

Diplomas Count: Ready for What?

Preparing Students for College, Careers, and Life After High School

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Executive Summary

Today's high school graduates are entering a world in which they'll need at least some college to gain access to decent-paying careers, according to the 2007 edition of *Diplomas Count*. And those without even a high school diploma will face increasingly bleak labor-market prospects.

This report, *Ready for What? Preparing Students for College, Careers, and Life After High School*, draws on two national databases to examine the distribution of jobs nationally and within each state, as well as the related education and pay levels.

The analysis uses information from the **Occupational Information Network**, or O*NET, a database developed for the **U.S. Department of Labor**. O*NET classifies jobs into five "zones," each defined by various worker attributes, including particular education, training, and experience requirements. By combining that information with another national database—the **American Community Survey**, conducted by the **U.S. Census Bureau**—the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center is able to show what proportions of adults nationally and in each state hold occupations in the various job zones, their median earnings, and their average education levels.

The findings underscore that to earn a decent wage in the United States, young people need to anticipate completing at least some college. For Job Zone 3, for which the median annual income is \$35,672 nationally, 37 percent of jobholders have some college education and another 26 percent have a bachelor's degree.

For Job Zone 4, with a median annual income of \$50,552, fully 68 percent of jobholders have a bachelor's degree and 21 percent have some college.

Fewer than one in 10 employees in Job Zone 3 or higher have less than a high school diploma.

At the bottom end of the job-zone classifications, in which workers with a high school diploma or less are concentrated, the median annual income is \$12,638 a year.

Policymakers Face Tough Issues

But while it's clear that more education is associated with higher pay, it's far less clear what mix of academic and nonacademic skills will best prepare young people for college and careers.

Diplomas Count 2007 highlights some of the tough issues now facing state policymakers and educators as they redesign high school education for the future:

- Students who score higher on mathematics tests in high school tend to earn more in the labor market later on. But while there are benefits to taking advanced math, at least some researchers and economists argue that may be less crucial than developing skills in problem-solving and the ability to apply math in new situations.
- Employers complain more about a lack of "soft" or "applied" skills among high school graduates than they do about inadequate academic skills. For example, young people must also be able to work comfortably with people from other cultures, solve problems creatively, write and speak well, think in a multidisciplinary way, and evaluate information critically. And, like workers of previous generations, they need to be punctual, dependable, and industrious. Yet few schools have explicitly focused on developing soft skills as part of their core mission.
- The focus on college and career readiness, combined with concerns about economic competitiveness, has also led some states to place a renewed emphasis on career and technical education. Research has found that participation in CTE courses can reduce high school dropout rates and increase short- and medium-term earnings for students. But the new generation of CTE programs faces a daunting agenda, including increasing academic rigor; forging stronger links to local labor markets and high-demand, high-skill jobs; and making better connections to postsecondary education so that students have the option of going directly into the workplace or continuing with their formal education.

This year's analyses also show that, despite the increasing importance of education in the labor market, 1.23 million students will fail to graduate from high school this year, with the lowest graduation rates among Native American, Hispanic, and African-American students.

Nationwide, only about 70 percent of 9th graders make it to graduation four years later. And that figure drops to 46 percent for black males and 52 percent for Hispanic males. About six in 10 black and Hispanic females earn a diploma within four years of entering high school.

While the graduation rate for Asian, Hispanic, and black students improved slightly between 2003 and 2004, the most recent data available, it dipped somewhat for white students and American Indians.

As in past years, more than one-third of the students lost from the high school pipeline fail to make the transition from 9th to 10th grade.

The report also examines **graduation rates for the nation's 50 largest school systems**. As in the past, the Detroit district has the lowest graduation rate, just below 25 percent.

This year's analyses also show a severe mismatch between local labor markets and students' education levels in many urban areas. For example, while 15.7 percent of the labor force in the District of Columbia occupies Job Zone 5—in which more than nine in 10 workers have at least some college and more than three quarters have a bachelor's degree—most of those jobs are inaccessible to Washington's public school students, more than four in 10 of whom fail to earn a diploma within four years.

To better prepare students for college and careers, many states are working to define what they mean by "college" and "work" readiness. In a 50-state survey, *Diplomas Count* found:

- Eleven states have a definition of college readiness, and 14 more are working on one. In all 11 states, those definitions are based on course requirements, and, in some cases, academic standards and test scores.

- Twenty-one states have a definition of work readiness, and 10 more are working on one. Most of those definitions stress standards for car
- States, on average, require 20 course credits for students to earn a high school diploma, with 24 states offering advanced recognition to students who exceed standard graduation requirements. But only eight of those states provide advanced recognition for students in a career and technical field.
- Twenty-two states now require students to pass an exit exam to earn a diploma. In 18 of those states, the exams are based on standards at the 10th grade level or higher. Sixteen of the exit-exam states also offer an appeals process or an alternative route to a diploma for students who fail the tests.

—The Editors

LOWEST TO HIGHEST GRADUATION RATES IN THE NATION'S 50 LARGEST DISTRICTS

Rate	District	Size Rank	Rate	District	Size Rank	Rate	District	Size Rank
24.9	DETROIT	15	55.6	ORLEANS PARISH, La.	50	67.2	FULTON COUNTY, Ga.	44
34.1	CLEVELAND	48	56.1	PALM BEACH COUNTY, Fla.	11	67.4	VIRGINIA BEACH, Va.	38
34.6	BALTIMORE	31	57.4	FRESNO, Calif.	35	69.5	COBB COUNTY, Ga.	26
44.4	DALLAS	14	58.2	AUSTIN, Texas	37	69.8	BREVARD COUNTY, Fla.	43
45.2	NEW YORK CITY	1	58.9	BROWARD COUNTY, Fla.	5	74.6	ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY, Md.	42
45.3	LOS ANGELES	2	59.8	CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG, N.C.	23	75.1	HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY, Fla.	10
46.1	MILWAUKEE	29	60.8	ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.	32	76.2	WAKE COUNTY, N.C.	24
46.3	DENVER	45	61.6	SAN DIEGO	17	77.0	NASHVILLE-DAVIDSON COUNTY, Tenn.	49
49.0	MIAMI-DADE COUNTY, Fla.	4	61.7	MEMPHIS, Tenn.	21	77.1	MESA, Ariz.	59
49.6	PHILADELPHIA	8	62.2	POLK COUNTY, Fla.	34	80.1	GRANITE, Utah	47
50.2	DUVAL COUNTY, Fla.	19	63.5	LONG BEACH, Calif.	28	80.3	MONTGOMERY COUNTY, Md.	16
51.3	DEKALB COUNTY, Ga.	27	63.7	JEFFERSON COUNTY, Ky.	30	80.4	FAIRFAX COUNTY, Va.	13
51.5	CHICAGO	3	64.1	HAWAII (statewide district)	9	81.1	BALTIMORE COUNTY, Md.	25
53.0	PINELLAS COUNTY, Fla.	22	65.6	ORANGE COUNTY, Fla.	12	81.5	JEFFERSON COUNTY, Colo.	33
53.1	CLARK COUNTY, Nev.	6	66.5	NORTHSIDE, Texas	46	86.9	CYPRESS-FAIRBANKS, Texas	40
54.6	HOUSTON	7	66.9	PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, Md.	18	88.5	JORDAN, Utah	41
55.5	FORT WORTH, Texas	36	67.2	GWINNETT COUNTY, Ga.	20			

ONLINE: For detailed graduation-rate data go to www.edweek.org/go/dc07