolis Public Schools	1245	64%	1%	57%	22%	5%	16%	16%	61%	9%
<b>Indianapolis Inner-Ring Suburbs</b>										
M S D Wayne Township	1227	75%	1%	37%	17%	6%	39%	13%	61%	8%
M S D Lawrence Township	1117	89%	2%	42%	13%	7%	36%	11%	47%	5%
Perry Township Schools	1035	92%	15%	9%	8%	5%	63%	9%	50%	15%
M S D Warren Township	864	89%	1%	50%	11%	6%	32%	13%	61%	5%
M S D Washington Township	842	85%	4%	39%	12%	6%	40%	10%	42%	8%
M S D Pike Township	714	93%	3%	65%	16%	7%	10%	13%	59%	5%
Franklin Township Community Schools	546	97%	4%	6%	7%	3%	80%	10%	32%	2%
M S D Decatur Township	462	87%	1%	12%	6%	3%	77%	13%	51%	3%
Beech Grove City Schools	195	87%	1%	5%	6%	5%	83%	10%	42%	1%
School Town of Speedway	113	97.5%	3%	19%	7%	4%	67%	14%	41%	3%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education

Township in northwest Marion County, had a greater percentage of Black and Hispanic students in their 2015 graduating cohort. Wayne Township and Warren Township served the same percentage of low-income students as IPS, but both had 2015 graduating cohorts with significantly fewer students of color. In five of the eleven school districts in Marion County, Black and Hispanic students comprised less than 30 percent of the graduating cohort. Low-income students comprised 50 percent or more of graduating cohorts in more than half of districts across the county. Graduation rates for Indianapolis’ township school districts were largely in the 80s and 90s. Due to federal privacy laws, it is difficult to provide comparisons on how each of these districts is doing in graduating students from various subgroups, but in general, almost all districts in the area with significant numbers of Black and low-income students are graduating them at higher rates than the national average.

Overall, the cohort sizes in charter schools in Indianapolis are far smaller than at their district school counterparts. Only three charter schools in the area served larger cohorts of Black and Hispanic students than their district counterparts and six had larger cohorts of low-income students. Many charter schools in Indianapolis graduated students at a higher rate than Indianapolis Public Schools, but altogether, graduation rates for Indianapolis’ charter schools were mixed. And although a few Indianapolis charter schools enrolled significantly greater populations of Black or low-income students, there is no distinct pattern of segregation in these schools at the graduating cohort level. Indianapolis is also home to two high schools that were taken over by the state and placed under private management. The students of these schools are not included in IPS enrollment or graduation rate data, and are thus, considered separately here as well.

Graduation Rates and Cohort Demographics, Indianapolis Area Charter Schools, 2014-15

School Name	2015 Cohort Size	Federal ACGR 2014-15	State 2014-15 Grad Rate	2014-15 White Cohort Size	2014-15 Black Cohort Size	2014-15 Hispanic Cohort Size	2014-15 Low-Income Cohort Size
Carpe Diem - Meridian Campus	12	75.0% (GE50)	66.7%	42.0%	50.0%	-	42.0%
Charles A Tindley Accelerated	29	90.0% (GE80)	85.7%	0.0%	97.0%	-	97.0%
Christel House Academy South	32	74.5% (70-79)	77.4%	41.0%	16.0%	34.0%	81.0%
Christel House DORS South*	41	24.5% (20-29)	26.5%	32.0%	37.0%	15.0%	46.0%
Damar Charter Academy	21	10.0% (LE20)	0.0%	76.0%	19.0%	-	43.0%
Fall Creek Academy (Closed 2015)	21	90.0% (GE80)	85.0%	14.0%	81.0%	-	90.0%
Herron Charter	162	97.5% (GE95)	99.4%	68.0%	22.0%	5.0%	31.0%
Hoosier Academy - Indianapolis	34	34.5% (30-39)	38.2%	68.0%	26.0%	3.0%	3.0%
Hope Academy	22	49.5% (40-59)	65.0%	82.0%	0.0%	9.0%	18.0%
Indiana Math & Science Academy North	27	90.0% (GE80)	89.0%	22.0%	41.0%	-	74.0%
Indianapolis Metropolitan High School	90	47.0% (45-49)	47.7%	13.0%	82.0%	2.0%	82.0%
Indianapolis Lighthouse Charter School	48	84.5% (80-89)	91.3%	31.0%	54.0%	8.0%	69.0%
Irvington Community School	97	72.0% (70-74)	72.2%	73.0%	19.0%	2.0%	43.0%
Nexus Academy Of Indianapolis	27	69.5% (60-79)	76.9%	56.0%	26.0%	15.0%	37.0%
University Heights Preparatory Academy (Closed 2015)	26	49.5% (40-59)	44.0%	69.0%	23.0%	8.0%	62.0%
Excel Center for Adult Learners*	686	13.0%	19.3%	18.0%	60.0%	12.0%	51.0%

\*Excel Center for Adult Learners is classified as a K-12 high school, where students earn a high school diploma along with postsecondary credits and/or career credentials. Operated by Goodwill Education Initiatives, these centers serve primarily adult students who have dropped out of high school.

Note: Due to federal privacy regulations, federal graduation rates for schools with smaller cohort sizes are reported publicly in ranges. The numbers reported in the ACGR 2014-15 column, therefore, represent the midpoint of the federally-reported range and in parentheses, the actual range. The state-reported graduation rate is also reported for comparison purposes. Differences in the rates are due to more allowances for student removal from the cohort by the Indiana Department of Education.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education; Indiana Department of Education

Graduation Rates and Cohort Demographics, Indianapolis State Takeover Schools, 2014-15

Thomas Carr Howe High School	87	62.0% (60-64)	70.0%	37.0%	57.0%	2.0%	51.0%
Emmerich Manual High School	90	62.0% (60-64)	71.3%	60.0%	23.0%	13.0%	37.0%

\*Thomas Carr Howe High School and Emmerich Manual High School were taken over by the state in 2012 due to chronically low performance. These schools are currently operated by Charter Schools USA, a management company headquartered in Florida.

: Due to federal privacy regulations, federal graduation rates for schools with smaller cohort sizes are reported publicly in ranges. The numbers reported in the ACGR 2014-15 column, therefore, represent the midpoint of the federally-reported range and in parentheses, the actual range. The state-reported graduation rate is also reported for comparison purposes. Differences in the rates are due to more allowances for student removal from the cohort by the Indiana Department of Education.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education; Indiana Department of Education

## Fort Wayne

Fort Wayne Community Schools had the largest graduating cohort in Indiana in 2015. Unlike Indianapolis where the city's central school district faces competition from both the nearby township schools and the charter schools sector, Fort Wayne has little direct competition for enrollment with other public schools. Fort Wayne does face competition from private schools, which are more heavily concentrated in the area than anywhere else in the state,

but despite expansion of the state's voucher program, the district has seen little loss in enrollment. Roughly half of Fort Wayne's 2015 graduating cohort was White and nearly 40 percent Black or Hispanic making it more diverse than districts like Indianapolis Public Schools, but the district has experienced a significant increase in low-income students in recent years. Though Fort Wayne has seen its graduation rate drop slightly since 2013, it still graduates 85 percent of students on time.

	ACGR 2014-15	2015 Cohort Size	2015 White Cohort	2015 Black Cohort	2015 Hispanic/Latino Cohort	2015 Low-Income Cohort
Fort Wayne	85%	1962	51%	26%	13%	58%

Source: U.S. Department of Education

## Evansville-Vanderburgh

The graduating class of 2015 in Evansville-Vanderburgh in southwestern Indiana was nearly three-quarters White and less than half low-income. However, the district's overall percentage of low-income students hides the fact that two of the district's high schools had low-income cohorts greater than 60 percent. Evansville-Vanderburgh's 2015 graduation rate of 77 percent puts it on the lower end of the state's large urban districts. Though the district does well with graduating higher-income students, it graduated

just 68 percent of low-income students on time in 2015, and despite making up just 15 percent of the cohort, Black students graduated at a rate of 62 percent – 15 percentage points less than the rate of White students in the district. Evansville-Vanderburgh has undertaken significant work to improve academic performance and high school graduation rates in recent years (see profile in the Common Themes and Best Practices in Indiana Schools and Districts for more), but it will need to address these key areas of concern to continue moving forward.

	ACGR 2014-15	2015 Cohort Size	2015 White Cohort	2015 Black Cohort	2015 Hispanic/Latino Cohort	2015 Low-Income Cohort
Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation	77%	1594	74%	15%	3%	46%

Source: U.S. Department of Education

## South Bend and Elkhart

South Bend Community School Corp and Elkhart Community Schools both have nearly 50 percent low-income students in their cohorts, and large percentages of students of color. Like Fort Wayne, these two districts in northern Indiana stand out for their racial diversity. According to 2015 federal graduation rate data, both South Bend and Elkhart have large racial graduation rate gaps to contend with; in South Bend, White students graduated at a rate 11 points higher than Black students, and in Elkhart, the gap is 21 points.

## Gary Community Schools

The 2015 graduating cohort of Gary Community Schools in northwestern Indiana was 96 percent Black – a percentage far greater than any other urban public school district in the state – and nearly 70 percent low income. Both the city and the school district of Gary have experienced dramatic declines in population over time. At the same time, Gary has the second greatest concentration of charter schools serving high school students in the state, all of which also serve cohorts that are primarily Black and low income.

	ACGR 2014-15	2015 Cohort Size	2015 White Cohort	2015 Black Cohort	2015 Hispanic/Latino Cohort	2015 Low-Income Cohort
Elkhart Community Schools	84%	799	51%	14%	25%	53%
South Bend Community School Corp	82%	1267	42%	34%	14%	54%

Source: U.S. Department of Education

	ACGR 2014-15	2015 Cohort Size	2015 White Cohort	2015 Black Cohort	2015 Hispanic/Latino Cohort	2015 Low-Income Cohort
Gary Community School Corp	79%	375	1%	96%	1%	68%

Source: U.S. Department of Education

## Type of Diplomas Granted for Indianapolis Area School Districts and Other Large Urban Districts, 2015-16

Indianapolis & Marion County	Core 40	General	Honors	Waiver Diplomas
Beech Grove City Schools	62.7%	9.2%	28.2%	5.0%
Franklin Township Community School Corp	59.5%	4.4%	36.2%	5.0%
Indianapolis Public Schools	73.5%	5.4%	21.1%	9.0%
MSD Decatur Township	53.1%	23.3%	23.6%	9.0%
MSD Lawrence Township	55.3%	16.0%	28.7%	12.0%
MSD Pike Township	52.0%	26.0%	22.1%	8.0%
MSD Warren County	63.5%	8.2%	28.2%	10.0%
MSD Washington Township	37.7%	21.4%	40.9%	9.0%
MSD Wayne Township	54.0%	9.2%	36.8%	13.0%
Perry Township Schools	56.2%	15.0%	28.8%	18.0%
School Town of Speedway	38.1%	17.9%	44.0%	8.0%
<b>Other Large Urban Districts</b>				
Evansville Vanderburgh School Corp	41.5%	23.6%	34.9%	11.0%
Fort Wayne Community Schools	68.9%	3.3%	27.8%	12.0%
Gary Community School Corp	87.1%	0.7%	12.2%	10.0%
South Bend Community School Corp	57.7%	12.6%	29.8%	12.0%

Source: Indiana Department of Education

## Diploma Types Granted in Indiana's Large Urban School Districts

Another important factor in raising high school graduation rates in the state is to ensure that the diplomas being earned are high quality and put students on a path to success in postsecondary. Indiana offers four types of diplomas to students: a Core 40 diploma, a General diploma, and two Honors diplomas, a Core 40 with Academic Honors and a Core 40 with Technical Honors.<sup>6</sup> The Core 40 is the college-ready diploma all students are opted into when they enter high school, while the Honors diplomas build on the Core 40 and requires students to meet even greater academic or career-technical standards. To earn the General diploma, which has fewer core academic class requirements, a student, along with their parent or guardian and school counselor must decide together that opting out of the Core 40 diploma is in the best interest of the student and the student must complete a career-academic sequence to make up for the less rigorous core academic requirements.

Given the push for greater college readiness in Indiana and around the country, the Core 40 is considered

the standard diploma and the one most students are expected to earn. This is clearly the case in most districts in and around Indianapolis, as well as in Fort Wayne and Gary. In a handful of these districts, however, more than one in five students are earning the General diploma, not the Core 40 diploma.

## An Area of Concern for Indiana's Large Urban Areas

According to 2013 data released by the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, Black students in many of Indiana's large urban school districts are suspended and expelled from school at rates disproportionate to that of their peers from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. In some school districts, Black students are two to four times more likely to be suspended or expelled despite making up a smaller percentage of the student population. Research has shown that students who are expelled are more likely to drop out and that being suspended even one time in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade leads to a twofold increase in the likelihood of dropping out.<sup>viii</sup> Given the fact that Black students in Indiana's city schools and elsewhere continue to graduate at lower rates, eliminating these disparities should be a key area of concern moving forward.

<sup>6</sup> See more information on Indiana's Diploma Requirements: <http://www.doe.in.gov/ccr/indianas-diploma-requirements>

# College and Career Readiness in Indiana

**A**s more and more jobs now require education or training beyond a high school degree, states are focused on ensuring that students are not just graduating from high school, but graduating ready for the next steps of postsecondary education and career. However, determining what “readiness” means is far from simple.

Overall rates of high school graduates who go on to directly enroll in postsecondary education has risen gradually in Indiana, from a low of 59.1 percent in 2004 rising to a high of 65.8 percent in 2010. The rate as of 2015 was 64.7 percent. This trend line is slightly above the national average.<sup>7</sup>

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education provides data on college enrollment and remediation rates, and looking at those trends can provide some insight into how the state is doing in terms of ensuring its students are being prepared for the next steps of college and career. These figures do not tell the whole story (particularly in the case of remediation, where there are causes for concern around its accuracy as a readiness measure), but they can provide a starting point.

In 2015, ninety-three percent of Indiana students who graduated with an Honors diploma enrolled in college. Fifty-seven percent of those who graduated with a Core 40 diploma enrolled, as compared to just 25 percent of those who graduated with a waiver.<sup>8</sup> Of those students who enrolled in 2015, just three percent of those who graduated with an Honors diploma were in need of remediation, compared to 20 percent of those who graduated with a Core 40 diploma, and 58 percent of those students who received waivers. These numbers are an improvement over 2011, when seven percent of those graduating with the Honors diploma needed remediation, as compared to 41 percent of those graduating with a Core 40 diploma and 85 percent of those who graduated with a waiver.<sup>9</sup>

Looking at enrollment and remediation numbers by race and ethnicity as well as socioeconomic status shows a remaining achievement gap.

In 2011, sixty-nine percent of non-free or reduced lunch students enrolled in postsecondary, as compared to 50 percent of free and reduced lunch students. Sixty-five

percent of White students enrolled in postsecondary, compared to 62 percent of Black students, and just 50 percent of Hispanic students. As of 2015, the socioeconomic gap increased in terms of enrollment. Just 51 percent of free and reduced lunch students enrolled in postsecondary, while 72 percent of non-free and reduced lunch students did so. Racial demographics remained fairly similar in 2015, with sixty-six percent of White students enrolled in postsecondary, while 60 percent of Black students and 54 percent of Hispanic students did so.

Of those students who enrolled in Indiana public colleges, 47 percent of free and reduced lunch students required remediation, compared to 26 percent of non-free and reduced lunch students. Twenty-eight percent of White students required remediation, compared to 55 percent of Black students, and 40 percent of Hispanic students. These numbers improved in 2015, when 12 percent of White students required remediation, 29 percent of Black students, and 17 percent of Hispanic students.

While these numbers alone are not able to tell the full story of readiness in Indiana, they point towards interesting trends. For one, these figures indicate that students who are able to achieve Honors and Core 40 diplomas are more likely to enroll in college, and more likely to be prepared for college level work when they get there. This makes sense, given the more rigorous academics required for these diplomas, as opposed to that required for those who graduate with waivers. Research from Civic Enterprises and the Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins reviewed longitudinal data from the 2009 High School Longitudinal Survey, which demonstrated that high school GPA is the best predictor of college GPA, and that high school GPA closely tracked with college grades, regardless of how a student fared on reported test scores or the quality of their high school.<sup>9</sup> Unlike other indicators, GPA provides a more complete picture of a young person’s education and the skills they have learned that enable them to successfully navigate school – time management, study skills, perseverance, and motivation. All of these skills are very important for success in postsecondary.<sup>10</sup> A student’s ability to keep up with the more rigorous coursework demanded by Honors or Core 40 diploma tracks appear in this case to coincide

7 <http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/?year=2010&level=nation&mode=-data&state=0&submeasure=63>

8 <http://www.in.gov/che/files/2015%20state%20level%20reports.pdf>

9 <http://www.in.gov/che/files/StateofIndiana.pdf>

10 Balfanz, R., DePaoli, J., Ingram, E., Bridgeland, J., & Fox, J. (2016). Closing the college gap: A roadmap to postsecondary readiness and attainment. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises and the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins. Retrieved from <http://www.civicerprises.net/MediaLibrary/Docs/CCR.pdf>

with higher rates of enrollment, and lower rates of remediation in postsecondary for Indiana students.

Since 2007, Indiana has automatically enrolled all students into the Core 40 diploma track. This means that students must complete a formal opt-out process that involves parental consent if they want to leave the Core 40 track for a waiver option.<sup>11</sup> Given the positive trends shown for students who stay with the Core 40 diploma, this may be a good way to ensure that more students stay on the more rigorous path in high school, and are then better prepared to succeed in postsecondary.

In addition, the socioeconomic gaps in enrollment in postsecondary should be carefully considered. In 2015, there was a gap of over 20 percentage points between free and reduced lunch students and non-free and reduced lunch in terms of postsecondary enrollment. This is a trend seen nationwide. Indiana has a very narrow gap in terms of its high school graduation rates for low-income and non-low-income students, but higher rates of graduation for low-income students does not seem to be translating into higher rates of postsecondary enrollment. This is a question that should be carefully considered going forward if low-income students are to have the same opportunities as their non-low-income peers.

Attaining postsecondary education or training is becoming more essential as the global economy continues to shift towards a highly skilled workforce. It is estimated that some sixty percent of jobs in the United States will require some form of postsecondary education or certification. To better understand how states are doing in terms of preparing their young people for this new economic reality,

Lumina Foundation tracks educational achievement beyond high school (those who achieve college degrees, workforce certificates, industry certifications and other high-quality credentials) for Americans from ages 25-64. Since 2008, attainment nationally has risen 7.9 percentage points. Indiana's progress is similar to that of the nation, rising 7.7 percentage points from 33.4 in 2008 to 41.1 in 2015. Indiana is working towards its own goal of reaching a 60 percent attainment rate by 2025.<sup>12</sup>

In 2014, Lumina reported that the attainment rate for Indiana (associate degree or higher) was 35.9% with an additional estimated 5% of people who have earned high-value postsecondary certificates, totaling 40.9% of working age population in Indiana with quality post-secondary credentials compared to 45.3% nationally.

In 2016, Indiana's largest industry was durable goods manufacturing, accounting for 16 percent of Indiana's GDP. Close behind at 15.2 percent however was finance, insurance, real estate, rental, and leasing. These services saw real growth of 1.5 percent, compared to just 0.5 percent real growth for durable goods manufacturing. In addition, the largest contributors to real GDP growth in Indiana were professional and business services, with educational services, health care, and social assistance coming in second.<sup>13</sup> These sectors will require a skilled workforce in order to continue to grow and contribute to Indiana's economy, meaning more young people will need to complete high school, and go on to further postsecondary certification or education.

11 <http://www.doe.in.gov/ccr/core-40-general-information>

12 <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2017/#state/IN>

13 <https://www.bea.gov/regional/bearfacts/pdf.cfm?fips=18000&areatype=STATE&geotype=3>



# Common Themes and Promising Practices Observed in Indiana Schools and Districts

To improve educational outcomes for Indiana's students, schools must tackle many obstacles and challenges as they work to ensure that more students stay in school, and graduate prepared for the next steps of either postsecondary education or a career. With this goal in mind, there are several promising practices that districts across the state have in common.

First, there is evidence that districts are using data for learning rather than just reporting and accountability. By comparing and analyzing student metrics, districts are able to proactively identify students who are struggling, and match them with the right supports before they fall significantly off track. Second, school leadership is prioritizing building strong relationships between school staff and students to keep students in school and on track. During site visits, administrators discussed the various innovative ways they have found to ensure that relationship building is a priority within the school. Finally, districts are experimenting with a myriad of ways to connect school to the future education and employment opportunities their students will encounter once they leave high school. School leaders observed that this connection is motivating their students to work hard, learn difficult concepts, and graduate on time.

## Proactive Use of Attendance as an Early Warning System

Early Warning Systems (EWS) give schools a way to quickly identify when a student is falling off track. By tracking three metrics – Attendance, Behavior, and Course Performance (also known as the ABCs), schools can ascertain if a student is in need of supports, and proactively provide assistance.

Early Warning Indicators have been shown to be effective identifiers of students at-risk of dropping out of high school. Specifically, research has identified three key factors that are stronger predictors of student outcomes than demographics or test scores: attendance, behavior, and course performance – the ABCs of dropout prevention.<sup>14</sup>

A 2007 study demonstrated that indicators reflecting poor attendance, misbehavior, and course failures in 6<sup>th</sup>-grade

could be used to identify 60 percent of the students who will not graduate from high school.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that course performance in 9<sup>th</sup> grade was the strongest predictor of student graduation, while freshman-year absences were also a powerful predictor of graduation and the strongest predictor of student course performance.<sup>16</sup>

Additional data has illustrated the importance of attendance as an indicator of student success. A study in Baltimore found a strong relationship between 6<sup>th</sup>-grade attendance and the percent of students graduating from high school within one year of their expected on-time graduation.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, a study in Philadelphia schools found that just 17 percent of 6<sup>th</sup>-graders who were severely chronically absent and attended school less than 80 percent of the time graduated within one year of on-time graduation.<sup>18</sup>

Research also identified thresholds on these indicators that help to identify when a student is at-risk of dropping out:

- Attendance: missing 20 days or being absent for 10 percent of school days (common definitions of chronic absenteeism);
- Behavior: receiving 2 or more mild or more severe behavior infractions; and
- Course Performance: the inability to read at grade level by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, receiving an F-grade in 6<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> grade, or failing two or more courses in 9<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>19</sup>

A 2008 practice guide by the Institute of Education Statistics recommended that educators use ABC indicators to prevent students from dropping out school.<sup>20</sup>

A growing number of schools throughout the country began implementing Early Warning Systems to identify and intervene with students identified as at-risk by early

15 Ibid.

16 Allensworth, E.M., & Eaton, J.Q. (2007). *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in the Chicago Public Schools*, Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.

17 Baltimore Education Research Consortium (2011). *Destination Graduation: Sixth Grade Early Warning Indicators for Baltimore Schools: Their Prevalance and Impact*. Baltimore, MD: BERC.

18 Balfanz, R. Herzog, L., & MacIver, D. J. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Education Psychologist*, 42, 4, 223-35.

19 Bruce, Bridgeland, Fox, & Balfanz (2011). *On Track for Success*.

20 Dynarski, M., Clarke, L., Cobb, B., Finn, J., Rumberger, R., and Smink, J. (2008). *Dropout Prevention: A Proactive Guide* (NCEE 2008-4025). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.

14 Bruce, M., Bridgeland, J.M., Fox, J.H., & Balfanz, R. (2011). *On Track for Success: The Use of Early Warning Indicator and Intervention Systems to Build a Grad Nation*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises.

warning indicators. In the 2014-15 school year, 52 percent of high schools across the country had an Early Warning System in place.<sup>21</sup>

Districts in Indiana demonstrated various uses of the ABCs to monitor student performance and identify those who were struggling.

### Indianapolis Public Schools – Data Snapshot

2014 and 2015 Data - Federal

<b>2014 Cohort</b>	1,245
<b>2015 Cohort</b>	1,245
<b>2014 ACGR</b>	64%
<b>Percent of Low-Income Students in Cohort</b>	61%
<b>Percent Hispanic Students in Cohort</b>	22%
<b>Percent Black Students in Cohort</b>	57%

Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) has honed in on the importance of tracking attendance, and in the last several years moved from monitoring overall school attendance to monitoring attendance rates of individual students. This is important because looking at the overall school attendance rate allows students with near perfect attendance to mask those who are missing many days of school. By looking at individual student attendance rates, IPS now has a far more accurate picture of which students are missing crucial instructional time.

In addition to moving away from average attendance to individual, IPS expanded its reporting practices so that the district now tracks attendance beginning in preschool, continuing all the way through high school. Lisa Brenner, Director of Graduation and Alternative Services at IPS, explained that her move to count attendance at the preschool level initially garnered pushback from teachers and staff. Indiana Public Schools are not required to report preschool attendance data, and many were concerned that adding in this count would hurt their overall attendance numbers. Brenner felt strongly, however, that it was important to instill in students and parents from the very first days of school how important attendance would be to their academic success. She pointed out “you can have the best teachers and the best curriculum in the world – but if the kid isn’t in school, it won’t make a difference.”

To support IPS administrators and staff to improve attendance rates, Brenner built a team of Graduation Coaches who work with schools to identify graduation barriers, come up with strategies to address problems, and imple-

ment interventions. For example, Graduation Coaches worked with administrators to build a list for teachers of the students who were chronically absent from their classroom, as well as a set of concrete actions that teachers could take to try and improve attendance among that small group of students (calling home, scheduling a parent teacher conference, connecting the student with a social worker or school counselor). They found that teachers were frequently unaware that a student had been absent as often as they had, or felt that there was nothing they could do to influence the student’s attendance. Providing a manageable list of students, as well as concrete steps teachers could take, empowered educators to act to get students back on track.

Graduation Coaches at IPS have noticed that the consistent focus on attendance rates has started to create more communication between schools about students in need of extra attention. Schools have begun to contact each other when students transfer to make the new school aware if a student had attendance issues in the past, enabling the new school to be proactive from day one, rather than waiting for warning signs to appear.

Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation (EVSC), which serves over 22,000 students<sup>22</sup>, has undergone a significant turnaround effort in the last seven years, and the use of data and Early Warning Systems has played a central role in their turnaround work.

### Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation – Data Snapshot

2014 and 2015 Data - Federal

<b>2014 Cohort</b>	1,594
<b>2014 ACGR</b>	77%
<b>Percent of Low-Income Students in Cohort</b>	46%
<b>Percent Hispanic Students in Cohort</b>	3%
<b>Percent Black Students in Cohort</b>	15%

As part of their work to reduce the dropout rate, Evansville superintendent Dr. David Smith and Associate Superintendent of Strategy and Accountability, Catherine Miniham, dug into their student data to determine what the risk factors were for dropping out for Evansville students. The team looked at the 2012 student cohort to see who graduated, who did not, and determine the common factors that predicted either success or dropout. As the team anticipated, they found that Attendance, Behavior, and Course Performance were the critical indicators. Going one step further, they determined that for their student

21 U.S. Department of Education (2016). Issue brief: Early Warning Systems. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development.

22 <http://district.evscschools.com/>

body, anything less than a 97 percent attendance rate, one out of school suspension, and/or failing a math or ELA course in the first semester of high school were strong indicators that the student was off track and in need of intervention. Armed with this information, school administrators began to make some changes. First, they stopped looking at overall absences throughout the school year, and instead began to look at absences as a percentage of the school year (for example, 10 days missed in the first semester as opposed to 10 days over the course of the school year). They also made sure that social workers embedded within the schools had access to attendance data so they could quickly intervene.

Building on the focus on attendance, district administrators went to the schools and asked them what data would be helpful for them to be able to access and compare for their students, and then built reports that would reflect those needs. The district now builds “at-risk reports” that are updated nightly for student attendance and behavior, and quarterly for grades, allowing teachers and staff to have access to constantly updated metrics. They also trained school staff on how to use and interpret those reports to be sure they could take full advantage of the system. The feedback from schools has been that, while staff and teachers might have been aware of many of the students flagged by the data, it always points to several other students that they weren’t aware of, and who might have otherwise fallen through the cracks.

## Relationship Building

In interviews, district leaders all expressed the view that strong relationships between students, and the teachers and administrators in the school is key to keeping students in school and on track, especially for those students who may be struggling with barriers outside of the school walls. For these students, it is especially important that they have caring adults in school who are invested in their success, and available to provide support and guidance. Districts in Indiana gave examples of how they put relationship building at the center of their work.

**Warren Central High School** (part of MSD Warren Township district) focuses on building trusting relationships between staff, teachers, and students – no easy task with a student body of 3,700. School principal Rich Shepler made clear that he expects the staff at Warren Central to engage with and get to know their students beyond just the academics. He pointed out that for many of their students, school is a safe haven in an otherwise turbulent world. Building strong relationships with students is therefore a critical strategy that Warren employs to help their students stay in and do well in school.

## MSD Warren Township – Data Snapshot

2014 and 2015 Data - Federal

<b>2014 Cohort</b>	864
<b>2014 ACGR</b>	89%
<b>Percent of Low-Income Students in Cohort</b>	61%
<b>Percent Hispanic Students in Cohort</b>	11%
<b>Percent Black Students in Cohort</b>	50%

In order to support relationship building with students and families, Warren Central operates on a cohort model in which students are assigned in alphabetical order to a specific principal or dean. The students then stay with that one adult through all four years of high school, allowing the adult to build a relationship with the family as well as with the student. Administrators noted that this helps them get to know the students, and makes it easier for parents to engage with the school since they know exactly who they should contact if they have concerns, and that person stays the same throughout all four years. To further support relationship building between teachers and students, administrators moved an extra 15-20 minutes of time in the school day to the beginning of first period, and encouraged teachers to use that time to work with students on whatever topics or skills the teacher thought would be most helpful for those students. Teachers have used the time to bring arts and music into the classroom, to teach students about email etiquette, or to talk about issues on the minds of their students. Though the program was new, teachers already felt that this small amount of time helped them to get to know their students better and that dedicating time within the school day to connect with students has improved the overall feeling of the building.

For **Indianapolis Public Schools**, relationship building with families as well as students is a critical piece of their strategy. Graduation Coaches conduct home visits for students who have fallen off track, and talk with parents about their role in their child’s success. Graduation Coaches employ a similar strategy to reengage students who have dropped out of school – they meet the student in their homes, and talk with families and students about their options to complete their high school diploma. “Many students [who drop out] want to come back,” Brenner explained. “They just need someone to tell them it’s ok.” For those who don’t want to go back to a traditional high school, Graduation Coaches can help them identify an option that will fit with their schedule, whether that be a virtual school; the IPS Grad Academy that offers half-days of school so students can also hold down a job; an adult education center like the Goodwill Excel Center; or programs like JobCorps that provides students with both

a degree and work experience. By getting to know the student and understand their barriers and goals, Graduation Coaches are able to identify an option that students will be more likely to complete.

### Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation

approaches relationship building both from the perspectives of the relationships that students need to have with the adults in schools, as well as the relationships between school staff, administrators, and district leaders.

EVSC leadership began the process of implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practices into district schools under Dr. Smith's tenure. Dr. Smith explained that this was in response to a shift they were seeing in the needs of their students. Where previously the skills taught by SEL would have been a byproduct of their home environment, they now saw many students who were not learning critical social and emotional components they needed to be successful in school and in life. Smith saw the need for schools to adjust and approach those students differently in order to help them succeed.

Research shows that up to 75 percent of a student's success is dependent on factors other than academic skills, including social and emotional competence.<sup>23</sup>

Other studies demonstrate that students who receive high-quality SEL in the classroom demonstrate better academic performance, improved attitudes and behaviors, greater motivation to learn, deeper connection to school, improved relationships with peers, as well as fewer delinquent acts, conduct referrals, and reduced emotional distress, including fewer reports of student depression, anxiety, stress and social withdrawal.<sup>24</sup> These benefits of SEL are invaluable in a school setting where young students are navigating not only academic challenges but also the interpersonal relationship difficulties many face during adolescence.

In addition, a 2011 Meta-Analysis of 213 studies involving school-based, universal SEL programs including over 270,000 K-12 students revealed that SEL programming has powerful impacts on student gains. SEL programming fostered strong social-emotional skills; improved attitudes about the student's self, others, and their school; promoted positive classroom behavior; and boosted achievement scores on standardized tests (an average of 11 percent points higher). In addition, SEL programming was found to reduce the risk of failure, including fewer negative behaviors and less emotional distress.<sup>25</sup>

EVSC is in the process of providing teachers and administrators with coaching, training, and mentoring around the practices of SEL, and implementing Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) in place of more traditional classroom management practices. District leaders expect this to be a slow and steady process – they will need to build buy-in and support for the program among teachers, which will only come with time and exposure to the new methods, and the opportunity to see that the new practices will work within the classroom.

To assist with this transition, SEL specialists have been placed within EVSC buildings to provide coaching to administrators, teachers, and any other behavior specialists within the building. The goal is to get everyone to use the same language and practices so the new method can be implemented with model integrity, and to ensure that staff are comfortable and confident with the new approach.

EVSC has found great success by building strong relationships between district administration and the administrators of individual schools through its use of the Transformation Zone approach (TZ). In 2012, EVSC began a partnership with Mass Insight Education that brought the organization's Transformation Zone model to five schools in the EVSC in need of support and improvement. The model clusters high-needs schools together, and creates an Office of Transformational Support, which provides targeted assistance around school operation, teacher training and mentoring, and academics. School principals have a close working relationship with the Office of Transformational Support – Kelsey Wright, Director of School Transformation, meets one-on-one with each of the five school principals on a weekly basis to talk about challenges within their school, and understand where they could use more help. Wright can then go directly to the district leadership team and find ways to get those principals the tools or changes they need to be successful. For example, Wright looked for a solution for a principal in the TZ experiencing an overload of behavioral issues in the school. By looking at the data, Wright and her team determined that there were 10 students taking up a large portion of that principal's time with discipline referrals, and that nine out of the 10 were students who were new to the district. In response, Wright immediately brought several SEL coaches into the school to work with teachers to better manage those students in the classroom, and to determine what next steps should be going forward. The close relationship that Wright had both with the school

23 Duckworth, A. L., Dweck, C., Brooks, D. & Tough, P. (2012). True Grit, Can You Teach Children Character? NBC News Presentation, September 24, 2012.

24 Mart, A., Dusenbury, L., & Weissberg, R. P. (2011). Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning: Complementary Goals for School-Family Partnerships. *Handbook on Family and Community Engagement*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

25 Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & Schellinger,

K. (2011) The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*: 82, 1, 405-432.

principal, as well as the district leadership, meant that she could identify a solution and implement it swiftly, allowing the principal to more quickly return focus to critical tasks.

By building trusting relationships with school leadership in the TZ, and with district leaders, Wright and her team are able to quickly provide differentiated supports to each school that will be truly impactful.

## Connecting High School to Postsecondary and Career

A high school diploma is not the finish line, as most students will need additional opportunities for education, whether it be technical training, a certification, or a post-secondary degree, if they are to succeed in the job market of the future. District leaders of Indiana schools shared the ways in which they work to connect learning in high school to the careers and studies that their students will move towards in the future. District leaders shared ways in which they are working to help students obtain marketable skills and certifications while they are still in high school, as well as helping students see the connections between their studies in school, and their futures.

Warren Central's mission of connecting school to "what comes next" is seen through their commitment to providing multiple pathways that will allow all of their students to succeed. Principal Shepler explained that Warren understands that not every student will be a "four-year student," (some may need additional time to graduate), and that not every student will take the same path after high school. School leadership emphasizes providing all students with opportunities to engage with career and technical education (CTE), ROTC, and academics that will prepare them for college. In this way, students can ensure that they have many options open to them when they leave Warren Central.

CTE coursework at Warren Central includes what would be considered some of the more traditional options such as welding. But the school has also utilized Race to the Top funds to provide students with a full robotics lab, and an electrical course where students learn not just the basics of home wiring, but also more forward-looking techniques used to wire "smart homes." In addition, students can take advantage of cosmetology and Certified

Nursing Assistant programs, for which they take the formal certification test before graduation so they leave prepared to go into the workforce. The school also used Race to the Top funds to provide students with a full working recording studio for television and radio, allowing students to learn how to work with technical equipment, and manage the set and run of show. Students use the equipment to broadcast live morning announcements each day, do radio programming for the school, and cover and broadcast school sporting events.

In each of these programs, Warren Central has made a commitment to continually look towards the skills their students will need in the future, and find ways to best prepare them for the workforce.

Beyond academics, Warren Central works to find ways to help students explore their interests, and connect school to their future, whether that is further education or a career. The Extended Learning Opportunities program provides high school students – freshmen through seniors – with opportunities to engage in internships, or to create their own course of study and engagement around a topic that interests them. Janet Banks, the Extended Learning Opportunities Coordinator, views the program as a way to keep students engaged in school and prevent them from falling off track. When students are able to experience the world of work through internships, or engage with an activity or area of study that they are passionate about, it can motivate them to persist in school, even when their studies are challenging.

To provide internship and work experience opportunities, the Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) program partners with local employers. When the program was just getting off the ground, Banks went out into the community to proactively sell local businesses on the idea of bringing high school students on as interns. The program has been so successful that businesses now come to Banks and ask how they can participate. Banks explained that employers view the program as a way for them to build a pipeline of talent into their businesses, and they report that the students who participate are great assets to their companies. During the 2014-15 school year, nearly 400 students participated in the program, earning a total of 118 credits.

# Using Best Practices to Raise Graduation Rates in Fort Wayne Community Schools

## Fort Wayne Community Schools

2014 and 2015 Data – Federal

<b>2014 Cohort</b>	2,026
<b>2015 Cohort</b>	1,962
<b>2014 ACGR</b>	87%
<b>2015 ACGR</b>	85%
<b>Percent of Low-Income Students in Cohort (2015)</b>	58%
<b>Percent Hispanic Students in Cohort</b>	14%
<b>Percent Black Students in Cohort</b>	26%
<b>Percent White Students in Cohort</b>	57%

Of all of Indiana's large school districts, Fort Wayne Community Schools have made great progress in bringing together a wide range of best practices in raising high school graduation rates. The district still has room for improvement, but they have made great strides by making systemic changes, remaining committed to continuous learning, and making decisions based on data and the needs of their students.

In the 2014-15 school year, Fort Wayne Community Schools graduated 85 percent of their students, dropping slightly from 2014 but still keeping them at the top of urban school districts in Indiana. In terms of the racial/ethnic makeup of Fort Wayne Community Schools, the graduating cohort has changed only minimally over time. The White student population dropped (65 percent of students to 57 percent between 2005-06 and 2014-15), and the percentage of Hispanic students increased (6 to 14 percent from 2005-06 to 2014-15) – mirroring similar changes in IPS. The most significant demographic change in Fort Wayne schools has been the increase in students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, going from 39 percent to 58 percent in just 10 years.

## Impetus

In the early 2000s, graduation rates in Fort Wayne high schools were cause for serious concern. Due to poor performance, two of Fort Wayne's high schools had been put on the list for state takeover if they did not improve. The Fort Wayne school board decided that, rather than fight that designation, they would embrace it and begin a rigorous process of revamping and improving their entire education system. In 2008, Fort Wayne's school board and leaders began the process of High School Reinvent.

High School Reinvent was a process based on careful research, learning from other successful schools, and bringing those best practices back into Fort Wayne's ecosystem. Debra Williams-Robbins explained that during this initial research phase, Fort Wayne's administrators relied heavily on the work of Bill Daggett and the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE). From ICLE's work, Fort Wayne gleaned twelve characteristics of successful high schools that they would seek to implement throughout Fort Wayne's school system. These characteristics included building smaller learning communities for teachers and staff, creating a culture of rigor and high expectations for students, building strong adult/student relationships, a focus on 9<sup>th</sup> grade transition and success, and the proactive use of data and Early Warning Systems to inform instruction.

## Changes to School Systems

Williams-Robbins shared the large-scale systems changes that were made in order to put in place the twelve characteristics that they had identified as critical to success. For example, the district had originally operated on a 4x4 schedule. In order to better accommodate time for smaller learning communities, professional development, and planning time, the district switched to a seven-period day. This allowed adults to meet throughout the day to review data on student progress, identify supports needed for specific students, and discuss instructional practices.

Fort Wayne also revamped its grading procedures in order to get all of their teachers on the same page – a move that garnered significant pushback among teachers at the outset. In order to get buy in from teaching staff, Fort Wayne leadership made a significant effort to involve teachers in both the learning and planning process. They sent teachers out to model schools to see best practices in action, and ensured that teachers from every single high school were part of the task force that would implement those changes.

## Focus on 9th Grade Transition

In addition, Fort Wayne recognized that a strong transition into 9<sup>th</sup> grade is critical for future success in high school. To improve their systems for incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders, high schools created a learning community for 9<sup>th</sup> grade math, science, and language arts teachers. These teachers were

given the same planned collaboration time, and were also allowed to “flex” the schedule to accommodate student needs. So for example, if a language arts teacher identified a need to spend more time with students on a concept to be sure students had full comprehension, they could work with the other 9<sup>th</sup> grade teachers to flex the schedule, and give them some more time to work with those students. This teacher collaboration, communication, and flexibility helps to ensure that students earn at least 10 credits their freshman year, and enter sophomore year on track and prepared for the next steps. Ninth graders also have a designated counselor and administrator assigned to support the students, and work with teachers to manage behavioral or academic concerns. Having dedicated personnel for this critical year can prevent ninth graders from falling through the cracks and getting off track. These critical staff members provide ninth graders with a reliable adult presence, and help them learn to navigate high school academics and expectations.

## Proactive Use of Data

Fort Wayne leadership recognized the critical role that data would play in identifying weak spots, and in proactively working to close those gaps. While previously they had focused on final graduation rates at the end of the year as their measure of success, they now provide teachers and staff with access to a robust set of data around student attendance, grades, achievement scores, and whether they are on or off track for graduation in terms of credits earned. In Fort Wayne high schools, student data is displayed in the hallways (with a student identifier number), showing if they are on or off track in terms of the number of credits they are earning, their attendance, and their overall grades. This gives teachers and students a constant visual reminder of their progress, or any areas for concern.

## Focus on Academic Rigor and College/Career Ready Coursework

Fort Wayne leadership recognized that rigorous coursework was essential if their students were to go on to succeed in postsecondary education, or in future careers. The first step was to push more students to achieve the more rigorous Core 40 diploma. Principals now must justify any waiver diploma request for a student, and students must show that they have completed the required remediation hours, attempted to improve their final test scores, and retaken the exam each time it was offered before they can be eligible for a waiver. In addition, Fort Wayne began allowing students to come back over the summer or for a fifth year in order to complete their credit requirements and earn their diploma.

Rigorous coursework also includes opportunities to take AP and IB courses, and Fort Wayne has worked hard to give more students access to these types of courses, and the encouragement and supports they need to succeed. Fort Wayne also began to proactively build relationships with local community colleges, to add more dual credit courses, and has worked with local leaders and businesses to provide internship opportunities for their students.

## Looking Forward

None of these changes happened overnight. Williams-Robbins noted that having a long-serving and supportive superintendent in place during this transition was critical. With steady and committed leadership at the top, Fort Wayne was able to take time to learn, to educate and gain buy in from staff and teachers, and to strategically implement the new practices. And while they certainly made adjustments along the way if something was not working, the overall direction of High School Reinvent remained the same, with a commitment to the core characteristics they had identified at the outset.

This steady and consistent movement forward has allowed Fort Wayne to make strong gains, even in the face of serving a more diverse demographic of students. As the needs of Fort Wayne’s student body have changed, leadership has doubled down on its commitment to academic rigor, coupled with strong supports for its students. Recognizing that they serve many students who cannot afford basic needs, the district now provides free breakfast and lunch for all elementary and middle school students. The recently opened Family and Community Engagement Center houses a free health clinic that provides vision screening and immunizations to students; centralizes supports for homeless students; and manages many of the college and career ready components that support students to take their next steps after high school graduation. Fort Wayne also strives to engage with the community through its community and parent advisory boards, and seeks to engage a diverse cross section of the community and incorporate their views.

The work is ongoing, and Fort Wayne is continuing to search for ways to evaluate their success, and work to improve. They continue to monitor graduation rates, and now also monitor attendance, types of diplomas earned, and rates of participation in AP and dual credit courses. In addition, the district has now begun tracking students into postsecondary in order to better understand if the supports they are now providing in high school are having an impact on a student’s ability to succeed in college and/or career once they leave the district. Going forward, this commitment to consistent evaluation will help the district better tailor its methods to maximize student success.

# State Areas for Improvement

Indiana has a great deal to celebrate in terms of its high school graduation rate and the great work being done in districts around the state to give kids the highest-quality education possible. However, there are also some areas of concern that the state should continue to address moving forward. Since many of these issues stem from how the state collects and reports data on high school graduation, in this section, all numbers come from state-reported data, not federally-reported as was used at the beginning of the report. This allows for an examination of how the state graduation rate differs from the federal rate, as well as a look at issues within the state that are not reported federally, such as waiver diploma rates and homeschooling.

## Data Issues

### Federal/State Discrepancies

In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education released non-regulatory four-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate guidelines for states. These guidelines were intended to ensure states properly calculated their high school graduation rate and provided guidance on which students to include in each graduating cohort, who could be removed from a cohort, and how districts and states were to report graduation rates each year. Through these guidelines, the U.S. Department of Education aimed to establish common rules for graduation rate calculation and reporting and create standardization across states. However, given that these are guidelines, not law, it is up to states to interpret and abide by them, often leading to discrepancies between what is reported by states and what is ultimately federally reported by the U.S. Department of Education.

In Indiana, as in other states, these discrepancies are apparent and indicative of the state legislature establishing statute that allows for greater leniency in adjusting the four-year cohort graduation rate than what is accepted in federal reporting. One example of this can be found in Indiana's mobility codes, which dictate to schools and districts the reasons for which students may be legally removed from their cohort. In the 2008 Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate guidelines, the federal Department of Education provided only three reasons a student may be removed from their cohort: 1) transferring out and enrolling in another school or educational program that culminates in a high school diploma; 2) emigrating to another country; or 3) is deceased. To that list, however, Indiana statute adds six other codes for cohort removal in their state calculations:

- Poor health
- Incarceration or placed by court order in Department of Child Services custody
- Placement by court order in another corporation where education continues
- Missing student who cannot be located within boundaries
- Religious beliefs
- Enrolled in Indiana less than one year

Allowing for students to be removed under these codes results in smaller graduating cohorts and can help to inflate state-reported graduation rates. While some of these codes could be seen as legitimate reasons for removing students from their public high school, they ultimately allow students to be effectively taken off the books and the responsibility for ensuring they receive an education greatly diminishes.

A critical example of this can be seen in the state's data on students removed from their cohort under the "Missing, Cannot Be Located" code. Under this code, a student who has essentially dropped out and efforts to locate him or her are unproductive, may be removed from the cohort if the school attempts to contact the student at their last known address through U.S. Certified mail and either receives a new forwarding address or has the letter returned without a forwarding address. If the student cannot be located through this step, the school then must file an official report with the state Clearinghouse for Information on Missing Children and receive confirmation from the Clearinghouse that the student has been reported by October 1<sup>st</sup> of the following school year. The school must have on file both the U.S. registered mail receipt showing that a new address for the student could not be found and email verification from the Clearinghouse to be able to remove a student using the missing code; however, if the student cannot be found, there are no further steps required of the school to find him or her.

Between the 2005-06 and 2014-15 school years, 31 high schools in Indiana used the missing code for 10 or more students in a given year and accounted for between 158 and 659 students being removed in a given year's cohort. Almost all of these schools come from Indiana's largest school districts where cohort sizes are large and student mobility is a major issue. About one-third of those high schools only appeared on the list one time in those ten school years, and several of the 31 high schools last

reported 10 or more students missing five or more years ago, indicating they have since limited their use of the missing code. However, there are a handful of schools where the missing code to remove students from their graduating cohort seems abnormally high. One of these high schools averaged 120 students removed as missing between 2006-07 and 2014-15, with as many as 191 students removed in any one given school year. The next closest average is 86 students removed between 2013-14 and 2014-15 by one of Indiana's virtual schools. Three high schools averaged around 30 students removed as missing in this time frame, including significant numbers within the past few school years. These five high schools, while outliers, show a troubling use of the missing code, which resulted, in part, in a difference of between 4 and 19 percentage points in federal and state graduation rates in 2014-15 alone. Though the use of this code cannot solely be attributed with the federal and state graduation rate discrepancies (other reasons for removal may also play a part), it is clearly a factor, and these anomalous schools should be a point of concern for the state.

### **Division between State and Schools**

There is a clear division on the collection, reporting, and overall use of data at the state and school levels. On one hand, the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) has made efforts to improve the system schools and districts use to collect and report data. It has also developed a process for schools and districts to submit the requisite data. IDOE constantly evaluates this process, but they are somewhat limited in what they can change because of how data collection and reporting is authorized by the state legislature. The IDOE has attempted to rectify this problem by offering regional training sessions and creating online videos, but these efforts have yet to have the wide-reaching impact the state needs to ensure better data collection. The state has also piloted graduation rate reports that provide districts with data on their graduation rates over time, as well as survey data on students' post-graduation goals, and the IDOE is also moving towards more real time collection and reporting on student attendance, mobility, and graduation rates.

On the other hand, during interviews many school and district officials expressed frustration with the state data collection and reporting system, which they see as cumbersome and in a constant state of fluctuation. Much of this may be directly due to the political environment in Indiana and the related turnover at the Department of Education, but some is also the result of a state focus on data solely for accountability measures and not as a proactive learning tool. This has led to great confusion

over what data the state requires schools and districts to report, how data is expected to be reported, and who the data is supposed to be submitted to – all of which can change from year to year. Leadership at both traditional public and charter schools voiced concerns that ambiguity in state reporting guidelines has led to great discrepancies between districts in reported data that make it nearly impossible to make district-to-district and school-to-school comparisons. One example of this is how school districts report on attendance. According to several district officials who handle data reporting, the state does not differentiate between full- or half-day attendance, nor does it specify how districts should report excused absences versus unexcused absences, which leads to significant inconsistencies in publicly-reported district attendance rates.

While there are efforts underway to change this, many schools and districts across the state have taken it upon themselves to collect and analyze data that can help them better identify and help struggling students. Some have done this by hiring data specialists or assigning staff members to specifically help schools with state data reporting and maintaining communication with the state to resolve data issues. For larger districts, having a staff person dedicated to this may not be a huge issue, but not all districts can afford to create a new position or replace an existing position with one simply to work on state data reporting. As one district administrator said, "infrastructure costs for data aren't really considered," and given the already tight budgets districts must work within, the issues with state data reporting have created a major challenge for many Indiana school leaders.

### **Reactive, Not Proactive Data Use in K-12**

Another chasm between the state and districts lies in the purpose and ultimate use of the data being collected. For the state, data collection is primarily used for accountability measures. For schools and districts, however, data has become a critical tool for identifying students at risk of falling off track and providing them with the support they need. This difference looms large in many districts where teachers and administrators feel hindered by the data they must collect that does not align with what they see as necessary for improving outcomes for their students and is often collected in an unusable manner. This then puts the onus on schools and districts to not only make sure they are collecting and reporting state-required data, but to also devise their own systems – at their own expense – for collecting and analyzing the data that help them make critical decisions and help their students. As described in the previous section, schools and districts are turning more and more to the key early warning indicators (attendance,

behavior, and course performance) to identify struggling students that are flying under the radar. But to do this, schools frequently have to create separate data systems, guidelines, and procedures to track the data that matters to them. This places additional hardship on districts that could be resolved by better alignment with the state and a greater statewide emphasis on creating a data system that works for both accountability purposes and providing real-time, usable data for teachers and school staff.

### **Homeschooling**

Homeschooling in Indiana is almost completely deregulated – requiring no notification, parent education minimums, criminal bans, state-mandated subjects, or assessment requirements<sup>26</sup> – though according to a 2013 state law, students who are removed from high school must receive counseling from their public school on home education and their options for earning a diploma. Once a parent or guardian has removed their child from the public school system to be homeschooled, the accountability placed upon them for what is taught or learned is limited. State law does allow local public school officials to request attendance records from parents to verify attendance, but there is no formal mechanism for keeping attendance records. Students home schooled by their parents can earn a legally issued, non-accredited diploma or they can choose to enroll with an accredited program, but they are not eligible to receive a diploma from their local public school.

Concerns over homeschooling at the high school level are largely twofold. First, many in Indiana have questioned whether students who are off track to graduation are being counseled into homeschooling by their local public school. Some of this concern stems from Indiana’s version of “No Pass, No Drive” legislation, which allows for a student under the age of 18 to have their learner’s permit or driver’s license revoked should they be chronically truant, suspended, expelled, or considered a dropout. This legislation was intended to incentivize students to stay in school and out of trouble, but questions have been raised over the possibility that school administrators are using this law to sway off-track students into homeschooling to remove them from the school’s graduating cohort, and thus, helping to raise graduation rates. The second concern came from school district officials who felt that the pervasive knowledge of Indiana’s lax homeschooling regulations gives parents and guardians an easy loophole to remove their children from public schools should they no longer wish to comply with public school regulations.

Given the lack of regulations on home schooling in the state, it is difficult to discern whether either of these concerns is empirically valid; however, analysis of state data tracking students who were removed from their graduating cohort using the code “Removed by Parent” (a proxy for students who were removed for homeschooling) over the past decade shows some interesting trends. Between the 2005-06 and 2014-15 school years, more than forty thousand students were removed by their parents to be homeschooled in Indiana. Seven Indiana high schools reported 500 or more students removed from their graduating cohorts under this code between 2006 and 2015. These seven high schools had an average removal rate ranging from 51 to 74 students each school year during this time frame, with one high school removing as many as 152 students from one cohort. Given that all but one of these schools have an average cohort size in the 300 to 400 range, more than 1 in 10 students were removed, on average, from each cohort, and in one school, that number was as high as 4 in 10 students.

Another 25 schools had between 300 and 500 students designated as removed by parent between the 2005-06 and 2014-15 school years, with one school removing 165 students under this code in just one cohort. One of the schools falling in this range, Indiana Connections Academy, a statewide virtual charter school, began reporting cohort data in 2011-12, but had 414 students removed by parent in just four school years – an average of more than 100 students each year. This could be indicative of students who were previously considered to be homeschooled enrolling and later un-enrolling in an accredited virtual program or students and parents being unhappy with the virtual school experience; however, no other virtual school in the state shows a similar trend. Another 84 schools had between 100 and 300 students removed by parent during the same 10-year span, averaging 10 to 30 students removed from each cohort. In all, one-quarter of Indiana high schools removed an average of 10 students or more from their graduating cohorts between 2005-06 and 2014-15.

Indiana lawmakers have prioritized choice and religious freedom in education, but when it comes to homeschooling, this comes at the expense of having accurate data on the educational fate of many of the state’s young people. While there is no explicit proof of off-track students being counseled out by school administrators or parents taking advantage of lax homeschooling law to take their child out of the public school system, the data does show that the use of the “Removed by Parent” code is far more prevalent in some schools than others. This is

26 Huseman, J. (27 August 2015). Homeschooling regulations by state. *ProPublica*. Retrieved from <http://projects.propublica.org/graphics/homeschool>; HSLDA. (2017). Homeschool laws in your state. Home School Legal Defense Association. Retrieved from <https://www.hslda.org/laws/>

Waiver and Non-Waiver Graduation Rates, 2010-11 to 2014-15

Year	Cohort N	Grad N	Grad Rate	Non-Waiver Grad N	Non-Waiver Grad Rate	Difference Between Waiver and Non-Waiver Grad Rate	# of Waiver Grads	% Waiver Grads
2014-15	78774	70026	88.9%	65251	82.8%	6.1%	4775	7.0%
2013-14	78346	70557	90.0%	65522	83.6%	6.4%	5035	7.0%
2012-13	78346	69406	88.6%	64023	81.7%	6.9%	5383	8.0%
2011-12	76951	68226	88.7%	62366	81.0%	7.6%	5860	9.0%
2010-11	78630	68469	87.1%	63244	80.4%	6.6%	5225	8.0%

Source: Indiana Department of Education

troubling mainly in that as soon as a parent or guardian provides a signed statement to homeschool, there is no way of knowing whether or not the child actually continues to receive an education. While some may argue that this is a parent’s right or that the majority of parents removing students from public school to homeschool do so with the best of intentions, because regulations are so loose around homeschooling in Indiana, questions will continue to linger over whether or not children are being rightfully removed from public education or if the loopholes provided are a serious cause for concern.

**Diploma Waivers**

Indiana students must complete the required course sequence and pass the Algebra I and English 10 end-of-course assessments (ECAs) to graduate with a high school diploma. If a student is unable to pass the Algebra I and/or English 10 ECA by the end of their senior year, however, they may be eligible for one of two state waivers – the evidence-based waiver or the work readiness waiver – to earn their diploma. To qualify for the evidence-based waiver, students must:

- Take the ECA they did not pass at least one time each school year after the year the exam was initially taken;
- Complete remediation sessions to help prepare for exam retakes;
- Maintain an attendance rate of 95 percent or higher over the course of their high school experience;
- Maintain a grade point average of a C or better in required courses (34 credits);
- Satisfy local graduation requirements; and
- Obtain a written recommendation from a teacher in the subject area not passed.

To earn a Work Readiness Waiver, students must meet all of the Evidence-based Waiver requirements with the exception of obtaining a teacher recommendation, but must also:

- Meet all requirements for a General Diploma;
- Complete a workforce readiness assessment; and
- Complete one of the following:
  - A career exploration internship course
  - A cooperative education course
  - Earn a workforce credential

Intended to help students who may struggle with test taking, particularly students with disabilities and English language learners, the overuse of waivers by some districts came under heavy scrutiny in recent years. Many of these concerns stem from two beliefs: first, that students graduating with evidence-based waivers (which comprise the majority of students receiving waivers) are being held to a lower standard and are not prepared for postsecondary education; and second, that districts are using waiver diplomas as a means to raise their graduation rates. To counter the first concern, legislation was passed in 2013 requiring schools to administer a college and career readiness examination to students appearing to need remediation, as well as to disqualify students receiving an evidence-based waiver from getting state-based financial aid for stand-alone remedial college courses. To address the second concern, the state board of education established a rule in 2014 to hold accountable schools with waiver rates of 10 percent or higher for three consecutive years.<sup>27</sup> This rule requires schools meeting this criteria to submit a waiver-reduction plan to the Indiana Department of Education, and allows for state assistance in reducing waivers should a school continue to have waiver rates of 10 percent or more.

<sup>27</sup> Students who are deemed “waiver appropriate” (e.g., students with disabilities, English language learners) are excluded from the 10 percent count.

Since attempts to reduce waiver diplomas went into effect, both the number and percentage of students across the state graduating with a waiver has dipped slightly, and the gap between the state statutory graduation rate (including waiver and non-waiver graduates) and the non-waiver graduation rate (excluding students with waivers) has narrowed. Still, in 2015, there was a 6.1-percentage-point difference in the state-reported statutory graduation and non-waiver graduation rate, which effectively drops the overall state-reported graduation rate from 88.9 percent to 82.8 percent.

The impact of waivers on graduation rates is even more evident at the district and school level. In 2015, two-thirds of school districts reported a statutory graduation rate of 90 percent or higher, but less than one-third of districts had a non-waiver graduation rate of 90 percent or above. Conversely, roughly 10 percent of districts had a statutory graduation rate below 80 percent, but that number more than doubles when taking waiver diplomas out of the equation.

#### Difference in District Waiver and Non-Waiver Graduation Rates, 2015

Graduation Rate	Number and Percentage of Districts Waiver Grad Rate	Number and Percentage of Districts Non-Waiver Grad Rate
90% and above	227 (66.6%)	110 (32.2%)
80-89.9%	75 (22.0%)	150 (44.0%)
70-79.9%	13 (3.8%)	46 (13.5%)
Less than 70%	26 (7.6%)	35 (10.3%)

Source: Indiana Department of Education

In 2015, nearly 65 percent of schools with a graduating cohort had a statutory graduation rate of 90 percent or higher, but less than 30 percent of schools reported a non-waiver rate in the same range. Removing waiver-qualifying graduates from the graduation rate count also more than doubles the number of high schools reporting a graduation rate below 80 percent. Waivers had a significant effect on reported graduation rates for about 20 percent of schools, in which there was at least a 10-percentage-point difference between the statutory graduation rate and the non-waiver graduation rate.

When examining Indiana’s waiver graduation rate for the past three years (2012-13 to 2014-15), 51 schools – or about one in eight high schools – qualify under the state’s accountability rule for schools granting 10 percent or more of waiver diplomas for three straight years.<sup>28</sup> The

28 This number may be affected by the number of students deemed to be “waiver appropriate” in these schools.

#### Difference in School Waiver and Non-Waiver Graduation Rates, 2015

Graduation Rate	Number and Percentage of Schools Waiver Grad Rate	Number and Percentage of Schools Non-Waiver Grad Rate
90% and above	258 (64.8%)	116 (29.1%)
80-89.9%	90 (22.6%)	175 (44%)
70-79.9%	14 (3.5%)	58 (14.6%)
Less than 70%	36 (9.0%)	49 (12.3%)

Source: Indiana Department of Education

number of schools with consistently high rates of waiver diplomas has declined slightly in the past few years, but the significant amount remaining means further efforts will be required if the state wants to further reduce the overuse of evidence-based waivers.

Offering diploma waivers is intended to provide students who may struggle with standardized tests a rigorous pathway to graduation, and given that there is no evidence that Indiana’s state standardized tests are correlated with postsecondary success, waivers provide a reasonable means of bypassing testing while still holding students accountable. The major concern on waivers voiced by education officials is that teachers sometimes feel wary about granting evidence-based waivers to students earning lower grades in their coursework, despite it being acceptable under current waiver rules, because of concern over whether these students have learned what they need to be successful beyond high school. This matches up with the overall apprehension toward the lowering of standards that waivers seem to imply. If the most significant concern over the use of waivers is that they are leading to lowered standards, lawmakers should look to raise the minimum grade students must earn in core courses to be considered for a waiver. This would better ensure that students are still meeting rigorous standards despite not passing one or both required ECAs. It is also aligned with many years of research showing that a student’s high school grade point average (GPA) is a far better predictor of postsecondary enrollment and success than standardized test scores. Lawmakers should also consider a high-quality portfolio-element to the waiver requirements that would provide an additional outlet for students to demonstrate the knowledge they acquired in high school. Other states have begun to use a portfolio approach to assessing student knowledge to varying success. Indiana lawmakers can learn from their experiences if they want to create an additional tool to assess student learning and bolster the quality of the evidence-based waiver diploma.

### ***Influence of Politics in the Classroom***

Indiana is one of just 13 states in which the state superintendent of education is elected, rather than being appointed by the governor. Indiana is not alone in having a highly-charged political environment, but it is necessary to point out how it has trickled down into the state's classrooms. A significant point of contention in recent years has been over the replacement of Indiana's state assessment, ISTEP, taken by students in grades 3-8 and high school sophomores. Indiana nearly replaced ISTEP with the Common Core-aligned PARCC exam in 2010, but lawmakers dropped the Common Core in 2014, ultimately leaving the state to write new, more rigorous standards but without an assessment to match. The ISTEP, which had been in existence for decades, was retooled to better align with the new standards in 2015, but it was officially scrapped in early 2016 after numerous administrative issues caused many to lose confidence in the exam.

Following the decision to scrap the latest version of the ISTEP, the General Assembly assembled a panel of 23 education stakeholders to design a new test by the start of the 2017-18 school year. The panel had a rocky start and after seven months of debate, recently submitted a plan to the General Assembly with only minor changes to the testing schedule and a recommendation to consider using an off-the-shelf test or existing questions from outside vendors to save time and money, possibly including the PARCC consortium that Indiana left just two years ago.

While all this has been happening at the state level, students, teachers, and administrators have felt the impact of uncertainty created by the near constant back and forth over the past six years. There is great concern that less than 18 months after the plan was submitted, no one has any idea what the next state assessment will look like, and although the new test should align with the standards created in 2014, there is no guarantee that the new exams

will meet expectations immediately, creating more frustration for schools being held accountable by these exams. It is also unclear, based on recommendations from the ISTEP panel, whether the state will continue to use state assessments moving forward or if there will be a push to create a more holistic assessment. While this may be a positive step, it may once again disrupt what is expected in Indiana's classrooms.

The state's A-F grading system is another example of the state political environment seeping into Indiana's classrooms. Since the letter grade accountability system began in 2011, the formula used to grade schools has been overhauled multiple times, causing schools' grades to shift – sometimes dramatically – from year to year. Advocates for the A-F system believe it provides a clear, easy-to-understand school accountability metric for parents and community members. The fluctuating formula and grades, however, have caused some frustration for parents, students, teachers, and administrators, many of whom have found the system to be confusing, and in some cases harmful. One school official said the A-F system is demoralizing to the students and staff of lower-graded schools, and more importantly, does not accurately reflect the hard work happening in those schools, which often serve more disadvantaged students. It can also be misleading to parents and students choosing a school and make it harder for schools to recruit good teachers.

The changing standards and assessments in Indiana have affected the state at the classroom level in ways that can make the work of educating students more challenging. As one district leader pointed out, some feel the schools in Indiana are working in spite of the political influence, not because of it. Though politics will always be a part of any state's education system, it is critical that state lawmakers remain aware of how their actions impact students and teachers and move beyond politics as usual to do what is best for them.



# First-Year Programs at Indiana Universities

## First-Year Programs in Indiana

As high school graduation rates across the nation continue to rise, focus has shifted towards ensuring that graduates leave high school equipped for the rigors of postsecondary education. This is especially important given that in 2010, 59 percent of jobs required some postsecondary education or training, and by 2020 that number is expected to grow to 65 percent.<sup>29</sup>

To help students successfully transition from high school into postsecondary, higher education institutions have to think beyond freshman orientation offerings. In 2016, U.S. News and World Report invited more than 1,500 college presidents, chief academic officers, deans of students, and deans of admission to nominate institutions with stellar examples of first-year experiences. Several Indiana institutions were highlighted, including Indiana University – Bloomington, Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis, Butler University, Purdue University – West Lafayette, and the University of Notre Dame.<sup>30</sup> Every Indiana University highlighted by U.S. News and World Report also boasted first-year retention rates beyond the national retention rate of 72.1 percent reported by the National Student Clearinghouse.<sup>31</sup>

### Indiana University – Bloomington

Indiana University's **Office of First Year Experience (FYE)** offers new students at Indiana's Bloomington campus a wide range of supports to help students acclimate to college life and make the most of their time at IU. FYE offers programs, resources, and services to students beginning with New Student Orientation and lasting throughout the entirety of a student's first year on campus. IU-Bloomington currently has an 89 percent freshman retention rate.<sup>32</sup>

One aspect of FYE is the IUBeginnings program, which is offered exclusively to new IU students as they transition to college. For three days, new students are given the opportunity to connect with other new students, current student leaders, and staff coordinators while exploring activities and interests in one of three areas: IUBAdventurous where students engage in different outdoor activities; IUBCultured,

where students connect and reflect over their love of the arts and culture; and IUBEngaged, where students participate in community service and connect with other new students on a shared interest in social impact and civic engagement. IUBeginnings gives new students the opportunity to have a shared experience with other new students, granting them greater comfort and confidence as they enter IU.<sup>33</sup>

### Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)

IUPUI's Division of Student Affairs provides a host of First Year Programs that offer students the opportunity to develop academically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually. First Year Programs at IUPUI are intentionally developed to help students develop the skills that will benefit them during college and throughout their career. In 2015, IUPUI's freshman retention rate was 72 percent.<sup>34</sup>

IUPUI offers Summer Bridge Events that give students several opportunities to connect with one another and build relationships over the summer leading into college, including paddle boat trips, outings to minor league baseball games, and opportunities to learn more about different aspects of IUPUI's campus. Additionally, the JagVenture program is a leadership camp that takes place in August prior to school beginning and offers first and second year students the chance to build relationships, develop leadership skills, and gain insights from peers. During IUPUI's Summer Orientation Program, JagBlast introduces new students to different student organizations, fraternities and sororities, community service opportunities, and other ways to get involved with campus life.

### Butler University

As part of the University's Core Curriculum, Butler requires students to take part in a first-year seminar, which stretches across both semesters of a student's freshman year.<sup>35</sup> The goal of the seminar is for student's to develop skills important for college success, including critical reading, writing, and thinking skills, and to better understand the liberal arts while reflecting on significant questions relating to a student's self, community, and world. Butler currently boasts a 90 percent freshman retention rate.<sup>36</sup>

29 Carnevale, A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2014). *Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

30 U.S. News & World Report (n.d.). First-year Experiences. Retrieved from <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/first-year-experience-programs>.

31 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2016). *Snapshot Report: Persistence and Retention*. Herndon, VA: The National Student Clearinghouse.

32 U.S. News & World Report (n.d.). Indiana University – Bloomington. Retrieved from <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/indiana-university-1809/academics>.

33 Indiana University – Bloomington. (n.d.) First Year Experience: IUBeginnings. Retrieved from <https://fye.indiana.edu/orientation/iubeginnings/index.cfm>.

34 U.S. News & World Report (n.d.). Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis. Retrieved from <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/iupui-1813/academics>.

35 Butler University (n.d.). First Year Seminar. Retrieved from <https://www.butler.edu/core/first-year-seminar>.

36 U.S. News & World Report (n.d.). Butler University. Retrieved from <http://>

### **Purdue University**

Some institutions, like Purdue University, offer first-year programs that focus specifically on a particular major. Purdue provides first-years with learning communities, where students can meet and learn from fellow first-year students in their major or college.

In addition, Purdue offers first-year students in their engineering program their own first-year program. The First-Year Engineering Program is the entry point for all beginning engineering students at Purdue. The mission of this student-oriented program is to advise and prepare students in the College of Engineering and ensure retention. Students are provided with a common first-year curriculum of required classes and a plan of study. Upon completing the First Year Engineering Program, students transition to a specific Engineering program in Purdue's College of Engineering. The freshman retention rate for students in Purdue's engineering program was over 95 percent in 2015<sup>37</sup> and the University's overall freshman retention rate was 90 percent.<sup>38</sup>

### **University of Notre Dame**

During Notre Dame's First Year of Studies, students familiarize themselves with the academic opportunities available to them, while laying the foundations necessary for success in advanced academic work. The First Year of Studies take students through a diverse curriculum aimed at expanding students' educational perspectives.

Notre Dame's First Year of Studies requires that students of all majors take a first-year seminar, one writing and rhetoric course, two semesters of math, and two semesters of a science or foreign language, as well as electives or courses in the student's major. In addition, each student is required to take the Moreau First-Year Experience Course. This course is designed to assist students with the transition to college and focuses on health and wholeness, cultural competency, academic success, and personal discernment.

In total, 99 percent of Notre Dame's first-year students persist onto their second year, while 95 percent go on to graduate with their class.<sup>39</sup>

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colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/butler-university-1788/academics.

37 Purdue Office of Enrollment Management (n.d.). Graduation/retention Rates: First-time Full-time New Beginners West Lafayette. Retrieved from <http://www.purdue.edu/enrollmentmanagement/researchanddata/gradretentionrates.html>.

38 U.S. News & World News Report

39 Notre Dame (n.d.). The First Year of Studies: The Point of it All. Retrieved from <http://firstyear.nd.edu/incoming-students/the-point-of-it-all/>.

### **Goodwill Excel Centers**

For some students, despite efforts on the parts of high school teachers and administrators, traditional high school models are not enough to get them to graduation. If these students drop out and do not find a way to complete their high school degree, it can make it very difficult for them to find sustainable work that will provide for them and their families, leaving them disconnected from both school and work. For these students, it is especially important that any efforts to get them back on track to complete their high school diploma be strongly connected to a future career or postsecondary education. Goodwill Industries is tackling this issue through its Excel Centers, providing students ages 16 and older with the opportunity to complete their high school education, and earn their high school diploma, as well as wrap-around supports to help students find above-minimum wage jobs, and build brighter futures for themselves and their families.

In September of 2010, Goodwill opened its first Excel Center in Indianapolis with a class of 300 students. Jim McClelland, former Goodwill Industries President and CEO, recalled that just six months later, with no advertising, the Center had 2,000 people on a waiting list. Today, there are 11 Excel Centers in central Indiana, with four additional centers in South Bend, IN, Austin, TX, Memphis, TN, and Washington, DC.

The Excel Centers work hard to ensure that barriers their students typically experience do not derail their education. First, there are no tuition costs for students. Second, the Excel Centers provide free transportation to the Centers and finally, the Centers offer free childcare so parents can focus on their studies and avoid incurring extra costs for childcare. Beyond these barriers, Excel Center students often are still struggling with the same challenges that originally made it difficult to graduate from a traditional high school. To help their students navigate these issues, Excel Centers pair their students with a Life Coach – an individual who serves as both a guidance counselor and a social worker. Life Coaches provide wrap-around support services to their students, and act as a source of constant support and mentoring.

The Excel Centers focus on ensuring their students are prepared for the next step. Part of the graduation requirement is that students earn either dual credits or an industry-recognized certification, as well as complete a Senior Seminar course where students cover topics including financial aid, school visits for college, career pathways, resume building, and mock interviews. Sixty-four percent of Excel Center students were unemployed when they entered. A year out, 80 percent are either employed, or in college working towards a degree.

# Plan of Action to Continue Raising High School Graduation Rates in Indiana

## ***Increase Access to Caring Adults***

The support and guidance of caring adults is critical to a student's success in school. Strong relationships with teachers, mentors, counselors, or administrators can ensure that students receive timely assistance if they begin to struggle academically; that barriers they may face outside of school are addressed; and that they have the support and information they need to plan for college or career once they leave high school. A 2014 report from MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership found that students who had access to a mentor report set higher educational goals, were more likely to attend college, and were more likely to report engaging in productive and beneficial activities than youth without a mentor.<sup>ix</sup> During site visits and interviews for this report, school leadership at public and charter schools expressed how important it was for their students to be able to build strong relationships with teachers, coaches, counselors, and school staff.

However, ensuring that school staff has the time to engage with students and offer the right supports can be a challenge. For example, Indiana ranks 45<sup>th</sup> out of 50 states and the District of Columbia for its counselor workload – Indiana counselors have an average caseload of 634 students.<sup>x</sup> With this many students, counselors are likely to miss opportunities to counsel students for college and career planning, and to intervene when students are struggling or falling off track. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that far too many counselors are asked to do non-counselor work within the school as well. In fact, a 2010 report by the Indiana Chamber of Commerce found that the majority of counselors spent no more than a quarter of their time on college and career counseling.<sup>xi</sup> This is a troubling statistic, particularly given the importance of postsecondary education in today's economy.

As Indiana continues to work to close gaps for students, a focus on ensuring that students have access to caring adults who can help them navigate the challenges they face both inside and outside of school is critical. This could include increasing the numbers of school counselors and social workers within schools, and building connections between schools and community organizations that support mentoring relationships that could help to

close the gaps between what schools can offer and what students need. For example, Project Hope Alliance in Orange County, CA has formed a strong partnership with Newport-Mesa Unified School District. Project Hope provides intensive mentoring support for homeless students for up to six years, helping them earn their diploma, enroll in postsecondary, and obtain employment. Newport-Mesa Unified provides Project Hope with office space within the school building, and teachers and school staff can refer students they believe could benefit to the program. Homeless students are a highly vulnerable demographic in need of intensive supports that may be difficult for many schools to provide. A strong partnership with an organization like Project Hope brings much needed resources into the school, and gives students the access to caring adults that they need to weather a time of crisis.

***At the State Level:*** Establish greater funding and support for counselors and social workers in all schools.

***At the School/District Level:*** Set clear boundaries for how school counselors and social workers can use their time. School counselors and social workers should be available to students for the social and academic supports they are intended. Schools can also look externally to partner with nonprofit organizations that can provide social and emotional supports, particularly for the most vulnerable students.

***What Funders Can Do:*** In 2016, The Lilly Endowment announced a competitive grant process, the Counseling Initiative, focused on promoting and supporting the development and implementation of innovative, promising, and sustainable comprehensive counseling models in Indiana public schools and charter schools. This grant was in response to surveys done by the National Association of College Admission Counseling, in which Indiana was ranked 45<sup>th</sup> out of the 50 states in K-12 student to counselor ratio, with an average of just one counselor for every 620 students. Understanding how critical counselors are to helping students succeed in school, and to go on to higher education and career opportunities, The Lilly Endowment is working to fill that gap. Other philanthropic organizations in Indiana can follow their lead and direct funding toward ensuring all children have access to school counselors, social workers, and mentoring opportunities.

## Improve Systems for Data and Accountability

Indiana is ahead of many other states in terms of its data collection, particularly around college and career readiness. Leadership at both charter and public schools, however, expressed concerns during interviews and site visits that the system for collecting and reporting data in Indiana was burdensome and not helpful to their own improvement goals. Several interviewees reported hiring a full-time employee for the sole job of managing the data and accountability requirements from the state, leaving teachers or other school staff to manage any data inputs and analysis needed for their own learning. At the Indiana Department of Education, staff members expressed concerns around the accuracy of the data received from school districts, and felt that further technical assistance and training was still needed across the state.

Therefore, the key now may be to focus more intensely on analysis of that data in a way that allows schools, districts, and policy makers to make more strategic and data-backed decisions. For example, Achieve reported that Indiana's data system allows for analysis of student course-taking, but that the state has yet to complete that analysis.<sup>xii</sup> Understanding how student course-taking patterns impact their performance in high school and beyond could help schools identify students who are likely to struggle in college, and to provide the right supports or additional coursework that those students will need to be truly college and career ready. In particular, working with schools to align what data the state requires and what schools find most helpful for them to track could be a positive step. A system that collects this data and allows schools to generate reports around Early Warning Systems (Attendance, Behavior, and Course Performance) could be of great help to districts, as these metrics are proven indicators of students who are falling off track.

Given concerns on both sides of data collection and use within the state, Indiana could benefit from a focused attempt to better align its data and accountability systems with a focus towards the indicators of student success in Indiana, and better identifying the factors that help students graduate from high school college and career ready. An example of this type of system can be found in Kentucky. At the K-12 level, Kentucky has developed the "Persistence to Graduation Tool" within their statewide Infinite Campus data system that allows districts to run reports in real-time that assign students a risk value based on early warning indicators of falling off track to graduate from kindergarten through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Nearly three-quarters of schools in Kentucky regularly use the system and roughly 70 percent said that the tool usually or

always accurately identifies students that drop out.<sup>xiii</sup> Given that many school and district leaders in Indiana have already begun using Early Warning Systems on their own, developing a centralized statewide system that collects and reports this data would be beneficial to the state Department of Education and schools alike. IDOE noted that they have had conversations with schools about creating one Student Information System that all districts would use. IDOE officials expressed that choosing one system that all schools would want to use is a logistical challenge, and it would still require schools to submit data for checking and approval by IDOE. Given this, IDOE employees were unsure that choosing a centralized system would in fact cut down on the time that schools spend reporting data to the state. These are certainly valid questions, and should be considered as the state works towards streamlining and improving the quality of data collection from schools.

**At the State Level:** Given the misalignment between what data schools collect internally versus what they are asked to report, it would be beneficial for the state to work with districts to align school needs with state requirements. While this may be happening in some places, a better process could be established for school and district feedback, as well as improved training for school and district data specialists in how to correctly report required data.

**At the School/District Level:** Focus on using data proactively to improve learning and better identify students in need of support and intervention. As reported, many schools and districts, in Indiana and around the country, have established Early Warning Systems using data that is already collected on a regular basis, but it is critical that that data be readily available to teachers and school leaders so that they have an accurate picture of which students are on track and which are falling behind.

## Close Graduation Rate Gaps and Focus on the Student Subgroups that Remain Off-track

Indiana outperforms the nation in graduating students from subgroups that have historically graduated at lower rates, including Black, Hispanic, and low-income students as well as students with disabilities. The state also boasts narrow graduation rate gaps between many student subgroups, most notably low-income and non-low-income students, whose graduation rate gap nationwide is nearly 10 percentage points higher than in Indiana. Despite this positive news, the graduation rate gap between Black and White students in the state stands at 14.7 percentage points, slightly higher than the national average of 13 points,

and the gap between students with disabilities and their general education peers, though less than the national average, is at 18.4 percentage points. To reach a 90 percent graduation rate – a rate only one state has so far achieved – Indiana only needs to graduate about 2,200 more students than it did in 2015. However, in order to meet that goal, schools and districts across the state will have to make a concerted effort to graduate more Black, low-income, and special education students.

### What Indiana Can Do to Improve Graduation Rates for Black Students

According to data from the Civil Rights Data Collection, in a significant number of Indiana’s large school districts, Black students are greatly overrepresented in in- and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions.<sup>40</sup> In some cases, Black students in these districts are two to four times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their peers despite making up a smaller percentage of the student population. Given that students who are expelled are far more likely to become a drop out and being suspended even one time in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade is associated with a twofold increase in the likelihood of dropping out, these discipline disparities should be a major area of concern for school, district, and state leaders.<sup>xiv</sup> One step to addressing this issue is to eliminate zero tolerance policies and other overly-punitive discipline policies, and replace them with policies and practices that are intended to resolve students’ underlying issues instead. One example of this is the Restorative Justice model, which aims to reduce suspensions and expulsions by improving peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult relationships in school and create a more positive school climate. A 2016 research review of Restorative Justice programs found that implementation of the program led to significant reductions in discipline referrals, suspensions and expulsions, recidivism rates, and even improved attendance rates in some schools.<sup>xv</sup>

### What Indiana Can Do to Improve Graduation Rates for Low-Income Students

Low-income students pose a significant challenge to schools across the country as nearly half of all public school children now meet the definition set by federal free- and reduced-lunch poverty guidelines. This is especially true for schools with majority low-income students and those serving students from high poverty (20 percent or greater) or concentrated poverty (40 percent or greater)

neighborhoods. Children from poor families tend to arrive at school less prepared to succeed academically, score lower on measures of early literacy, numeracy, and social skills, and are less likely to be enrolled in pre-schools than their higher-income peers.<sup>xvi</sup> This early gap follows students throughout their education, putting low-income students off track to graduation before they even enter kindergarten. Increasing access to high-quality early education opportunities, particularly for low-income children, should be a top priority for state leaders to help put children on the right path from the start.

### What Indiana Can Do to Improve Graduation Rates for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities graduate at significantly lower rates in Indiana and in every state across the country. However, experts in the field have estimated that 85 to 90 percent of special education students can meet the same diploma requirements as their peers when provided the right supports.<sup>xvii</sup> One of the greatest challenges these students face is the chronic misperception by adults – both their own parents and educators – that they cannot meet the same standards, yet the majority of students with diagnosed disabilities feel confident they can earn a diploma and go on to college.<sup>xviii</sup> The misperceptions special education students face can cause everything from lowered self-confidence in school to lowered expectations and misplacement in less academically rigorous courses, and can ultimately lead students with disabilities to disengage and drop out from school. Students with disabilities also face higher rates of disciplinary restraint and seclusion and are twice as likely to face suspension than their general education peers.<sup>xix</sup>

**At the State Level:** In ESSA accountability plans, states must provide information on low-performing student groups, including students with disabilities, and establish goals for raising graduation rates for these students. Education leaders in the state should set reasonable graduation rate goals and a clear plan for how to achieve it for students with disabilities, and progress towards these goals should be monitored closely.

State lawmakers and education funders can also do more to direct funds to support these learning opportunities and provide improved resources to students with disabilities. It is critical that within these experiences, students and parents are provided better information about how students in special education are tracked versus what these students will need to graduate college ready and that they are given the same opportunities to connect with

40 See school-level reports from the Office of Civil Rights’ Civil Rights Data Collection at <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/DistrictSchoolSearch>

postsecondary and career pathways as all other students to boost engagement and keep them on a successful path to their future.

**At the School/District Level:** Schools and districts, as well as teacher education programs at state colleges and universities, can help to counter misperceptions and reduce disciplinary disparities through improved professional development, pre-service teacher courses, and parent education classes.

## Raise Standards for High School Diploma Waivers

Concern was raised from all corners of Indiana's education landscape on the overuse of high school diploma waivers and the role this has played in lowering the academic bar for students in districts across the state. As discussed in this report, much of this concern stems from the belief that students who are granted waiver diplomas are not as prepared for postsecondary as those who passed their ISTEP exams and fulfilled all the standard diploma requirements. As also discussed, the state has taken the step of requiring a college and career readiness exam for students who appear at risk of needing college remediation courses to help identify students who may struggle in college before they get there. It appears from current data on waiver graduates that more students graduating with a

diploma waiver are enrolling in postsecondary. Therefore, Indiana schools are on the right track with educating waiver students, but it will be necessary to continue holding these students to a high standard.

**At the State Level:** Lawmakers could pursue strengthening waivers and better ensuring students who fail to pass the required state assessments by setting a minimum grade point average (GPA) students must earn in their required courses (or the courses covered in the failed assessment) to a B or better. A review of the research on the value of high school GPA conducted by Civic Enterprises and the Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins found that high school GPA is the best predictor of college GPA, and that high school GPA closely tracked with college grades, regardless of how a student fared on reported test scores or the quality of their high school.<sup>xx</sup> Placing greater emphasis on how students fare in their courses, rather than on state assessments, would therefore maintain a high standard for students receiving a waiver and ensure they are still on track for postsecondary success.

**At the School/District Level:** Educators need to continue holding waiver diploma students to a high standard. In the absence of state action, school and district leaders can establish their own GPA requirements and focus on providing rigorous coursework regardless of the type of diploma that is granted.



## Conclusion

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Indiana has much to be proud of in terms of its high overall graduation rate and higher than average graduation rates for many of its student subgroups. In addition, districts within the state are learning, innovating, and improving their abilities to serve their students and prepare them for the next steps in life. Throughout the state, there are examples of schools turning to tested and effective uses of data to provide early interventions and keep students on track. Schools are investing in the staff and programs they need to build an atmosphere where students have caring adults to help guide them forward, and school staff coordinate and work together to address challenges. There is also a strong focus on helping students who have dropped out return to achieve their high school diploma – whether that is through Goodwill Excel Centers or through innovative programs created by the public school systems. This shows a dedication to student success, and that education leaders in the state understand the value of a high school diploma as a critical first step towards achieving future goals. The focus and commitment of schools, districts, community organizations, and foundations has certainly been a major contributor to the progress Indiana has made.

But while there are many positive examples of progress, there are also reasons for concern. Looking forward, the state must find ways to improve its communication with and relationship to schools and districts so they can work as partners, providing much needed support and clear, consistent guidance. In addition, while there is a large focus on accountability at the state level, there seems to be less of a focus on learning from the data being gathered, and using it to delineate a clear and consistent course. The turnover of leadership and the politics at the state level have made it difficult for schools and districts to stay ahead of the changes, to the detriment of staff and students. As Indiana considers further changes, lawmakers must keep in mind that their decisions have a very real impact on the ground, and that a constantly moving target will be very difficult to hit. To ensure that all students in Indiana have the opportunity to engage in a great education, the state must tackle some of these tough challenges, and keep consistently moving forward with the pieces that have shown great success.

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