

Introduction

Graduation rates have become a prominent feature in the landscape of high school reform and within the larger world of educational policy. Studies conducted over the past several years have repeatedly demonstrated that far fewer American students are completing high school with diplomas than had previously been realized. Whereas the conventional wisdom had long placed the graduation rate around 85 percent, a growing consensus has emerged that only about seven in 10 students are actually successfully finishing high school. Graduation rates are even lower among certain student populations, particularly racial and ethnic minorities and males.

That same conventional wisdom also suggests that the type of community in which a student lives and attends school will exert a strong and pervasive influence on a variety of educational outcomes. This connection between place and performance applies to both the experiences of individual students and the collective performance of schools and school systems. Striking differences between schools situated in urban and suburban environments, for instance, have frequently been documented in the area of tested achievement. An analysis by the EPE Research Center also shows that high school graduation rates are 15 percentage points lower in the nation's urban schools when compared with those located in the suburbs. Despite the acknowledged importance of such contextual factors, apart from attention to broad national-level patterns, there has been limited detailed investigation into the connection between where a young person lives and his or her chances of graduating from high school.

This report takes a geographically-informed approach to the issue of high school completion. Specifically, we examine graduation rates in the school districts serving the nation's 50 most-populous cities as well as the larger metropolitan areas in which they are situated. Results show that graduation rates are considerably lower in the nation's largest cities than they are in the average urban locale. Further, extreme disparities emerge in a number of the country's largest metropolitan areas, where students served by suburban systems may be twice as likely as their urban peers to graduate from high school.

Figure 1: National High School Graduation Rates, 2003-04

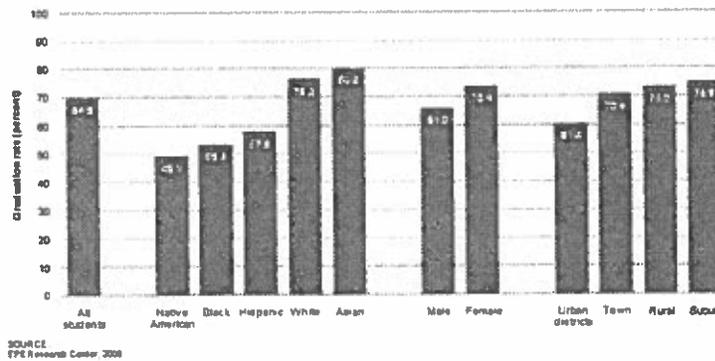


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