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Contact: Becky Powell
(202) 403-6843

Maggie Monrad
(202) 403-6828

National High School Center Issue Brief Outlines the Need for Better High School Dropout Data and More Accurate Graduation Rates

[“State Approaches to More Reliable and Uniform Dropout and Graduation Data,”](#) a newly released issue brief by the National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research, outlines the immediate need for more accurate dropout and graduation data.

High school students are dropping out at alarming rates every day across the country. There is urgency for obtaining more accurate, consistent, and timely data to analyze who is dropping out and the reasons contributing to these life-altering decisions so that more targeted support can be offered. The brief outlines how these data are needed to track dropout trends and patterns, as well as how to direct resources and develop effective strategies to ensure that more students receive a high school diploma.

“Having comprehensive, longitudinal data systems that track individual students over time is a critical tool in preventing high school dropout,” commented Joseph Harris, Director of the National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research. “The ability to access unique student identifiers to track early warning indicators, such as attendance, course selections, and academic progress in a central location allows educators to identify those students who need additional assistance and/or are on the verge of dropping out.”

Significant progress has been made in streamlining the process of implementing a universal graduation formula for capturing accurate graduation rates, yet less work has been done in capturing reliable dropout rates. States currently use different approaches for calculating both graduation and dropout rates. The issue brief reports on two prominent methods for calculating graduation rates: the National Governors Association’s endorsed longitudinal approach and the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR). Comparisons of state reported graduation rates and the AFGR rates for 39 states for the 2003–2004 academic year are also provided in the brief.

States must implement a consistent and reliable method for calculating graduation rates as well as dropout rates. Further, it is essential that the two rates are calculated independently as dropout rates do not directly translate into graduation rates due to variables, such as mobility and/or students being retained that can alter the counts. In order to achieve accurate readings that can be adjusted based on actual transfers in and out of school, it is critical that states put in place accessible, longitudinal data systems to monitor individual students over time.

The brief, available on the [National High School Center Web site](#), provides a snapshot of work currently underway and offers key take-aways for states.

About the National High School Center

The National High School Center (www.betterhighschools.org), established in 2005, serves as a central source of expertise on high school-related issues for the Regional Comprehensive Centers, a national network developed by the U.S. Department of Education. The National High School Center is housed at the American Institutes for Research, located in Washington, DC. Subcontractors include Learning Point Associates, MDRC, the National Center for Educational Accountability, and WestEd.

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