

## Ten Things to Know About Public High Schools and 'Dropout Factories'

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Education Secretary Arne Duncan believes we have what amounts to a "once-in-a-couple-of-generations opportunity" to "push a very, very strong reform agenda" for the nation's schools. His view is based, in part, on the Obama administration's intention to spend billions of additional dollars on public education, though Duncan acknowledges that money alone is not the answer. He also says the country has arrived at a moment when we have the necessary political will to make tough changes

Not least of the problems that must be addressed can be found in America's high schools, where, Duncan said in a speech last week, "Our expectations for our teenagers in this country are far too low."

In fact, change has never come easily to America's approximately 23,800 public high schools. Since the alarming report *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983, we have had "wave after wave of reform" - and little progress, according to **Ron Haskins** of the Brookings Institution.

Among the problems: easing the transition into ninth grade, raising retention rates, and preparing teens for college and/or work. "Our high schools are not organized for today's student," Cindy Brown, of the Center for American Progress, told Politics Daily. "Too many kids are surrounded by technology. (They're) getting information in much more diverse ways" than from a teacher standing in front of a class. "So we need to rethink the ways we're doing high school."

Although many states have upgraded their high school curriculum, resetting the focus on academics and accountability, the consensus among educators is that our secondary schools "are not doing the job they need to do at all," Brown added.

The snapshot below of U.S. high schools and high-school students is loosely drawn from "Can the American High School Become an Avenue of Advancement for All?" an essay by Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University. It offers a somewhat contradictory view of their performance. All figures are from current studies.

1. One in four U.S. public high school students drop out before graduating.
2. About 15 percent of the nation's public high schools produce more than half of its dropouts and 75 percent of its minority dropouts, according to the Everyone Graduates Center.
3. The nation's 2,026 "dropout factories," where 40 percent of the freshman class fail to graduate three years later, are found in every state but are concentrated in 17 Midwestern, Northern-industrial, Southern, and Southwestern states, as well as in California.
4. In 2006, America's 15-year-olds scored just ahead of the Slovak Republic and Lithuania in science literacy and on par with Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation in math literacy.
5. More than half of the 81,499 U.S. high school students participating in the 2006 High School Survey of Student Engagement said they spend one hour or less each week reading and studying outside of class.

6. At least 95 percent of students entering high school from the wealthiest communities are proficient in their eighth-grade state exams; in high-poverty, inner-city schools, less than 20 percent of students are proficient, usually possessing fifth- or sixth-grade math and reading skills.

7. Of the class of 2008, 15.2 percent took an Advanced Placement exam and scored a 3 or above—the scores typically required by a college for credit—up from 12.2 percent in 2003. Low-income students made up 13.4 percent of successful examinees, up from 9.8 percent, in five years.

8. Eighty-seven percent of high-school seniors surveyed by the U.S. Department of Education said they expected to go to college. Three-quarters of graduates enroll in college within two years.

9. Approximately 40 percent of college students take remedial courses.

10. The college graduation rate for low-income students is less than 10 percent.

Of course there are pockets of success. Referring to the U.S. education system broadly, Duncan told his audience of educators and reporters, "All of the answers are out there. Adult dysfunction has been at the heart" of the nation's educational ills.

**But experts on a Brookings panel last week sounded a more skeptical note about high schools, suggesting the evidence of what works is scant and that we should expect to build on "modest positive effects" rather than to find "a silver bullet."**

Still, there's reason for optimism. The good news, one panel member said, is that "people still believe high school improvement is worth investing in." And, the president is poised to do just that. Obama's 2010 budget request includes a High School Graduation Initiative funded at \$50 billion, \$43.5 billion to fund an Advanced Placement incentive and test fees, and \$1.5 billion in Title I grants to turn around low-performing schools.

We have to challenge ourselves to raise the bar, Duncan said. "And I promise you that if we do, our (high school) students will rise to that challenge."