

## The Every Student Counts Act

### **THERE IS A NATIONAL CRISIS IN AMERICA'S HIGH SCHOOLS.**

The United States high school graduation rate ranks eighteenth out of twenty-four developed nations. One out of every three students who enters ninth grade in the United States each year fails to graduate from high school four years later. Worse, almost half of black and Hispanic students fail to graduate during the same timeframe. Special education students also have graduation rates that hover just over 50 percent. Just as unfortunate, half of all students who do succeed in graduating each year lack the knowledge and skills needed for postsecondary education and the modern workforce. Given these statistics, it is no wonder that researchers who study graduation rates have dubbed our current situation a “dropout crisis.”

### **CURRENT POLICY DOES NOT HOLD HIGH SCHOOLS ACCOUNTABLE FOR IMPROVING GRADUATION RATES.**

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has focused the nation's attention on the unacceptable achievement gap and the need to improve outcomes for all students, particularly those of low-income and minority students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. However, NCLB does not place enough importance on *graduating* the nation's high school students. Furthermore, current federal policy on graduation rates permits the use of inconsistent and misleading graduation rate calculations that overestimate graduation rates, does not require meaningful increases in graduation rates over time, and does not require the graduation rates of student subgroups to increase as part of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) determinations.

- **Graduation rates cannot be compared across states and are often overstated and inaccurate.** There are five different types of graduation rate calculations in use by states across the country, many of which significantly overestimate the graduation rate. In fact, comparisons of state-reported graduation rates and independent estimates by researchers show that state-calculated rates are an average of 12 percentage points higher than independently calculated rates.
- **States have little incentive to improve graduation rates overall or for groups of students that are being left behind.** Left to set the bar as they chose, some states have set ultimate graduation rate goals as low as 50 percent. Very few states have set an ultimate graduate rate goal of 100 percent, and the majority of states (twenty-nine) permit high schools to meet AYP by making any improvement, including improvement as low as .1 percent, in graduation rates each year. In an average-sized high school, that translates into a graduating class that increases by one student every four to five years.
- **States are not held accountable for disaggregated graduation rates.** NCLB's requirement that schools, local education agencies (LEAs) and states report and be held accountable for disaggregated data has not been applied to graduation rates. While most schools, LEAs, and states do report disaggregated graduation rates, they are only held accountable for the overall rate.

- **Because of the current focus solely on test scores for accountability, many students who may be least likely to pass accountability tests are “pushed out” before graduation.** Students typically take their high school assessments in the tenth grade and schools, as outlined earlier in this summary, have very little, if any, requirement to improve graduation rates. As a result, there is a documented phenomenon of schools pushing low-performing students out before the tenth grade in order to improve test scores.

#### **GROWING CONSENSUS FOR CHANGE**

Educators and policymakers at all levels of government have come to agree that change is necessary on this issue. States, through the National Governors Association (NGA), have agreed to move toward a common, improved graduation rate calculation and thirty-six states have developed the capability to implement this calculation. In fact by the 2010–2011 school year, it is expected that forty-nine states will have the capability to calculate the NGA rate.

Recently, the secretary of education has released proposed regulations that would create a firmer timeline for implementation of a uniform calculation and would ensure that graduation rates are part of the accountability system. However, the secretary’s proposed regulations do not go far enough to ensure meaningful graduation rate goals and to significantly increase graduation rates over time. Further, the proposed regulations would allow for schools to predetermine when certain populations of students will graduate rather than measuring when they *do* graduate.

#### **The Every Student Counts Act requires accurate and transparent calculations and meaningful accountability.**

The Every Student Counts Act creates a graduation rate calculation that is consistent across states, requiring reporting of subgroup graduation rates, setting meaningful graduation rate goals and targets, and removing incentives for schools to push out low-performing and at-risk students.

The Every Student Counts Act would do the following:

- **Make graduation rate calculations uniform and accurate.** The bill would require that all states calculate their graduation rates in the same manner, allowing for more consistency and transparency.
- **Set meaningful graduation rate goals and growth targets for *all* students.** The bill sets a graduation rate goal of 90 percent for all students and disadvantaged populations. Schools, districts and States with graduation rates below 90 percent, in the aggregate or for any subgroup, must increase their graduation rates an average of 3 percentage points per year to make AYP.
- **Balance testing and graduation rates for accountability purposes.** The bill would ensure that test scores and graduation rates are weighted equally when determining AYP so that schools have balanced incentives to both graduate their students and raise their test scores instead of doing one at the expense of the other.

- **Recognize that some small numbers of students take longer than four years to graduate.** Instead of treating certain students differently for accountability purposes and predetermining when certain students would graduate, the Every Student Counts Act includes a cumulative graduation rate provision. Under this provision, schools, school districts and states would be given credit for graduating students who may take longer than the typical four years when they graduate with a regular diploma. Providing for a cumulative rate also creates incentives for schools, districts, and states to create programs to serve students who have already dropped out and are over-age and undercredited. The bill also maintains the primacy of graduating the great preponderance of *all* students in four years by requiring that at least 90 percent of all graduates be four-year graduates.