

## *Every Student Counts Act* Summary

In 2001, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) with bipartisan support because of the consensus that the nation needed to close the achievement gaps that existed between students of differing racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds, and that schools should be held accountable for the success of all students. NCLB held the promise of ending what was coined “the soft bigotry of low expectations.”

Unfortunately, the soft bigotry of low expectations persists unabated in the nation’s high schools. Recent estimates demonstrate that, nationally, one-third of our students leave high school without a diploma; that’s about 1.23 million each year or 7,000 each school day. There are large “graduation gaps” between racial groups; about half of American Indian students and black students and 60 percent of Hispanic students graduate on time with a regular diploma, compared with more than three quarters of their white and Asian counterparts.

Graduation rates are a fundamental indicator of whether or not the nation’s public school system is doing what it is intended to do: enroll, engage, and educate youth to be productive members of society. In today’s increasingly competitive global economy, graduating from high school is more critical than ever to securing a good job and a promising future. Since an estimated 85 percent of current jobs and almost 90 percent of the fastest-growing and best-paying jobs now require some postsecondary education, a high school diploma and the skills to succeed in college and the workplace are essential. High school dropouts often have trouble finding stable, well-paying jobs. Individuals with less education are generally less healthy, die earlier, and are more likely to become parents when very young. Dropouts are also more at risk of becoming embroiled in the criminal justice system, or of needing social welfare assistance.

Schools, districts, and states have a responsibility to accurately measure and report graduation rates for all students, and an obligation to significantly progress towards the goal of having all students graduate high school prepared for college and work. Unfortunately, unacceptably low graduation rates have been obscured and accepted for far too long due to inaccurate data, misleading calculations and reporting, and flawed accountability systems

In drafting NCLB, Congress recognized that holding schools accountable for their test scores could create perverse incentives to “push out” low-performing students and intended for high schools to also meet graduation goals to make AYP. Unfortunately, there are three significant flaws in NCLB (as written and implemented) that undermine the intention of the law and weaken the role of graduation rates in both accountability for student success and as a tool for identifying low-performing high schools and targeting support and interventions.

- NCLB has permitted the use of inconsistent and misleading graduation rate calculations that overestimate graduation rates.
- NCLB does not require meaningful increases of graduation rates over time.
- NCLB does not require the disaggregated graduation rates of student subgroups to increase as part of AYP determinations.

To remedy these significant problems, the *Every Student Counts Act*:

- Builds on the National Governors Association’s Graduation Rate Compact, originally signed in 2005 by all fifty of the nation’s governors, to ensure the use of accurate and consistent measurements for high school graduation for reporting and accountability purposes.
- Gives schools credit for graduating students who need extra time by allowing increases in both the four-year and five-year graduation rates to count towards achieving AYP.
- Ensures that schools are held accountable for increasing the graduation rates of all students by requiring graduation rates to be disaggregated for both reporting and accountability purposes.
- Mirrors the mounting support for “growth models” of accountability by setting annual benchmarks as a specified increase from current graduation rates.
- Reflects existing research by setting meaningful annual goals based on rates of improvement that have been achieved in successful high schools.