

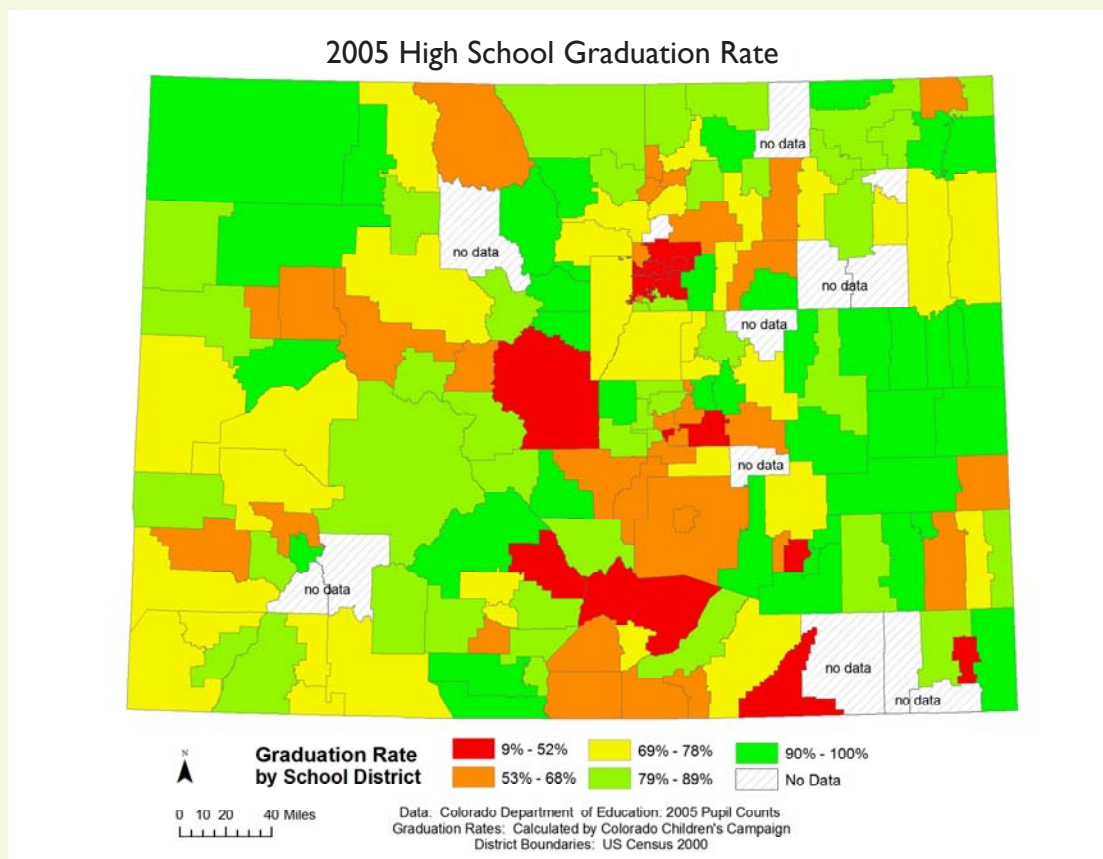
THE GRADUATION GAP IN COLORADO

WHO IS MOST LIKELY TO GRADUATE HIGH SCHOOL IN COLORADO?

For young adults in Colorado, graduating high school is key to a successful future both personally and as contributing members of society. Based on 2004 data from the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), the Colorado Children's Campaign calculates that Colorado had a high school graduation rate of 70 percent.¹ This means that each year 16,333 students do not graduate on time. Failure to graduate represents a staggering loss in human potential for Colorado and the nation. One analysis estimated that the lost earning potential due to students not graduating from high school costs Colorado 3.4 billion dollars per year.²

Low graduation rates are not just an urban problem concentrated in the Denver-metro region. While the causes of and responses to low graduation rates will vary across the state, this is a statewide issue. Districts in rural, urban, and suburban settings all have graduation rates that are unacceptably low.

Figure 1. 2005 Graduation Rates.³



¹ Data Source: Colorado Department of Education. Fall 2000, and 2004 Pupil Count <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/download/pdf/2000PM/2000PMByCountyDistEth.PDF> <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/download/spreadsheet/2004PMSchools2/WebSchool2/AllSchools.xls>. These rates were calculated by the Colorado Children's Campaign by estimating the proportion of 9th graders enrolled in Colorado public high schools in the fall of 2000 who graduated with their class in the spring of 2004. This number was estimated by dividing the number of 2004 graduates for boys and girls of each ethnicity by the 9th grade pupil count in October 2000, and adjusting for the change in district population for each of these groups over time. This method may slightly underestimate graduation rates because the number of 9th graders appears larger than it should be because students are more likely to be retained in 9th grade than in other grades. Based on similar analyses conducted with other data sets, such as those previously calculated by CDE, this effect averages about 4 percent.

² Donnell-Kay Foundation, Colorado Children's Campaign (2005 or 2006 date not provided). "The High Cost of Not Graduating High School" brief. Data Source: Colorado Department of Education. Fall 2004 Pupil Count <http://www.cde.state.co.us/>

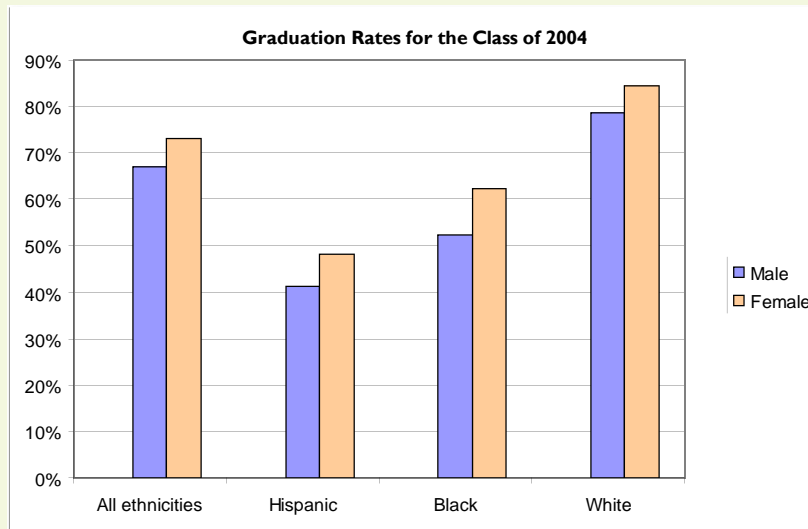
³ Data Source: Colorado Department of Education. Fall 2005 Pupil Count <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/download/spreadsheet/2005PM/DISTRICT/05PercentMinority.xls/>

GRADUATION GAP

In Colorado, graduation rates vary consistently between racial groups and by gender. White females are the most likely to graduate and Hispanic males are the least likely. Black students have the largest gap between boys and girls. The graduation gap between all girls and boys is about six percentage points.

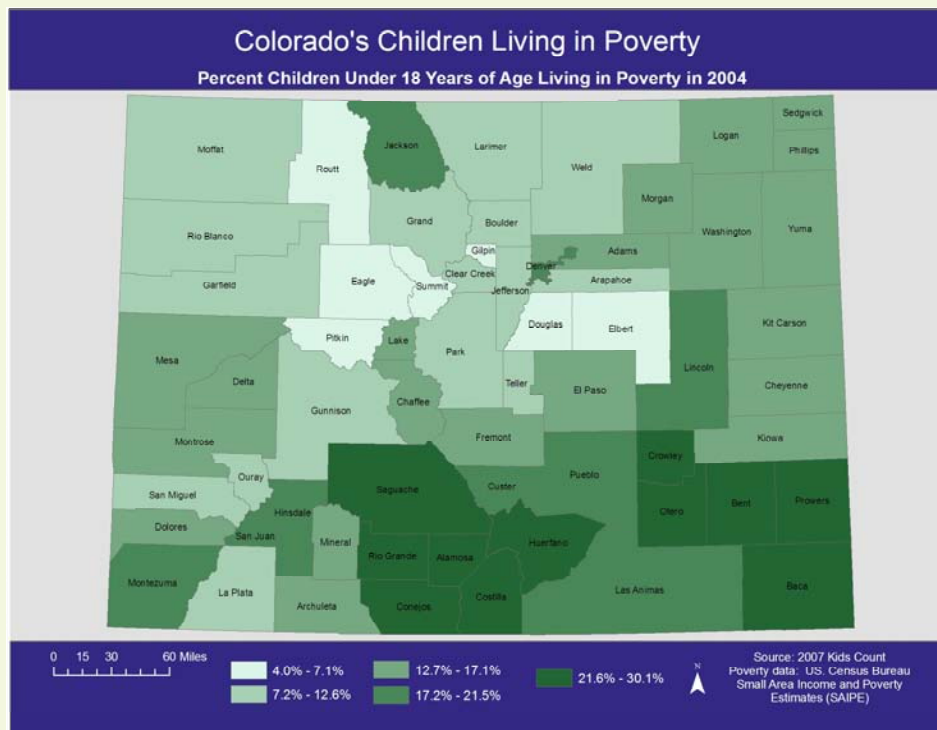
While ethnic minority students are disproportionately represented among students who fail to graduate on time, in terms of total numbers of students, white students represent the largest group of students not graduating high school. In 2000, approximately 42,000 white students represented 63.5 percent of the state's 9th-grade enrollment. More than 8,000 of these students did not graduate from high school on time.

Table 1. Graduation Rates by Gender and Ethnicity for the Class of 2004.⁴



Disadvantaged students in all districts, including blacks, Hispanics, and those living in poverty, are less likely to graduate than their more advantaged counterparts.

Figure 2. 2004 Children Under 18 Living in Poverty by County

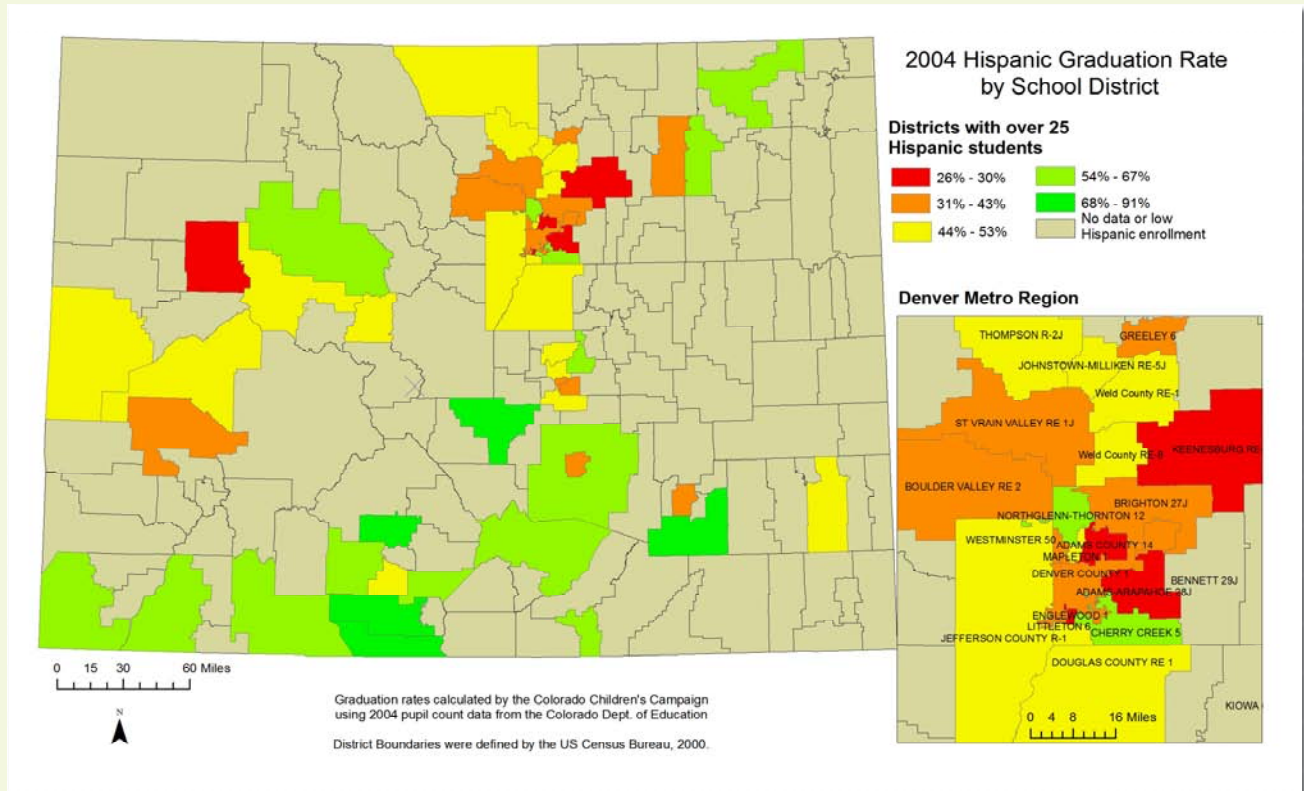


⁴ Data Source: Colorado Department of Education. Fall 2004 Pupil Count <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/download/spreadsheet/2004PMSchools2/WebSchool2/AllSchools.xls>.

DISTRICT DIFFERENCES

The graduation rates vary from district to district. For example, the following map illustrates Hispanic graduation rates in the 55 school districts that enroll more than 25 9th graders. Districts with small Hispanic student populations, appearing below with no data, collectively serve approximately 650 Hispanic students, or 5 percent of the state's total.

Figure 3. 2004 Hispanic Student Graduation Rates



SUMMARY

The method used to calculate graduation rates here may produce different results from calculations using other methods. However, irrespective of the minor variation that can come with different calculation methods, the methods produce substantially similar conclusions. Any variation should not lessen the need to address the issue.⁵

The number of students not graduating from high school creates a statewide crisis that exacts a huge cost on individuals, families, local communities, and the economy.

- Graduation rate problems exist statewide, in rural and suburban regions, as well as urban.
- Graduation rates are consistently lower for males than females, and this disparity is larger when race is included.
- Minority students graduate less frequently than non-minority students.
- Economically disadvantaged students graduate less frequently than their more affluent peers.



ISSUES TO CONSIDER

- To address the dropout problem, Colorado should identify students who need help and establish and replicate programs that keep kids in school and on track. Several strategies for decreasing dropout rates and improving graduation rates include:
 - Improving the preparation and selection of high-quality school leaders;
 - Enhancing teachers' abilities to create caring, culturally responsive classrooms while maintaining high academic expectations;
 - Creating smaller high schools with diverse student populations; and
 - Focusing on accountability and high expectations, including post-graduation plans.
- What data and reporting systems could help identify students in need of assistance, evaluate programs that serve them, and build public understanding of the scale of the problem we face? Is the data we need available to take action? Who needs that data, and when is it needed?
- While starting with young children takes time to show results, early childhood education is a research-based method proven to improve graduation rates.⁶ Should focus be on the long term-strategy of high-quality early childhood education?
- An effective response to increase Colorado's high school graduation rate should be grounded in the student's educational needs. While ethnic minority, poor and male students are more likely to dropout of high school, simply recognizing their gender or ethnicity will not address the diverse educational circumstances of those students or the reasons why those students fail to complete high school on time.
- Students fail to complete high school for a wide variety of reasons. Schools and districts that anticipate these needs and life circumstances will be more effective in engaging and graduating students. Circumstances that contribute to dropping out include:
 - Work schedules that conflict with school calendars;
 - Being overage but under credited;
 - Lack of connection between academic content and postsecondary work or schooling;
 - Boredom; and
 - Absence of settings that serve students who have been out of school for awhile, among other reasons.⁷

⁵ There are a variety of methods for calculating graduation rates, which makes comparisons between different data sources and reporting agencies difficult. Reporting errors, adjustments for student enrollment increase or decline, accounting for transfers and GED or alternative completers, complicate accurate reporting further. The statistical methods for calculating graduation rates vary from very simple to quite complex. Some variation in results for different methods is to be expected. For more information on calculating graduation rates, see the report by the Children's Campaign:

⁶ The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40, Schweinhart, Lawrence J., Ph.D., High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2004, www.highscope.org; The Carolina Abecedarian Project, <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/> This study does not specifically mention high school graduation – it found that participating children completed more years of education and were more likely to go on to college.

⁷ "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts" (March 2006) <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/ed/TheSilentEpidemic3-06FINAL.pdf> and <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/ed/edwhitepaper.pdf>



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