



Research Spotlight: New Jersey High School Graduation Profile

New Jersey still leads the nation in graduation rate, but the scores tell only part of the story

By **John Mooney**, June 7 in **Education**

What it is: The report is compiled each year by *Education Week*, a trade newspaper, as part of its "Diploma Counts" project. This year it shows that New Jersey continues to be the nation's leader in graduation rate, at least by one measure. According to the report, nearly 87 percent of New Jersey students entering high school four years earlier graduated in 2008, the most recent available data for every state. The national average was 71.7 percent.

What it means: The state-by-state data is a couple of years old, but the report comes out at a time when arguments are raging about the quality of New Jersey public schools, or at least some of them. Gov. Chris Christie has built much of his reform agenda around what he calls the failures of urban schools (in particular). Acting Education Commissioner Chris Cerf says too many graduates are not adequately prepared for college or the workplace.

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Not all good news: While the state's overall graduation rate is high, the gaps between races and ethnic groups are deep. For instance, the graduation rate for white students was 90.9 percent; for black students, 72.6 percent; and for Hispanic students, 68 percent.

A stunning number: By the report's estimate, even New Jersey's high graduation rate means 78 students are leaving school for one reason or another every day. Nationwide, it's more than 6,400 "lost" students each day.

On the one hand: Cerf last night put out a statement to go along with the report. It started, "New Jersey's graduation rate is a source of pride, indicating that we have excellent school programs and teachers who are doing a great job in helping our students graduate."

On the other: Cerf also said, "Our most important goal must be to see that students who graduate from New Jersey's high schools are college- and career-ready. Statistics show that's not the case. In 2009-2010, 91 percent of first-time Bergen Community College students tested into remedial math or English. In Fall 2009, 61.2 percent of full-time, first-year students at Union County College were enrolled in at least one remedial class.

Math matters: The *Education Week* report, as it has in the past, uses what it calls a Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) to calculate the graduation rate. Through a complex formula detailed in the report, it seeks to track the students who enrolled as freshman through their graduation to determine actual graduation rates, similar to the methodology that will be required by the federal government of all states next year. New Jersey currently uses different measures in its own rates, all self-reported by districts. That data put New Jersey's graduation rate last year at close to 95 percent.

That will change: The Christie administration has already announced changes to the reporting process that will take it out of district hands. In addition to the changes required by the federal

government, officials estimate that the state's graduation rate will likely fall under the new measurement.

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