



Grad rate controversy underscores need for longitudinal data systems

[Economic Policy Institute](#) researchers **Lawrence Mishel** and **Joydeep Roy** released a study indicating that 83 percent of students receive diplomas -- challenging a [Manhattan Institute](#) finding that nearly 30 percent of students drop out.

The dueling grad rates have engendered a debate over just how badly high schools are failing. However, the findings also underscore the need for states to develop longitudinal databases that can accurately measure student progress.

Dueling grad rates

The EPI analysis is based on several data samples, the **U.S. Census**-based [Current Population Survey](#) and national longitudinal studies.

Manhattan Institute researchers **Jay Greene** and **Marcus Winters** based their measurements on the [National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data](#).

Each was critical of the others' methodology.

"CCD numbers are actual counts of students and enrollments," Winters said. "It's extraordinary to point to a sampling to say the count is incorrect."

Mishel countered that the CCD data did not directly measure the number of graduates, and it did not have the same level of quality control as the CPS data.

"The CCD doesn't have the resources to be other than, mostly, a national data dump," he told *Education Daily*.

At the crux of the debate is whether the conventional wisdom that 30 percent of high school students drop out overstates the failure of America's high schools.

"We have great challenges," Mishel said. "The racial disparity in graduation rates still exist and, in some areas of the country, graduation rates are horrifyingly low, but it may not be that there needs to be a wholesale indictment of all public schools."

Still, both researchers concede that state longitudinal data systems ultimately would provide the most accurate information on dropout rates.

"The states seem to be moving in that direction, and that's a good thing," Winters said.

Meanwhile, other stakeholders are concerned the debate might detract from key high school reform questions.

"An academic smack-down may fill the seats," said **Bob Wise**, president of the [Alliance for Excellent Education](#). "But the real question is the quality of the diplomas states offer."

--[Stephen Sawchuk](#)

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