

Leaving school ready to succeed is the next important opportunity gateway. For much of the last century, so long as you were a loyal employee and worked hard, it was possible to get and keep a good paying job that had decent benefits even if you did not have a high school diploma. Those days are gone.

Today, the successful completion of high school is virtually indispensable to one's prospects for success. Even so, the earnings of those with only a high school diploma have declined in recent years. In fact, today the greatest value of a high school diploma—and the skills and knowledge the credential represents—is the opportunity it provides to pursue further education and training. It is postsecondary education and training that now open doors to most good jobs with adequate benefits.





Indicators

We have chosen three indicators to measure whether Coloradans are leaving high school ready to succeed: 1) high school completion rates; 2) math proficiency in the 10th grade; and 3) ACT scores in the 11th grade. These are important because:

- While not as valuable as it once was, the high school diploma still matters when it comes to wages.¹
- Math achievement in middle and high school has been shown to be a good predictor of whether a student will go on to further education and training.
- The ACT is valuable not only as a gauge of what a student has learned, but also as an indicator of how well a student might do in the postsecondary education and training system.

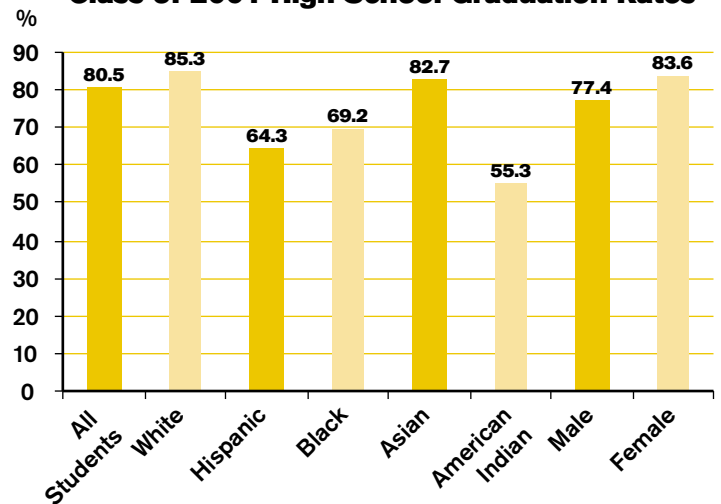
Indicator 1: High School Completion

■ Approximately 9,500 students who once were part of the class of 2001 left school between seventh grade and their senior year in high school and, by the spring of 2001, had

not received a diploma. The cumulative effect of the drop out rate for each graduating class is that more than 340,000 Coloradans over the age of 25 lack a high school diploma or a GED.² This rate has not changed appreciably over the past ten years.

In 2001, one out of every five students failed to complete high school in Colorado. One of every three Black and Hispanic students and two of every five American Indians failed to complete high school.

Class of 2001 High School Graduation Rates³



The general assembly hereby declares that the drop out rate indicates a waste of economic and human potential.

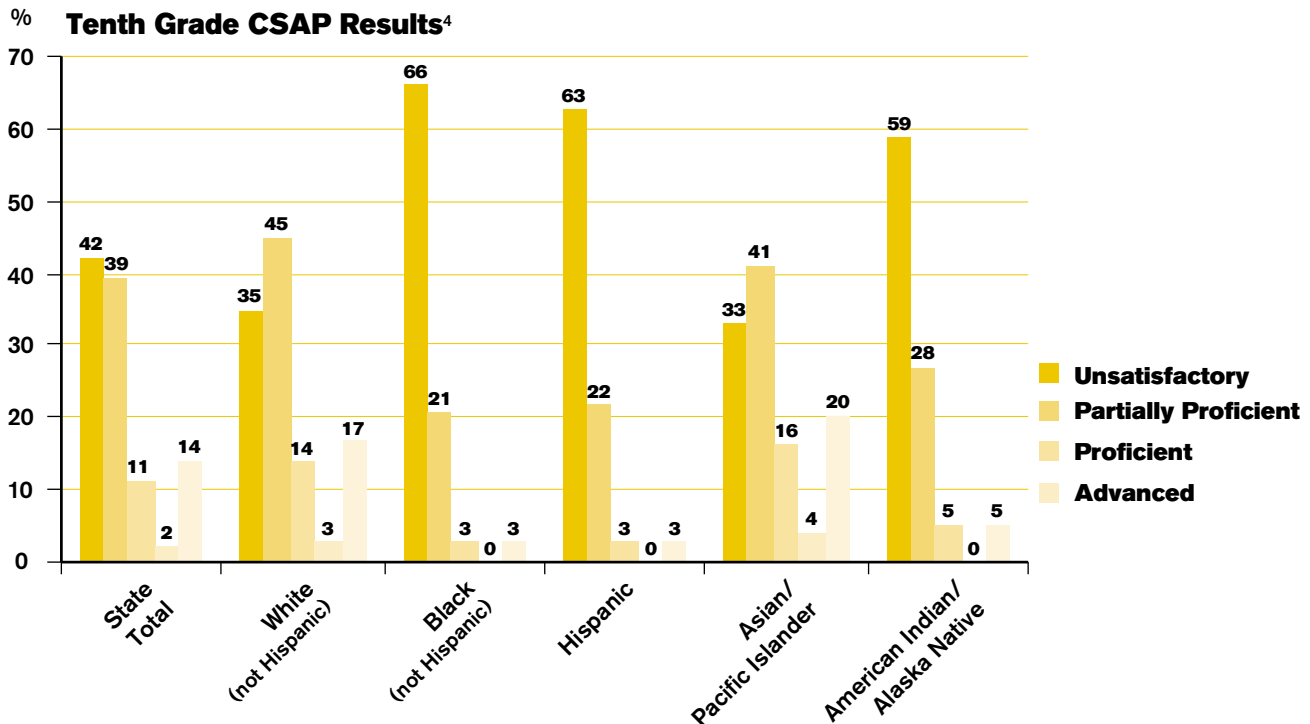
—Colorado Public Law 22-2-114.1

Indicator 2: Math Proficiency in 10th Grade

While it is vitally important to at least complete high school, how much you learn in the process also makes a difference in terms of later opportunities.

■ While the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) results for reading in fourth grade were not good, the math results for 10th-graders are even worse. Overall, 42% of students statewide were rated unsatisfactory and only 14% either proficient or advanced.

■ There is a significant achievement gap between White and Asian 10th-graders and their Black, Hispanic and American Indian peers. Two-thirds of all Black students were rated unsatisfactory. Only 3% of Black and Hispanic students were at the proficient level.





In 2001, only 14% of Colorado 10th-graders were rated proficient in math based on CSAP results. Even worse, about two-thirds of all Black and Hispanic 10th-graders were rated unsatisfactory, the lowest rating possible.

Indicator 3: Performance on the ACT College Entrance Exam

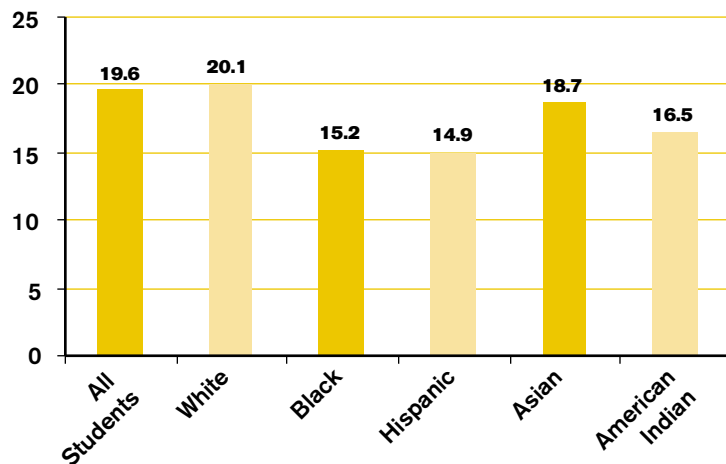
Our third indicator is performance on the ACT college entrance exam, which all 11th-graders are required to take.

■ Nationally, the average score on the ACT for students who take the exam voluntarily (typically in their senior year as part of the college application process) is 21. The maximum score possible is 36.

■ On average, Black and Hispanic students in Colorado score well below the national cutoff score for the lowest quartile of test takers—17.5.⁶ Research has found that students with composite ACT scores below 17 are usually only eligible to attend “open” colleges and universities (i.e. those that admit all applicants).⁷

Why is finishing high school with a diploma and strong skills important to the Cycle of Opportunity?

% **2001 ACT Testing Results for 11th-Graders⁵**



■ Dropping out of school has a direct impact on an individual's ability to get a job that pays good wages and provides health and other benefits.

■ It is very difficult for people without high school diplomas to gain access to postsecondary education and training programs, because they often do not meet entrance requirements and are not eligible

Gateway 5 | Leaving High School with a Diploma and the Skills to Succeed

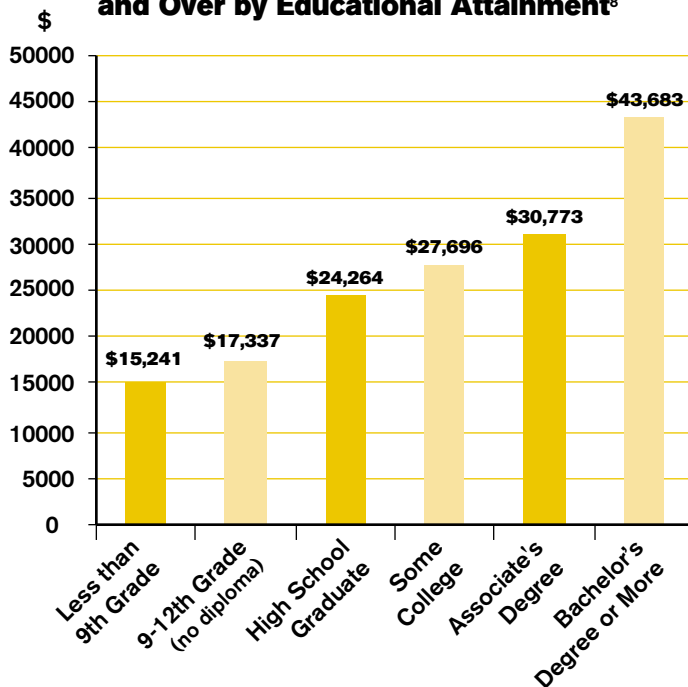
for financial assistance.

■ It is clear from the 10th-grade CSAP math results and 11th-grade ACT scores that even among those students who graduate, especially those from minority groups, a large number lack the skills to get good paying jobs or to continue their education and training.

■ In 2000, 20.6 % of all infants—13,490 babies—were born to mothers with less than a high school diploma.⁹ Not only are these children born to parents with low earning potential, but earlier in this report we also provided evidence that a mother's level of educational attainment is a strong predictor of her child's school readiness and literacy development.

■ 33% of all adults in Colorado with less than 12 years of education are smokers, as compared to 15% of those with more than 12 years of education.¹⁰

Median Earnings of Adults Age 25 and Over by Educational Attainment⁸



How do other gateways and barriers impact whether a young person will graduate from high school?

■ Those who work with young people who are at risk of dropping out or have researched this issue commonly observe that leaving school is not a dramatic event, but a process that begins in elementary school and culminates years later. School readiness, early proficiency in reading, and competency in math and science in the middle grades—each a gateway to opportunity—are all strong predictors of a student's later success in school and likelihood of graduating.





Dropping out of school is a slow-motion dive for most kids, and we can see them approaching the edge long before they fall off...

–Gary Orfield, Harvard University¹¹

■ Teen pregnancy is a significant cause of girls leaving school before they graduate. Conversely, pregnancy is more common among girls who have dropped out of school. A recent study showed that increased educational attainment reduces the likelihood of a teen pregnancy.¹²

■ Students from poor families, especially those who live in inner city neighborhoods, are more likely to drop out of school.

What are some of the state programs designed to increase student retention, graduation rates and learning?

There has been much more attention at the national and state level on improved learning in the elementary grades compared to the middle and high school grades. As a result, there is **not** a great deal of activity at the state level focused on keeping older

students in school and ensuring they are mastering the core curriculum.

■ The only statewide program aimed at reducing the number of dropouts is The Expelled and At-Risk Student Services Grants Program,¹³ which gives grants to schools and other organizations to help them provide educational services to students who are at-risk of dropping out or who have already dropped out. Funds are awarded on a competitive basis to schools and other organizations across the state and are targeted at providing educational, vocational, social and emotional support to students so they will remain in or return to school.

■ The Colorado Small High Schools Initiative (CSHSI)¹⁴ is a private-public partnership designed to help underachieving students in large, comprehensive high schools. CSHSI is operated by the Colorado Children's Campaign, and the bulk of its funding (\$8 million) comes from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The project aims to create smaller high schools either by breaking existing, large facilities into "schools within a school" or by developing new schools from scratch. In addition to focusing on school size, the project attempts to instill certain guiding principles, such as personalized relationships

between students and adults, a clear educational focus and high expectations for student work.

What else could Colorado do to increase the number of students who complete high school?

While there are no “silver bullets” to solve this problem, there do appear to be promising practices for retaining students. These tend to fall into three categories:

- **Organizational.** One approach already mentioned involves breaking large, depersonalized middle and high schools into “schools within schools.” These smaller organizations allow for stronger relationships between teachers and students and provide more opportunities for students to get involved in extracurricular activities.
- **Curricular and Instructional Innovations.** Rather than diverting poorly prepared middle and high school students into low-level and remedial programs, schools should carve out extra time for core curriculum learning; offer extra learning time outside of

the regular school schedule; present curriculum in a context that is relevant to students; and accelerate—not slow down—their exposure to challenging material.

- **Engaging the School Staff and Community.** To be successful, dropout prevention efforts must be planned and implemented with commitment, energy and enthusiasm. Teachers, administrators, parents, students and other relevant members of the immediate community must be deeply involved.

Based on what we know is effective, Colorado should:

- **Make improved high school performance a higher priority—get it on the public agenda.** The Colorado State Board of Education and the state legislature should appoint a task force to investigate the status of the state’s high school students—who is succeeding and who is not and why—and based on these findings, develop an action plan that is commensurate with the problem.
- **Address the fact that far too many Black and Hispanic students are not meeting minimal**





learning standards and dropping out of school at much too high a rate. Hispanic students are the fastest growing segment of Colorado’s student population. Dramatic action is required to avoid a loss of opportunity for these young people and the state. This will require looking at everything from the state’s school funding formula to attracting highly qualified teachers to the lowest performing schools. There are no easy answers.

■ **Use additional public and private dollars to expand the Small Schools Initiative currently funded by the Gates Foundation so that more schools across the state—at least those that have been rated as “unsatisfactory”—have an opportunity to design or redesign high schools.**

■ **Identify those schools that are doing a good job educating low-income students so they meet the state’s standards for proficiency.** Study these schools to identify effective educational practices that work for Colorado students. Use existing and new federal and state funds to implement these effective practices in low performing schools.

■ **Continue to expand “distance learning” high school course offerings so no students are denied**

the opportunity to take advanced courses because of where in the state they go to school. The state should create a scholarship fund to ensure that a lack of financial resources does not keep a student from taking an Advanced Placement exam.

Where can I get more information about succeeding at the high school level?

- Colorado Department of Education, Center for At-Risk Education, www.cde.state.co.us
- Colorado’s Small High School Initiative, Colorado Children’s Campaign, www.coloradokids.org
- The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, www.dropoutprevention.org
- America’s High Schools Project, U.S. Department of Education, www.ed.gov