

#### Further Reading

The publications and websites below contributed to the information presented in this issue brief and provide additional information to readers.

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O'Neal, D. (2007). *Increasing The Graduation Rate, Phase I: Data Needed And Available To Make Quality Decisions*. Atlanta, GA: Project of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, Governor's Office, Georgia Department of Education, and Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. Retrieved on April 4, 2009 at <http://georgia-gradstories.blogspot.com/2009/02/increasing-graduation-rate-part-2.html>

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Professional Association of Georgia Educators  
P.O. Box 942270  
Atlanta, GA 31141-2270  
770-216-8555 (Metro-Atlanta) or 800-334-6861 (Outside Atlanta)  
[www.pageinc.org](http://www.pageinc.org)

# Issue Brief

Professional Association of Georgia Educators  
Vol. 7 No.4  
May 2009



## Increasing Graduation: Georgia and the Nation Make Strides

Current graduation rates are doing more than raising eyebrows. A growing consensus among educators, business leaders and policymakers has sparked a concerted effort to forge a quality education system that will enable Georgia students to compete globally, to safeguard Georgia's economic prosperity, and to secure America's future.

### Stark Reality

Educators recognize the critical importance of the high school diploma. We know that students must successfully complete high school if they are to earn a decent living and engage in the American dream. Yet awareness alone will not increase graduation rates. According to Education Trust (August 2007), nationally "almost one million students who start ninth grade will not earn a diploma four years later. For African American and Latino students, it's closer to one in three." Further, barely half of disadvantaged minority students graduate on time (Swanson, April 2009). Education Trust concludes, "These figures represent an incalculable loss of talent and carry profound civic and economic consequences."

The Urban League's annual State of Black America 2009 report reveals that Blacks have lost ground over the last eight years economically with a widening gap between Black Americans and White Americans on every indicator except health. While the report points to the political progress African Americans have made in recent years, it also notes ground lost, including the dismal rate of graduation among children of color. Ultimately, this gap in education impacts communities, states and the nation. Marc H. Morial, president of the Urban League notes, "Blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed than their white counterparts, three times as

likely to live in poverty, and more than six times as likely to be incarcerated" (qtd. in Lewis, 2009).

### Economic Consequences of Low Graduation Rates

While Georgia's graduation rate has improved steadily from 61.8% in 2002 to 74.4% in 2008, the impact of low graduation rate persists. In 2007, the median earning for Georgians aged 25 and older who did not have a high school diploma was \$20,050, while the median income for those with a Bachelor's degree was \$47,029 (Gehl, October 2008). According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (June 2008), "Almost 59,500 students did not graduate from Georgia's high schools in 2008; the lost lifetime earnings in Georgia for that class of dropouts alone total nearly \$15.5 billion."

The impact of low graduation rates goes beyond the individual student and impacts all Georgians. The Alliance report (June 2008) asserts:

- Almost \$8 billion would be added to Georgia's economy by 2020 if students of color graduated at the same rate as white students.
- Georgia would save more than \$746 million in health care costs over the course of the lifetimes of each class of dropouts had they earned their diplomas.
- Georgia households would have almost \$2.5 billion more in accumulated wealth if all heads of households had graduated from high school.

- If Georgia's high schools graduated all students ready for college, the state would save more than \$75 million a year in community college remediation costs and lost earnings.
- Georgia's economy would see a combination of savings and revenue of more than \$276 million in reduced crime spending and increased earnings each year if the male high school graduation rate increased by just five percent.

### Related Issues

Like all complex problems, the graduation problem requires systemic solutions. Nationally, these issues include but are not limited to inaccuracies in some states' reporting of graduation rates, gaps between current expectations and those required for student performance, and the critical need for post-secondary education.

Noting that current high school accountability policies "represent a stunning indifference to whether young people actually earn this critical credential," Education Trust (August 2007) calls for setting ambitious graduation rate goals, measures of whether or not schools are meeting them, and "strategic supports to struggling students and schools." According to Ed Trust, far too many states have overstated the graduation rate, a reality made possible by differing ways states have been allowed to calculate graduation rates. For example, *Getting Honest About*

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*Grad Rates* (Hall, June 2005) notes, “nationally, almost one-third of all high school students don’t graduate on time, with significantly worse rates for students of color.” Yet, often this fact cannot be found in state reports of graduation.

“For too many graduates, the American high school diploma signifies only a broken promise (Achieve, 2004).” So began the 2004 report, *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*, from the American Diploma Project (ADP). This report calls attention to the widening gap between the expectations set out for high school graduates and the expectations of the workforce and colleges. Huge disparity exists between the value of the diploma as viewed by parents and students versus colleges and employers. Once admitted to college, too many students lack adequate preparation, thus requiring remedial coursework.

More education means greater economic stability. High school graduation represents the floor, not the ceiling. Education Trust (August 2007) has issued a clarion call for action arguing that “the high school diploma is the bare minimum credential necessary to have a fighting chance at the successful participation in the workforce or civil society.” Progression beyond high school substantially increases an individual’s economic well being. According to the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute’s *The State of Working Georgia 2006* (Coffey, 2006):

Higher levels of education brought a lower unemployment rate. Workers without a high school degree had an unemployment rate almost 5 times that of workers with a bachelor’s degree (11.5 percent vs. 2.4 percent). Similarly, workers who did not finish high school were over three times as likely to have a part-time job for economic reasons – meaning, not by choice – as workers with a bachelor’s degree or higher. The wage gap between different education levels has grown over the last 25 years. College graduates’ median wages were 48% higher than high school graduates’ wages in 1979. In 2005, college graduates made 78% more than high school graduates in median hourly wages. That is an increase in the wage gap of 63% over the last 25 years.

#### **What is Being Done?**

Recently, the U.S. Department of Education acted to solve the inaccurate reporting of graduation rates in some states by issuing regulations that standardize the way graduation rates will be calculated and reported and establishing consequences for districts and states that do not meet established performance and improvement benchmarks (Swanson, April 2009).

The American Diploma Project (ADP) focused attention on the expectations gap at the National Education Summit on High Schools in 2005. At this summit ADP launched its network with 13 states that committed to closing the expectations gap. Today, the ADP Network includes 34 states that educate almost 85% of American’s students. Governors and state policymakers in these 34 states, including Georgia, have committed to: 1) aligning high school standards with the demands of college and careers; 2) requiring a college-and-career-

ready curriculum to earn a high school diploma; 3) building college-and-career-ready measures into statewide high school assessment systems; and 4) developing reporting and accountability systems that promote college and career readiness. The ADP Network reports the progress of these 34 states in its Fourth Annual 50-State Report on the alignment of high school policies with the demands of college and careers (Closing the Expectations Gap, February 2009). Excerpts follow:

**Aligned Standards:** Since 2004, almost half the states have revised their high school academic standards in English and/or mathematics to align them with the demands of postsecondary education and careers. Four new states reported doing so, bringing the total number of states with aligned standards to 23. Twenty-one other states and DC are in process. Georgia can take pride in being among these 23 states. The states want to work toward ensuring that their standards are “internationally benchmarked; fully integrate cross-disciplinary proficiencies; and are focused, specific and manageable.”

**Graduation Requirements:** In early 2005, only Texas and Arkansas had set graduation course requirements at a college and workforce ready level. In 2009, 20 states and DC now require all students to complete a college- and career-ready curriculum. Eight additional states have plans in motion to raise their requirements to this level. Georgia is among the 20 states that now have high school standards aligned with college-and career-ready expectations.

#### **Statewide High School Assessment Systems:**

Heretofore, only nine states had reported having a test capable of measuring students’ college and career readiness. This year, Georgia is the only new state to require all high school students to take a college readiness assessment which brings the total to 10 states nationwide. Ten states administer high school assessments that also are utilized by higher education to place incoming students. For example, only one state, New York, boasts end-of-course tests that are also used by higher education to place students. Three states have comprehensive high school assessments thus utilized: California, Texas and Georgia. Twenty-three state report plans to build college-and-career-ready assessments into their statewide testing systems.

**P-20 Longitudinal Data Systems:** The total number of states with P-20 operational longitudinal data systems that match K-12 data with postsecondary data and track the progress of individual students from kindergarten through college graduation is 12. Of these 12, three new states also report that they have begun to match student-level data between the K-12 and postsecondary systems at least once annually. Thirty-seven states, including Georgia, and DC are developing or planning to develop P-20 longitudinal data systems, making this an opportunity for growth for Georgia. As ADP points out, “Having the right data is just the first step; the next challenge for all state leaders is to commit to using data to strengthen the preparation of students for postsecondary success.”

**Accountability:** While every state and DC have reported, or soon will be able to report, a four-year cohort graduation rate based on student-level data, many are currently utilizing this rate for accountability. Eleven states have begun reporting the percentage of students who earn a college and career-ready diploma, while 18 states now report the percentage of students who must take remedial courses upon entering college, though neither indicator is usually factored into states’ accountability systems. Georgia is evolving in this area as is progress in most states.

#### **Georgia’s Significant Progress**

The good news is that Georgia, as well as 34 other states, has made a significant commitment of leadership, energy and resources and is making necessary changes in state policies to advance the American Diploma Project agenda of embracing college and career ready standards, rigorous graduation requirements, assessment systems that measure these rigorous standards, and systems that hold states accountable for measurable results (Georgia ADP Policy Agenda, 2009). We are also awakening to the reality that all students need further education in order to be competitive.

In 2006, Governor Sonny Perdue appointed State School Superintendent Kathy Cox to chair the Alliance of Education Agency Heads (AEAH). The Alliance has developed a strategic map that focuses on barriers, provides a comprehensive policy framework, and creates a blueprint for cross-agency collaboration to direct the integration and expansion of Pre-K through post-secondary activities as well as to inform workforce development recommendations involving other state agencies.

The first and foremost goal of the Alliance is to increase high school graduation rate, decrease high school dropout rate, and increase postsecondary enrollment. By making this its priority goal, AEAH is ensuring that the State and all of Georgia’s students will have the ability to succeed in an increasingly competitive and highly technical world marketplace (O’Neal, 2007).

In the summer of 2008, Governor Perdue also appointed a working group to study education policies and practices to make Georgia more competitive globally. Chaired by Charles Knapp and Dean Alford, Georgia’s “Tough Choices or Tough Times” working group has recently released a draft outline of recommendations, including a recommendation that allows students to “move on when ready” into the next phase of their postsecondary academic careers, attracting and retaining world class teachers, and ensuring that students have superior analytical and problem-solving skills (Knapp, C. and D. Alford, April 2009).

The Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) High School Redesign Initiative (HSRI) provides training to school teams of teachers and administrators on the Working on the Work (WOW) Framework (Schlechty, 2001) to assist high schools in designing work that engages students, and allows students to take responsibility for their own work. This focus on the quality of work offered to students represents a tangible outgrowth of PAGE’s core business and has attracted 14 Georgia high schools to join in this learning journey. HSRI is designed to assist high schools in

1) recognizing the need and urgency for change, 2) using their demographic and achievement data to make decisions, and 3) planning and developing engaging work for students. The program makes extensive use of technology and utilizes a team-based approach to engage students in problem-based learning that encourages students to persist in their work (PAGE, 2009).

Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) provides *High Schools That Work* (HSTW), a research-based school-focused reform effort which helps school teams raise academics expectations with a rigorous and relevant curriculum. HSTW also provides assistance in customizing school improvement plans to reach data-based improvement goals (O’Neal, 2007).

Another promising sign of Georgia’s progress is aligned acts of improvement by other reform agencies. For example, The Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) has aligned its core leadership training, Base Camp and Leadership Summit, to support leaders in achieving AEAH Goal One. Training focuses on teaching leaders a systemic, team-based process for increasing graduation rates, decreasing dropout rates and improving progression from one grade to the next and from level to level meeting and exceeding standards, as well as preparing students to transition successfully to postsecondary endeavors of choice.

Numerous other Georgia accomplishments are documented in detail in *Increasing the Graduation Rate, Phase I: Data Needed And Available To Make Quality Decisions* (O’Neal, 2007). For example, consider the Georgia Department of Education’s creation of the Georgia Performance Standards, as well as aligned development of School Keys, Class Keys, and Leaders Keys. Georgia’s HOPE Scholarship Program, for instance, has provided \$2.7 billion in financial assistance to more than 850,000 deserving Georgia students. As noted by the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, “(Georgia) has taken great strides and has a list of accomplishments that speak well of the political will to walk boldly in the 21st century (qtd. in O’Neal, 2007).

#### **Conclusion**

Education and economic prosperity are inextricably linked. While Georgia has accomplished much, there is more to do. Swanson (April 2009) observes, “The stakes attached to graduating have never been higher.” What this means is that efforts to end the graduation crisis must be serious and relentless. And they must proceed hand-in-hand with a fundamental commitment to create a public education system where earning a meaningful diploma that prepares youth for college and career is the expectation for all students and where dropping out becomes a rare exception. ■

*Dr. Gale Hulme is a freelance writer on educational issues and serves as executive director of programs and systemic solutions at the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement.*