



March 13, 2009

## Tennessee is tops in graduate rate gains

High school rate increase is best in U.S., climbing 11 percentage points

*By Natalia Mielczarek | THE TENNESSEAN  
and Jessica M. Pasko | ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Tennessee's high school graduation rate rose more than any other state's between 2002 and 2006 according to researchers at Johns Hopkins University.

The national graduation rate remained flat at about 75 percent, while a dozen states made substantial gains, they said.

A report released Thursday by the Baltimore university's Everyone Graduates Center found the largest gain was in Tennessee, where the rate rose from 61 percent to 72 percent in those years. New York's rate increased from 64 percent to 67 percent in the same time period.

Those two states produced the greatest number of additional graduates, with roughly 8,000 more students in each earning high school diplomas in 2006, said the center, which tries to develop strategies to help students graduate.

For Tennessee, "this is a significant increase; some states didn't make any gains," said Thomas C. West, co-author of the study. He's a senior analyst with the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

"We're very curious to see what's going on in Tennessee, how local schools and districts have contributed to it."

The report doesn't explore the reasons behind the gains.

States, including Tennessee, calculate graduation rates using different formulas from those applied in the study. Still, Tennessee education officials say their own numbers reflect the upward trend.

"The 11.2 percentage point increase, that's about two percentage points a year, which is about the type of gain we're continuing to show after 2006," said Rachel Woods, spokeswoman for the Tennessee Department of Education.

## Governor, teachers cited

In 2003, the Tennessee Board of Education set a target graduation rate of 90 percent by 2014. In 2008, the state's graduation rate was 82.3 percent. The board also aims to keep the state dropout rate to less than 10 percent, said Gary Nixon, the board's executive director.

Woods credited Gov. Phil Bredesen's focus on education and the hard work of local teachers. She said a number of "local on-the-ground programs" made a difference.

"By funneling more money into local schools, teachers are able to implement more interventions that students need if you're going to increase your graduation rate," she said.

One example in Nashville of such a program is the credit recovery that allows high-schoolers to take classes they had failed but that are required for graduation. The 75,000-student district's graduation rate went from 68.8 percent in 2006 to 72.6 percent last year, state numbers show.

Woods also said the federal No Child Left Behind law made a difference. Tennessee didn't calculate graduation rates until it was required by the initiative, Woods said.

"NCLB is good because of the level of accountability and scrutiny it puts on schools and districts. There's a vested interest to keep kids in schools and not let them drop out."

## Test results scrutinized

The state department of education has paid to train school districts to make better use of data that targets at-risk students, called the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System. The system uses standardized tests to determine which students are most likely to perform poorly in certain subjects or to drop out.

In Memphis, Shelby County schools implemented a policy called "zero is not an option" to teach students to strive for success. The system also created an in-school course recovery program to let students retake failed classes, purchased computer programs to aid learning and established after-school programs that have teachers mentor students.

"We don't wait for the child to fail and get discouraged," said Karen Woodard, Shelby County director of middle and high schools. "We remediate as we go along."

Graduation rates increased by 6.8 percentage points in Delaware (to 76 percent) and Kentucky (to 78 percent). Rounding out the list of states with substantial gains were South Dakota, Arkansas, Alabama, North Carolina, Hawaii, Missouri, Nebraska and New Hampshire.

The report comes just days after President Barack Obama's first major speech on education, in which he discussed reducing the high school dropout rate and pushing states to adopt more rigorous academic standards.

"One can look at the national data and get kind of depressed and think we're not improving, but we need to look at the fact that there are 12 states that did make significant improvements," said Robert Balfanz, co-director of the Everyone Graduates Center.

"But we're still clearly not putting enough resources and know-how behind this critical national problem."

---