

Study: 4 in 5 students graduate high school in U.S.

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By Kimberly Hefling / Associated Press

WASHINGTON -- U.S. public high schools have reached a milestone, an 80 percent graduation rate. Yet that still means 1 of every 5 students walks away without a diploma.

Citing the progress, researchers are projecting a 90 percent national graduation rate by 2020.

Their report, based on Education Department statistics from 2012, was presented today at the Building a GradNation Summit.

The growth has been spurred by such factors as a greater awareness of the dropout problem and efforts by districts, states and the federal government to include graduation rates in accountability measures. Among the initiatives are closing "dropout factory" schools.

"At a moment when everything seems so broken and seems so unfixable ... this story tells you something completely different," said John Gomperts, president of America's Promise Alliance, which was founded by former Secretary of State Colin Powell and helped produce the report.

The rate of 80 percent is based on federal statistics primarily using a calculation by which the number of graduates in a given year divided by the number of students who enrolled four years earlier. Adjustments are made for transfer students.

Iowa, Vermont, Wisconsin, Nebraska and Texas ranked at the top with rates at 88 percent or 89 percent. The bottom performers were Alaska, Georgia, New Mexico, Oregon and Nevada, which had rates at 70 percent or below. Idaho, Kentucky and Oklahoma were not included because these states received federal permission to take longer to roll out their system.

The new calculation method allows researchers to individually follow students and chart progress based on their income level. By doing so, researchers found that some states are doing much better than others in getting low-income students -- or those who receive free or reduced lunch meals -- to graduation day.

Graduation rates increased 15 percentage points for Hispanic students and 9 percentage points for African American students from 2006 to 2012, with the Hispanic students graduating at 76 percent and African-American students at 68 percent, the report said. To track historic trends, the graduation rates were calculated using a different method.

Also, there were 32 percent fewer "dropout factories" -- schools that graduate less than 60 percent of students -- than a decade earlier, according to the report.

Robert Balfanz, a researcher with the Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University who was a report author, said some of these schools got better. Other districts closed these schools or converted them to smaller schools or kids voted with their feet and transferred.

If the graduation rate stayed where it was in 2001, 1.7 million additional students would not have received a diploma during the period, Mr. Balfanz said.

In addition to America's Promise Alliance and Mr. Balfanz's center, the report was produced by the public policy firm Civic Enterprises and the education group Alliance for Excellent Education.