



# grad·u·ate (verb)

New approaches may cut into the nation's dropout rate.

BY SUNNY DEYÉ

**A** little experimentation may be the path to increasing high school graduation rates.

Career technical education, dual enrollment, early college high schools, and after-hours high schools are all approaches states are looking at to increase the value of their high school diploma and decrease dropout rates.

While there is no direct connection between these innovative approaches and a reduction in the dropout rate, research supports the notion that some of these different programs do reduce the likelihood that kids will leave school before graduating.

The search for new approaches is crucial

*Sunny Deyé tracks high school requirements and graduation rates for NCSL.*

as lawmakers and educators grapple with a new federal formula that, in many states, will likely show far fewer students are graduating on time with a regular diploma than was previously thought.

A top complaint of employers is that graduating students lack “soft skills”—the ability to solve problems creatively, communicate well, and interpret and evaluate information. The high school career academy—there are 2,500 of them across the country—is one



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popular approach to prepare kids for both college and work. The academies blend regular academic content with career-related studies, including mentoring and internships.

“Career academies are really about relevance,” says researcher James Kemple of the public policy research organization MDRC, who wrote a 2008 report on career academies.

In California, incoming Senate President Darrell Steinberg wants to give grants to emerging green businesses that will join with public schools to establish “green career academies.” He’d like to see partnerships with health care, high tech, biotech and other industries as part of the drive to change high school education.

“We must link education reforms to the new economy,” says Steinberg. “The green economy is an example of an opportunity to

Time for a test. Here's a multiple choice question that might be harder than it looks:

**Which states had the highest 2007 graduation rate:**

- A) Indiana: 76.5 percent
- B) South Dakota: 88.4 percent
- C) North Carolina: 68.1 percent
- D) Not enough information to decide

*The correct answer is "D."*

That's because comparing high school graduation rates from state to state—and even school to school—is nearly impossible. States use four methods to calculate graduation rates, and many of them grossly overestimate the number of students graduating on time with a regular diploma.

That led U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings to announce in April that the U.S. Department of Education will publish new rules this year requiring all states to calculate graduation rates using the same federal formula by the 2012-13 school year. She said the new approach means we "will not only better diagnose the dropout crisis, we'll be on our way to ending it."

The new formula is expected to be a calculation based on the number of kids who enter ninth grade and graduate with a standard diploma four years later. Some legislators are concerned that the plan requires building new databases and systems to analyze the information, all of which will cost money. States that do not comply will be in violation of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Using this method, the graduation rate tends to be considerably lower than most states now report. According to *Education Week's* EPE Research Center, about 71 percent of all U.S. public school students in 2005 graduated from high school on time with a regular diploma.

The results in the 17 states that have changed to the new formula have been dramatic. Indiana's rate went from nearly 90 percent to 76.5 percent. In North Carolina, the rate dropped to 68.1 percent from 96.1 percent.

As states start applying the new formula, there will be tremendous pressure to decrease the number of dropouts.

And there is a lot more at stake than

## DROPOUTS ARE A BIGGER PROBLEM WHEN SCHOOLS CHANGE HOW THEY COUNT GRADUATES.



bookkeeping. Dropouts earn far less than high school or college graduates and can be a significant financial burden on society.

### STARTING EARLY

Students drop out of school for many reasons: family demands, poverty, friends who drop out, schools that do little to encourage them to stay. Students also drop out because they are bored and don't see how their classes relate to their future. A 2005 survey found that most dropouts had passing grades, big career dreams and were confident they would have graduated. More than 80 percent said their chances of staying in school would have increased if classes were more interesting and encouraged real-world learning.

Research shows schools can identify as early as eighth and ninth grade the students most likely to drop out. Kids who are failing classes in middle school and skipping classes top the list, according to Elaine Allensworth, director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.

Despite those early signs of trouble, schools do poorly at preventing dropouts. "Past strategies for dropout prevention have not been well-targeted, nor have they been

based on how students have done in their classes," says Allensworth.

Across the nation, legislators are trying to find ways to keep kids in school. They've considered providing better equipment, changing the curriculum so it prepares students for college or work, and offering different ways to graduate.

But the key is finding and funding proven programs.

"Education is one of those fields where we have a long history of trying something based on a whim or anecdote rather than on strong evidence," says James Kemple, author of a 2008 report on career academies. "Too often, investment in a program or intervention comes first with research running from behind, trying to catch up."

State lawmakers need evidence that a program works if they expect to make the case to the public, he says.

Senator Darrell Steinberg, the incoming president of the California Senate, says reform of middle and high schools is the state's No. 1 priority.

"Data are key," says Steinberg. Good information gives lawmakers and educators a clear picture of what's happening in schools and which strategies are working.

### ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

Solving the dropout problem takes a two-prong approach that seems largely driven by common sense, says Russ Rumberger, director of the California Dropout Research Project.

"Dropouts are concentrated. Some schools have large numbers of kids dropping out, while others have just small sub-populations," says Rumberger, who has worked closely with Steinberg's committee to study high school graduation.

The best approach is to use small-scale programs for the schools with few kids at risk, and take a more systematic approach in districts with deep-seated problems.

"States don't have a great track record of dealing with systemic problems," Rumberger says. "Money alone is not a promising strategy. Schools must be provided with proven strategies, guidance and oversight."

 **CHECK OUT** the four different ways graduation rates are calculated at [www.ncsl.org/magazine](http://www.ncsl.org/magazine).



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meet environmental goals, create lots of jobs, and create a pipeline now from high school to the economy, while also making a dent in our dropout problem.”

Updating traditional career and technical education curricula to provide clear paths to success in school and on the job is another approach. In Arizona, for example, lawmakers created online vocational exams in 2000 that students can take to earn credentials in areas such as aircraft mechanics, bioscience, engineering and carpentry.

“This type of education is extremely valuable,” says Representative Mark Anderson, chair of Arizona’s Public Education Committee. “There are a number of students who really ‘plug into’ vocational courses.”

Arizona is challenging the old model of vocational education geared mainly to kids who can’t advance academically. Instead, students in these programs often end up going to college and see the vocational training as one more tool to further their academic careers.

**DIFFERENT APPROACHES**

A panel in North Carolina charged with investigating the dropout problem found that numerous programs trying to grapple with the problem were small and poorly funded.

“We wanted to find the programs that have been successful so that they could be duplicated and properly funded,” says Joe Hackney, speaker of the North Carolina House. The Legislature appropriated \$7 million for programs in 2007 and another \$15 million in 2008.

North Carolina’s approach reflects the state’s growing awareness that increasing



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graduation rates—only 68 percent of students graduate on time—will require new ideas and investments.

It’s a notion that resonates in New Mexico, where educators and lawmakers are grappling with one of the worst high school graduation rates in the country. Just 54.1 percent of students graduate in four years with a regular diploma.

The state recently passed legislation requiring high school students to complete either an advanced placement or honors course, a dual-credit course offered in cooperation with an institution of higher education, or a distance learning course in order to graduate.

“We gave a lot of thought to what kind of programs would add both rigor and relevance to the high school curriculum,” says Senator Cynthia Nava, vice-chair of the Legislative Education Study Committee. “By requiring students to take at least one course that demands a significantly different way of thinking and learning, we hope to engage and challenge all of them.”

**HELPING DROPOUTS**

States also are trying to help students who are older or have already dropped out of school. Many left school because they had to work or be at home during the day.

In Texas, Representative Scott Hochberg visited a high school in his district that offers classes on nights and weekends. The school helps students graduate with a high school diploma, rather than a GED.

“These kids clearly had made a choice to return to school to get their high school diplomas, and to continue to pursue higher



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**THE HIGH COST OF DROPPING OUT**

Most high school dropouts face grim employment prospects and a lifetime of low-paying jobs. Several studies have found dropouts also have far-reaching effects on the rest of society.

- ◆ The average annual income for a high school dropout in 2005 was \$17,299, compared to \$26,933 for a graduate.
- ◆ More than 1.2 million students did not graduate from American high schools in 2008. The lost lifetime earnings for that class alone totals nearly \$320 billion.
- ◆ America would save more than \$17 billion in health care costs over the lifetimes of each class of dropouts had they earned their diplomas.
- ◆ American households would have more than \$74 billion in additional accumulated wealth if all heads of households had graduated.
- ◆ More than \$310 billion would be added to the American economy by 2020 if students of color graduated at the same rate as white students.
- ◆ The American economy would see a combination of savings and revenue of more than \$7.7 billion in reduced crime spending and increased earnings each year if the male high school graduation rate increased by just 5 percent.

education. The high school diploma was the missing link, because they knew they could attend community college at night,” says Hochberg.

When he learned that the school didn’t receive extra funding for these students—they weren’t even counted in the state’s attendance system because they weren’t there for morning roll call—he pursued a bill to allow schools to count nontraditional students in dropout recovery programs.

“Kids who receive a high school diploma, rather than a GED, are getting real courses and real coursework,” say Hochberg. “We heard from industry that they’d much rather have an employee who finished high school than one with a GED. Also, these kids are much more likely to be successful in college.”

**CHECK OUT** NCSSL research on high school graduation rates, dropouts, and state-by-state report cards at [www.ncsl.org/magazine](http://www.ncsl.org/magazine).