



Week of Nov. 26-30, 2012

No More Excuses for California

By UCLA IDEA

The U.S. Department of Education released data on Monday that for the first time used a common measure allowing for state-by-state comparisons. Not surprisingly, in yet another national measure, California ranks in the bottom half of states.

But wait. We interrupt our grim-news reporting for a few rays of optimism. Some economic analysts are seeing the initial stages of California's economic recovery. Along with the easing of the overall economic crisis, a recovery could open significant benefits to k-12 education from Proposition 98. Then, too, voters did pass Prop 30. And California has a legislative super-majority that is of the same party as its education-friendly governor, which bodes well for coherent and decisive education support.

And now, back to the grim news that continues to underscore the damage that California's inadequate and inequitable school funding has done to student learning, the economy, and social justice.

In the new national data, California ranked 32nd among states with a 76-percent graduation rate among a four-year cohort that graduated in 2010-11. Iowa set the bar with an 88-percent graduation rate, while Nevada recorded 62 percent.

As was the case across the nation, California has graduation gaps between racial groups. Asian and white student graduation rates were 89 percent and 85 percent whereas 70 percent of Latino students and 63 percent of African Americans graduated. Substantial gaps also exist between graduation rates in the state's most affluent districts and those with the highest proportion of low-income students. Palo Alto and Palos Verdes Peninsula boast graduation rates of over 90 percent, while Oakland, Compton, and Lynwood have graduation rates below 60 percent.

The national data reveal that almost a quarter of California's class of 2011 (or about 119,000 students) did not graduate in four years. A small number of these students eventually will earn a high school diploma or GED. But, the vast majority will not graduate from high school and be labeled dropouts. Fully addressing this challenge will require Herculean efforts, but initial and substantial improvements in the graduation rates can be made quickly if there is the public will.

There certainly are ample reasons for California's public to address the state's dropout problem. Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed than graduates, and they are more likely to be among the "working poor." The California Dropout Research Project calculates that over two-thirds of high school dropouts are likely to use food stamps, and the probability of incarceration for a black male dropout is 60 percent. The Foundation for Educational Choice reported that dropouts earn an average of \$8,000 to \$16,000 less per year. Taken as a group, the California students who did not graduate in

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THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Nov. 26-30, 2012

Page 2

2011 lost something on the order of \$1 billion in potential earnings—a substantial annual loss for these young people, their communities, and the state's tax base.

These new and comprehensive data from the Department of Education and other entities are important because they can “help states target support to ensure more students graduate on time, college and career ready,” said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. The California Dropout Research Project concurs, and also recommends examining requirements for graduation requirements, implementing reform strategies in middle schools, and investing in proven dropout prevention programs and strategies, particularly those targeting low-income and disadvantaged students. Districts should mobilize communities and partner with outside organizations, and schools should ensure that classroom learning connects to the real world so as to keep students engaged.

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