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The Graduation Gap: Using Promoting Power to Examine the Number and Characteristics of High Schools with High and Low Graduation Rates in the Nation and Each State

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President Bush's High School Initiative and the National Governors Association's Redesigning the American High School initiative are focusing national and state leaders on the urgent need to improve America's high schools.

For high school reform efforts to succeed on a broad scale it is necessary to accurately identify the size and characteristics of the **Graduation Gap** -- the difference between existing graduation rates in each state's high schools and the levels needed to meet the economic and social challenges of the 21st century. It is also essential to identify which high schools produce the majority of each state's dropouts, so these schools can be targeted for intensive research-based interventions and increased support.

Once these two facts are understood, it will be possible to estimate the level and type of resources needed to provide every community with a high school that is equipped and able to educate and graduate all its students.

Because graduation rate data are reported differently by each state, there is no common data available on graduation rates at the school level. Thus, it is not possible to use a common graduation measure to establish how many schools, of what type, in which locales in each state currently have high or low graduation rates.

It is possible, however, to use promoting power data that compare 12th-grade enrollments to 9th-grade enrollments four years earlier to estimate graduation rates for nearly all public high schools in the nation. (For details, see the Technical Note section of the Graduating Gap website- www.csos.jhu.edu/gradgap.) This enables the identification of the number of high schools in each state with high and low graduation rates, and an examination of their key demographic characteristics.

Key National Findings

- Only about 20% of high school students in the United States are likely to attend high schools with exemplary graduation rates (90% or higher).
- Another 20% of high school students in the United States are likely to attend high schools with very low graduation rates (60% or lower). These are the high schools that produce close to half of the nation's dropouts.

- Nearly 90% of high schools with very low graduation rates educate large numbers of low-income students. However, only about one-quarter of these schools currently receives Title 1 funds.
- The nation's minority students are four times more likely to attend a high school with very low graduation rates and three times less likely to attend a high school with very high graduation rates than the nation's non-minority students.
- The largest number of high schools with very low graduation rates is located in the nation's cities (around 900), but there are also close to 800 high schools in towns and rural areas with very low graduation rates.
- High schools with very low graduation rates come in all sizes-there are more than 250 small high schools (less than 300 students) and 300 large high schools (more than 2,000 students) with very low graduation rates.

Key State-level Findings

- There are only six states in which most high schools have graduation rates of 90% or higher. This means that the majority of high schools in nearly all states will need to significantly improve their graduation rates if states set graduation goals of 90% or higher for their high schools.
- There is considerable variation across states in the location of high schools with high and low graduation rates. In Northern states high schools with high graduation rates are found throughout the state, while those with very low graduation rates are typically concentrated in cities. In Southern and Southwestern states, high schools with both high and low graduation rates are found throughout the state's urban, suburban, and rural areas.
- Every state has at least several high schools with very low graduation rates (60% or less). Seven states likely have more than 100 such schools (both Texas and Florida have more than 200). Twenty-six states have 20 or more high schools with very low graduation rates.

A state summary table, individual state profiles, and more information about promoting power may also be viewed and downloaded from the Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools website, www.csos.jhu.edu/gradgap. Data for individual schools are available by request and can be obtained by e-mailing Robert Balfanz at rbalfanz@csos.jhu.edu

