

Charter, Alternative, Virtual Schools Account for Most Low-Grad-Rate Schools, Study Finds

By Catherine Gewertz on May 9, 2016 6:00 AM | 5 Comments

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CORRECTED Charter, virtual, and alternative schools account for a disproportionate share of U.S. high schools with low graduation rates, according to a study released Monday. Even though they enroll only a small slice of students, they account for more than half of the U.S. high schools that graduate 67 percent or less of their students in four years.

"**Building a Grad Nation**," the seventh in an annual series of reports on U.S. graduation rates, concluded that regular district high schools make up 41 percent of those that didn't surpass the 67-percent threshold in 2013-14. Charter, virtual, and alternative schools—a small sector, representing only 14 percent of the country's high schools and 8 percent of its high school students—account for 52 percent of the schools that fell short of that mark. (The remaining 7 percent are vocational and special-education schools.)

The findings offer a challenge to a country that's renewing its focus on graduation rates through the newly revised Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Known now as the Every Student Succeeds Act, the law requires states to report four-year graduation rates for schools that enroll 100 students or more, and districts to provide research-based help for schools that graduate fewer than 67 percent in four years.

With that new law in mind, the organizations that issue the "**Grad Nation**" reports annually—Civic Enterprises, the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, the Alliance for Excellent Education and the America's Promise Alliance—shifted their focus for this year's report, from schools that enroll 300 or more students (about 13,400 schools) to those that enroll 100 or more (about 18,100 schools).

That change nearly tripled the scope of the study of schools with graduation rates of two-thirds or less: from 1,000 schools enrolling 924,000 students to 2,397 schools enrolling 1.23 million students. In a foreshadowing of the work that states face under ESSA, the Grad Nation researchers looked for patterns among the schools with low graduation rates. (**Note:** This paragraph reflects corrections made to the Grad Nation report.)

The contrast between "regular" district high schools, and alternative, virtual, and charter schools showed the starker pattern. Here are the shares of U.S. high schools of each type, and their shares of schools with low graduation rates:

Regular high schools:

84 percent of U.S. high schools

7 percent have graduation rates of 67 percent or less

Alternative schools:

6 percent of U.S. high schools

6 percent of U.S. high schools

57 percent have graduation rates of 67 percent or less

Charter schools:

8 percent of U.S. high schools

30 percent have graduation rates of 67 percent or less

Virtual schools:

1 percent of U.S. high schools

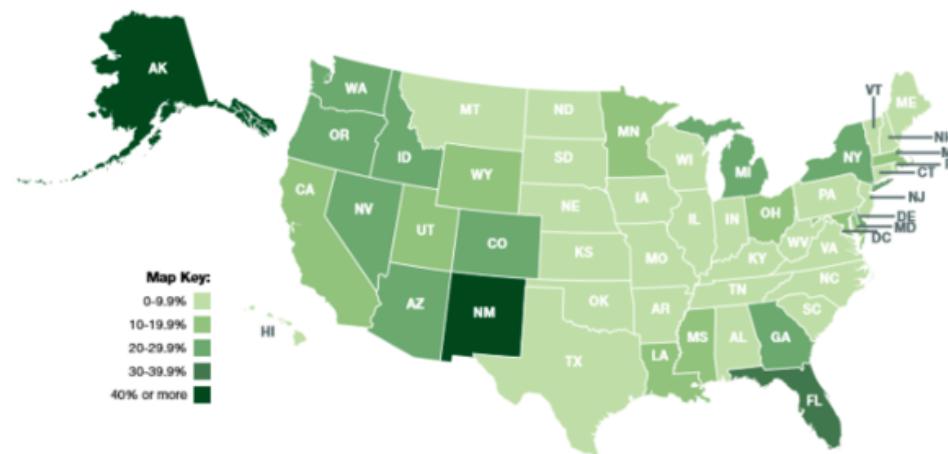
87 percent have graduation rates of 67 percent or less

The Grad Nation researchers called attention to the preponderance of low-grad-rate schools among charter, alternative, and virtual schools in part because the numbers of those schools have been rising in the last 15 years. Additionally, they enroll large shares of low-income, black, and Hispanic students.

"In many states, these various high school options have become popular pathways for students that have struggled to stay on track in traditional high schools," the study says. "Therefore, it is critical that issues surrounding these schools be addressed."

The report also pinpoints a bigger problem with low-graduation-rate schools in some states than in others. In Alaska, New Mexico, and Florida, 30 percent or more of the high schools have graduation rates of 67 percent or lower.

Figure 10. Percentage of High Schools (enrolling 100 or more students) with ACCR 67 Percent or Less, 2013-14



Many celebrated last December when the nation's high school **graduation rate reached an all-time high of 82 percent** for the class of 2014. But the milestone also sparked skepticism about whether states or districts were using shortcuts to boost their diploma numbers, by lowering academic expectations or changing the way they counted transfer students in each class cohort.

The Grad Nation researchers took on those questions, and concluded that there was little or no evidence that such practices were affecting state-level graduation rates. Further analysis would have to be done to make such conclusions at the district level, the report says. It did not examine schools' increasing reliance on quick credit-recovery programs to improve graduation rates.

The Every Student Succeeds Act gives states much more autonomy than they had under the No Child Left Behind Act over the way they handle low-performing schools. With that in mind, the Grad Nation authors urged states to give graduation rates significant weight in the accountability systems, and to make sure that charter, virtual, and alternative schools, as well as traditional high schools, are monitored and provided solid help with low graduation rates.

They also urged states to report five- and six-year graduation rates, to capture a more accurate picture of diploma-earning. Many alternative schools, in particular, were created to serve students who struggled in traditional schools, and who might take longer to earn their diplomas, the report notes. Adding five-year graduation rates to the national picture would boost the rate by 3 percentage points, it says, and adding six-year rates would increase it by another point.

Photo: A high school graduate raises his diploma in celebration as he walks back to his seat during a commencement ceremony last June in Pittston, Pa. —Andrew Krech/The Citizens' Voice via AP-File

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