

STUDY: ONLY “50-50” CHANCE OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION FOR U.S. MINORITY STUDENTS; WEAK ACCOUNTABILITY RULES FOUND

Inaccurate and Misleading Graduation & Dropout Data Hides Problem From Public View; California Would Allow Schools 500 Years for Minority Students to Meet Graduation Goals.

WASHINGTON, D.C.//February 25, 2004//Half or more of Black, Hispanic and Native American youths in the United States are getting left behind before high school graduation in a “hidden crisis” obscured by U.S. Department of Education regulations issued under the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) Act that “allow schools, districts, and states to all but eliminate graduation rate accountability for minority subgroups,” according to a new report from two nonpartisan groups, the Civil Rights Project at Harvard and the Urban Institute.

Also issued by the Civil Society Institute’s Results for America project and Advocates for Children of New York, the new report notes that the minority high school graduation rate crisis is masked by the widespread circulation of “misleading and inaccurate reporting of dropout and graduation rates.” According to the report, while 75 percent of White students graduated from high school in 2001, only 50 percent of all Black students, 51 percent of Native American students, and 53 percent of all Hispanic students got a high school diploma in the same year. The study found that the problem was even worse for Black, Native American, and Hispanic young men at 43 percent, 47 percent, and 48 percent, respectively.

The Civil Rights Project at Harvard/Urban Institute report finds: “The national (graduation rate) gap for Blacks is 25 percent; for Hispanics 22 percent; for Native Americans 24 percent. Despite wide ranges within some states, nearly every state shows a large and negative gap between Whites and at least one minority group.” According to the data, the 10 worst states overall for Black and Hispanic minority graduation rates are: New York; Wisconsin; Pennsylvania; Michigan; Iowa; Massachusetts; Nebraska; Ohio; Illinois; and Connecticut. The report defines the “graduation rate gap” as the difference between its calculations for graduation rates of Whites and minorities.

Civil Rights Project of Harvard Co-Director Christopher Edley said: “We have a tragic situation today under which high school graduation in America now is literally a ‘50-50 proposition’ for minority students. What is driving this problem? Recently, Congress took a first step in recognizing the severity of the dropout crisis by including graduation rate accountability provisions under NCLB. However, the Department of Education then issued regulations that allow schools, districts, and states to all but eliminate graduation rate accountability for minority subgroups. By doing so, Department officials have rendered these accountability measures virtually meaningless.”

Urban Institute Research Associate Dr. Christopher Swanson said: “The dropout data in use today misleads the public into thinking that most students are earning diplomas. The reality is that there is little, or no, state or federal oversight of dropout and graduation rate reports for accuracy. Incredibly, some states report a 5 percent dropout rate for African

Americans, when, in reality, only half of their young adult African Americans are graduating with diplomas. How is such a state of affairs possible? It happens when only nine states have accountability built in for minority graduation rates and 39 states have no true ‘floor’ for graduation rates that must be met by schools. For example, California sets a goal of 100 percent graduation and yet acknowledges ‘progress’ for ‘any improvement’ — even a tenth of a single percentage point. Given current graduation rates for Native Americans, Blacks, and Latinos in that state, California’s 100 percent goal literally could take over 500 years to achieve for its minority students.”

Advocates for Children of New York Executive Director Jill Chaifetz said: “The implications of the hidden minority dropout crisis in America are far-reaching and devastating for individuals, communities and the economic vitality of this country. High school dropouts are far more likely to be unemployed, in prison, and living in poverty. Many studies estimate significant losses in earnings and taxes with economic and societal effects that can last generations. We are deeply troubled by anecdotal information from across the United States suggesting that many low-achieving minority high school students feel that they are being ‘pushed out’ of school by schools and districts seeking to keep up their overall scores under the high-stakes testing environment of NCLB.”

Civil Society Institute President Pam Solo said: “This report highlights key information for communities to consider as the cost and benefits of NCLB are being debated. The Civil Rights Project at Harvard and the Urban Institute have put forth hard data, which when combined with the stories of students and parents who are feeling the brunt of this crisis, can sharpen the focus on the important national debate on education.”

REPORT OVERVIEW

The new report, ***“Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis,”*** exposes inaccurate and misleading official data now in use and suggests sounder statistical methods for accurate calculation of high school graduation rates. Study co-author Dr. Christopher Swanson of the Urban Institute calculated the graduation rates using what he refers to as a “Cumulative Promotion Index” (CPI), a method developed and tested independently to provide more accurate graduation rate estimates. The report combines the findings of a comprehensive review of state graduation rate accountability standards and interviews with state education officials.

In addition to those cited above, the key findings of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard/Urban Institute report are as follows:

* ***The United States Department of Education has taken steps that effectively weaken the graduation rate accountability provision of NCLB.*** In a controversial decision, Secretary of Education Rod Paige issued regulations that allow schools and districts to all but eliminate graduation rate accountability for minority subgroups. As a result, 39 states now set a “soft” Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goal for graduation rates, meaning

they can avoid sanctions simply by exhibiting even the smallest degree of improvement from one year to the next. Only nine states hold schools and districts accountable for the low graduation rates of minority students despite congressional intent. If there were a minimum graduation rate requirement of 66 percent and the reports CPI approach was used, 46 states and the District of Columbia would fail to meet this benchmark for the basic education of its student population as a whole or for at least one major racial or ethnic student subgroup.

* ***Most official graduation rates are estimates based on inaccurate data.*** Both of the two most commonly used measures — the modified National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) formula and the Census Bureau Current Population Survey (CPS) data — produce data that often dramatically underestimate the numbers of students who leave school without high school diplomas. The NCES method is what most states use to calculate their graduation rates for NCLB. However, large numbers of students that leave school without a diploma and are unaccounted for are often left out of the NCES calculations. The same also can be said for states that use the supposed “gold standard” of longitudinal data. The Texas state tracking system systematically excludes GED enrollees from graduation rate calculations for NCLB and treats them as if they never enrolled in high school, thereby inflating the diploma-completion rate for the state.

* ***Low minority graduation rates are found in all parts of the U.S.*** The four lowest graduation rates for Black students were: New York (35 percent); Ohio (40 percent); Nevada (41 percent); and Florida (41 percent). The four lowest graduation rates for Hispanic students were: New York (32 percent); Massachusetts (36 percent); Michigan (36 percent); and Nevada (38 percent). By contrast, the four lowest graduation rates for White students were: Florida (58 percent); Nevada (62 percent); Georgia (62 percent); and Mississippi (41 percent).

* ***Separate schools for Whites and Blacks fuel the low graduation rate problem.*** Low graduation rates are correlated to school segregation. Low graduation rates show a strong relationship with indicators of school segregation and this relationship is independent of poverty. Moreover, in every state, districts with high minority concentrations had lower graduation rates than districts where Whites were the majority. In Ohio, for example, the minority composition difference is pronounced even among the state’s largest districts, with a graduation rate gap of over 50 points between the majority White district of Westerville (81) and the largely minority district of Cleveland (30). This suggests that the growing segregation in public schools will likely contribute further to even lower minority graduation rates.

The report also recommends six action steps, including a reversal of the U.S. Department of Education regulation under NCLB that permits schools, districts and states to obscure the minority graduation rate crisis. For the full text of the new report, go to http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/call_dropout04.php.

The Civil Rights Project at Harvard/Urban Institute study draws on a companion report from the Urban Institute entitled, ***“Who Graduates? Who Doesn’t?: A Statistical***

Profile of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001.” Also issued today, the Urban Institute report by Dr. Swanson is available on the Web at <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410934>.

ABOUT THE GROUPS

The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (CRP) was founded in 1996 by Professors Christopher Edley, Jr. of Harvard Law School and Gary Orfield of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Its central mission is to help renew the civil rights movement by bridging the worlds of ideas and action, and by becoming a preeminent source of intellectual capital and a forum for building consensus within that movement. We achieve this by interweaving strategies of research and policy analysis, and by building strong collaborations between researchers, community organizations, and policy makers. Our dual objectives are to: (1) raise the visibility of, and attention to, racial justice national policy debates; and (2) arm local and national civil rights and educational organizations with credible research to inform their legal, political and public education efforts. CRP wrote the narrative and worked closely with the Urban Institute to analyze the data contained in the report.

The Urban Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy research and educational organization, examines America's social, economic, and governance problems. It provides information, analyses, and perspectives to public and private decisionmakers to help them address these problems and strives to deepen citizens' understanding of the issues and trade-offs that policymakers face. Its Education Policy Center conducts research on education reforms involving accountability, school vouchers, standards, after-school programs, technology, teacher quality, and the new increased flexibility in using federal funds. The Urban Institute created the indicator for graduation rates used in this study (the Cumulative Promotion Index), conducted all data analysis contained in this report, and contributed to preparation of the narrative.

Founded in 1971, Advocates for Children of New York (AFC) is New York's leading educational advocacy and legal services organization. Our mission is to make sure that New York's children get access to a quality and appropriate education. AFC does this work through direct service, training, policy reports, impact advocacy and information dissemination. In the past 33 years, we have helped hundreds of thousands of New York City children obtain the resources they need to succeed in school. For this report AFC reached out nationally to document the individual and systemic stories about why children are being pushed out or dropped out of school.

Results for America (<http://www.ResultsForAmerica.org>) is a project of the nonprofit Civil Society Institute (CSI), which is based in Newton, Massachusetts. The mission of the Institute is to serve as a catalyst for change by creating problem-solving interactions among people, and between communities, government and business, that can help to improve society. A key goal of Results for America is to shape and tap the tremendous amount of community-level knowledge, experience and innovative action that could solve America's problems in education under its “Great Kids, Great Schools, Great

Communities” initiative. Results for America supports investing in public schools, making sure parents have more of a say in their schools and creating conditions that will lead to learning and success for every child. CSI is supporting the efforts to disseminate this report in order to bring more voices and perspectives, particularly those of students, into the debate about the costs and benefits of the No Child Left Behind legislation.

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EDITOR’S NOTE: A streaming audio replay of a related news event will be available on the Web – along with the Civil Rights Project at Harvard/Urban Institute study and this news release – at <http://www.ResultsForAmerica.org> as of 5 p.m. EST on February 25, 2004.