

A PATH TO GRADUATION FOR EVERY CHILD

STATE LEGISLATIVE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A REPORT OF THE NCSL TASK FORCE ON SCHOOL DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY

By Sunny Deyé



NATIONAL CONFERENCE
of STATE LEGISLATURES
The Forum for America's Ideas

William T. Pound
Executive Director

7700 East First Place
Denver, Colorado 80230
(303) 364-7700

444 North Capitol Street, N.W., Suite 515
Washington, D.C. 20001
(202) 624-5400
www.ncsl.org

January 2011

3. TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

The state legislature plays a critical role in raising public awareness about the dropout problem; setting expectations for schools and districts and holding them accountable; and providing the data infrastructure to help schools and districts identify and support struggling students. The following recommendations identify how legislators can be most effective in dropout prevention and recovery efforts.

Create and sustain urgency to improve high school graduation rates

Legislatures can make it a state priority to improve high school graduation rates. Legislatures cannot do this alone, however. We must help organize and participate in powerful partnerships among key stakeholders, including legislators, governors, superintendents, state boards of education, educators, community-based organizations, parents, and business leaders. These stakeholders each play a critical role in developing the many options and solutions necessary to help all kids navigate a path to graduation and beyond.

Creating or participating in a statewide task force, advisory board, commission, office or other entity that can take a long-term view of the state dropout problem indicates bipartisan support, brings statewide visibility to the dropout problem, and raises awareness among the media and constituents. When legislators establish or participate in such a process, we send the message that improving dropout rates is a state legislative priority and that stakeholders have allies in the legislature who can codify their efforts in statute.

States need to set ambitious goals for improving high school graduation rates, and legislatures are well-positioned to ensure that state goals are understood by the public; that progress is accounted for and recognized; and that incentives and resources are available to help schools and districts meet state goals. Publicizing the goal and state progress will help inform citizens, parents and students about the costs and consequences of dropping out, and the many options available to keep kids on the path to graduation.

Task Force Recommendations

- Create and sustain urgency to improve high school graduation rates.
- Insist on high expectations and a rigorous curriculum for all students.
- Provide options and pathways to engage all students.
- Put excellent teachers, principals, and other caring adults in schools.
- Identify and support struggling students.
- Develop dropout recovery programs to reengage out-of-school youth.
- Build capacity to transform or replace low graduation-rate high schools.
- Conduct policy audits, eliminate counterproductive policies and provide incentives for collaboration.
- Hold schools and districts accountable for improving high school graduation rates.

4. CALL TO ACTION

The costs of dropping out are high—to the student; to the states; and to the nation. For students who do not earn their high school diploma, the future is grim. We no longer live in a society where high school dropouts can earn a living wage. Not only do dropouts see a significant decrease in earning power and workforce opportunities, but they also are far more likely to spend their lives periodically unemployed, on government assistance, or cycling in and out of the prison system.³⁹ Each high school dropout is a loss to our states and communities through costs to society, diminished quality of life, and—most importantly—loss of productive, engaged citizens.

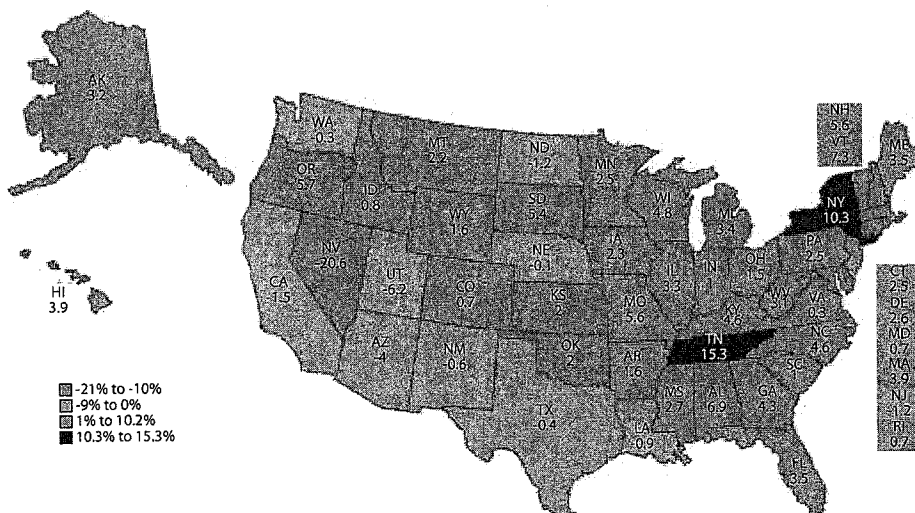
The current economic crisis offers an opportunity to act. The economic downturn has wreaked havoc on state budgets, forcing difficult choices and driving important conversations about state economic priorities, responsibilities and accountability. The current crisis in state budgets is expected to continue for several more years. It provides an opportunity to pare duplicate services; hold agencies accountable for improving results; and find new ways to collaborate, share information, and ensure that state policy environments provide incentives for improving high school graduation rates.

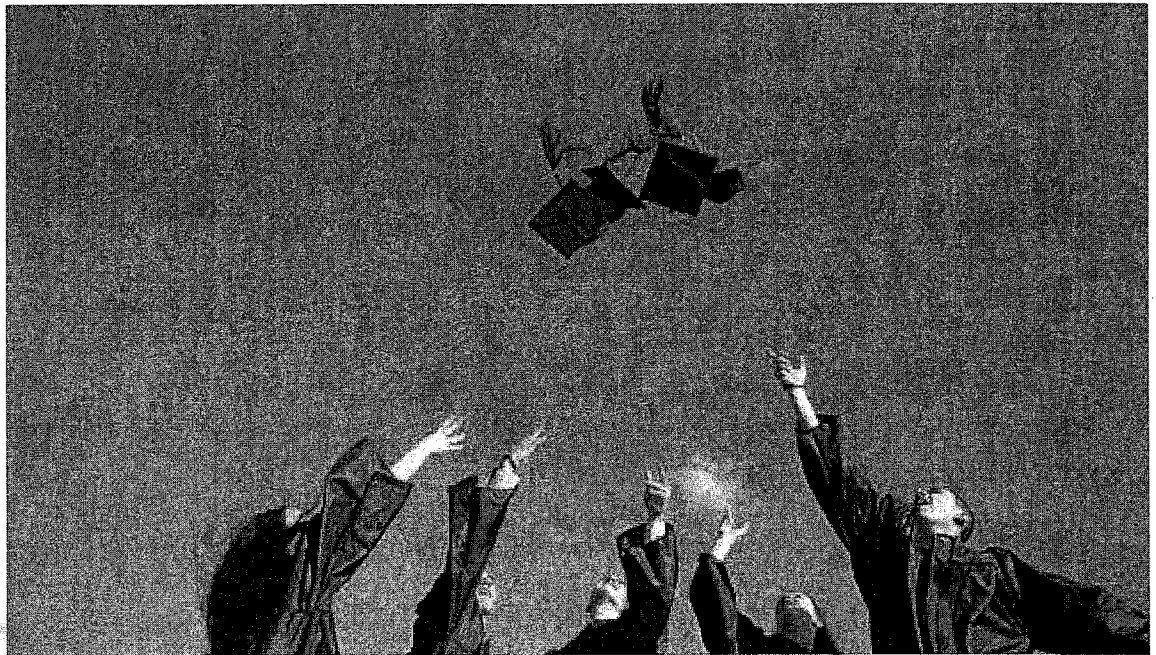
State legislators must be leaders in dropout prevention and recovery and set the expectation that

all students will successfully graduate from high school ready for success in college, careers and life. The time is now—we cannot wait until the current economic crisis subsides. We must take advantage of this opportunity to reexamine our expectations, policies and processes to ensure that schools and districts have every incentive and opportunity to help kids navigate a path to graduation and beyond.

This is our responsibility and thus our call to action: We must ensure that graduating every child means graduating every child. The clock is ticking for our children, our states and our nation.

Figure 7. Percentage Change in Graduation Rates, 2001-2002 to 2007-2008, by State





States Making Great Gains

The education recommendations, policy guidelines and legislation that state lawmakers have put in place during the past decade are playing a vital role in decreasing the number of students who drop out of high school in Tennessee and Alabama.

A new report shows positive signs that states are making progress in reducing the number of students who drop out of high school. The report—released in November 2010 by the America's Promise Alliance, Civic Enterprises and Johns Hopkins University's Everyone Graduates Center—highlights successful case studies in Tennessee and Alabama. It acknowledges the role of state legislators in creating policy environments that have helped increase high school graduation rates, including strong leadership with clear graduation rate goals; collaboration among many sectors that is guided by data; commitment to innovation and continuous improvement; technical assistance for evidence-based solutions; and high expectations, better policies and more support for students.

Tennessee: From 2002 to 2008, Tennessee led the nation in increasing its high school graduation rate from just under 60 percent to 75 percent. Researchers credit a statewide approach that included collaboration and coordination among stakeholders; setting clear and high statewide expectations; effectively using data to improve teaching and learning; and improving technical assistance to struggling schools.

Alabama: Between 2002 and 2008, Alabama's high school graduation rate increased from 62 percent to 69 percent. Researchers credit leadership from state policymakers that made drop-out prevention and increased graduation rates a statewide priority; set clear and high statewide expectations and standards for students; built capacity for comprehensive school improvement, including state-sponsored professional development and training; and provided intensive supports to students to finish high school.

Source: Robert Balfanz, John M. Bridgeland, Laura A. Moore and Joanna Hornig Fox, *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic* (Washington, D.C.: Civic Enterprises, Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and America's Promise Alliance, November 2010); <http://www.every1graduates.org/gradnation.html>.