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State graduation rate jumps to almost 90%

Change over 6-year period nears national goal, but minorities lag

By [Erin Richards](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Wisconsin graduated more high school students in 2008 than it did in 2002 and is just shy of an impressive 90% statewide graduation rate, according to a new national education report released this week.

"[Building a Grad Nation](#)," a study by America's Promise Alliance, Civic Enterprises and Johns Hopkins University's Everyone Graduates Center, highlights Wisconsin for being one of 12 states that made substantial gains in graduation rates over the six-year period, and one of eight states that greatly reduced the number of its so-called "dropout factory high schools."

"Wisconsin really deserves a lot of credit because it was doing well to begin with, but its gains are still strong with the progress in graduation rates and a 50% reduction in the number of dropout factories," said John Bridgeland, the CEO of education research group Civic Enterprises and one of the lead authors of the report.

Wisconsin's graduation rate was 89.6% in 2008, an uptick from 84.8% in 2002.

Bridgeland said Wisconsin is one of two states - Vermont is the other, with a graduation rate of 89.3% - that are on the verge of reaching the national goal set by the federal government: graduating nine out of 10 students by the year 2020.

Minority students nationwide made progress during the six-year study window, but their graduation rates still lag behind their white peers. For example, a quarter of all public school students fail to receive a diploma, while about 40% of all minority students fail to receive a diploma, according to the report.

Patrick Gasper, spokesman for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, said the statewide graduation rate rose for both Hispanic and African-American students from 2002 to 2008, but remained almost the same for Caucasian and Asian students.

"We are clearly concerned with the breakdown of the state's overall rate, which shows an achievement gap between white students and students of color," Gasper said. "We are still working on achieving the goal of having every child graduate, and even if our rate is nation-leading at just shy of 90 percent, we must continue efforts to ensure that all children will graduate."

Overall, the study found that the U.S. graduation rate rose from 72% in 2002 to 75% in 2008, with more than half of all states increasing their graduation rates. The report estimates that the increase resulted in at least 100,000 more students earning a high school diploma in 2008 than in 2006.

What's not clear is whether the increasing numbers of students who earned a diploma were better-positioned for post-graduation success because of it.

For example, it's possible that some high schools became more lenient about granting diplomas. Without corroborating evidence showing student progress in the form of ACT or SAT scores, state test scores or grade point averages rising alongside graduation rates, it's unclear whether students were better educated in 2008 than they were in 2002, or just better at staying in school.

Whatever the case, President Barack Obama's administration has turned the spotlight on graduation rates and chronically underperforming high schools as part of its education agenda. U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has called for a steep reduction in dropout factories, generally defined as high schools where less than 60% of freshmen graduate on time in four years.

Within the last year the government has channeled millions of dollars of improvement grants to the 5,000 worst-performing high schools in the country, identified by a Department of Education formula.

The "Grad Nation" report shows that the number of dropout factory schools in America declined over six years from 2,007 to 1,746.

In the same time period, the report says Wisconsin's dropout factories decreased from 16 to nine.

According to a 2007 Johns Hopkins University [analysis of dropout factories](#) however, Wisconsin had 22 dropout factories statewide, with 17 of those schools located in Milwaukee Public Schools.

No school-level data is included in the latest report to compare the two studies, but the difference in numbers is likely because of differing methodologies. The "Grad Nation" study only included high schools that have 300 students or more, and that had four years of data available, Bridgeland said.

Despite the progress, the report points out that about 2 million students attend high schools where their chances of graduating are about 50-50.

Graduation rates are also notorious for the multitude of ways in which they can be calculated. The most recent study calculated the rate by taking the average ninth grade enrollment and dividing it by the number of diplomas granted in 12th grade.

In 2008, the federal government tightened graduation-rate reporting guidelines for states. Starting next year, they'll have to use a uniform calculation that adjusts for transfer students and compares the number of graduating seniors to the number of freshmen in the school four years prior.

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