

Pressure to Graduate Failing Students Is Felt Nationwide

D.C.'s Scandal and the Nationwide Problem of Fudging Graduation Numbers

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The headlines made a big splash, and yet they were strangely familiar: Another school system was reporting a higher graduation rate than it deserved.

The most recent scandal—in the District of Columbia—is just the latest example in a growing case file of school systems where investigators have uncovered bogus graduation-rate practices.

Those revelations have unleashed a wave of questions about the pressures and incentives built into U.S. high schools, and fueled nagging doubts that states' rising high school graduation rates—and the country's **current all-time-high rate of 84 percent**—aren't what they seem.

The newest round of reflections was triggered by **an investigation, ordered by the D.C. mayor's office**, that found that 34 percent of last year's senior class got diplomas even though they'd missed too much school to earn passing grades, or acquired too many credits through quick, online courses known as credit recovery. Only three months earlier, the school system **touted a 20-point rise in its graduation rate** over the last six years.

“It's been devastating,” said Cathy Reilly, the executive director of the Senior High Alliance of Parents, Principals, and Educators, a group that focuses on high school issues in the District of Columbia. “It's made people here feel that our graduation rate gains weren't real.”

A National Problem

Such revelations are hardly confined to the nation's capital. In the last few years, a federal audit found that **California and Alabama inflated their graduation rates** by counting students they shouldn't have counted. News media investigations showed that educators **persuaded low-performing students in Atlanta and Orlando, Fla.**, to transfer to private or alternative schools to eliminate a drag on their home schools' graduation rates.

The drumbeat of graduation-rate fudging has opened the door to renewed attacks on the pressures imposed on schools by accountability rules, particularly the high stakes that some systems attach to specific metrics. In the District of Columbia, for instance, high school teachers and principals are evaluated in part on how many students pass courses and graduate.

With those kinds of stakes, teachers can feel immense pressure to award passing grades to students who haven't earned them, a dilemma that intensifies in schools with high rates of chronic absenteeism and academically struggling students.

In a survey of 616 District of Columbia teachers conducted after the scandal broke, 47 percent said they'd felt pressured or coerced into giving grades that didn't accurately reflect what students had learned. Among high school teachers, that number rose to 60 percent. More than 2 in 10 said that their student grades or attendance data had been changed by someone else after teachers submitted them.

Scott Goldstein oversaw the survey as the founder of EmpowerEd, a year-old coalition of D.C. teachers that works to strengthen teacher leadership. To him, the results cry out for a new conversation about the “moral dilemmas” embedded in accountability systems that rely heavily on just a few metrics, like graduation rates.

“If you pass students [who haven't completed course requirements], you're leading them into a world they're unprepared for. But if you fail them, you're harming their lives in other ways,” said Goldstein, a social studies teacher at Roosevelt High School. Teachers' decisions should rest on a professional appraisal of student mastery, not on fear for their own jobs, he said.

In the wake of the scandal, D.C. school leaders have removed graduation and course-passing rates from principals' and teachers' 2017-18 evaluations.

Pressure From the Top Pressure to Graduate: Perspectives From Educators

"Our principal sent us a notice that said: 'I met with the superintendent yesterday about our academic progress...He made me aware that failure rates should be taken into consideration during the [evaluation] process. ... Please closely monitor your failure rates and ensure that all is being done for your students to keep those rates low.'

Our teachers can read between the lines."

—**John R. Tibbets**

"I have been pressured not to fail students who miss 20-plus of the 45 days in a quarter....My colleague was 'reminded' that we are a first-year school, and that it 'wouldn't look good'...if a large number of kids failed."

—**A teacher in a new alternative school**

"I will NEVER recommend a student pass any class who has not worked toward standard based, content mastery of any class. However, some teachers use inappropriate rigor and grading practices...It's sometimes hard for an administrator to challenge and claim a teacher [didn't meet] those standards, but this is a professional decision reserved for classroom teachers. At the end of the day, staff have to ensure they hold students to high expectations."

—**Jeremy W. Hurd**, principal of McLaughlin High School, McLaughlin, S.D.

Even in school systems that don't reward or penalize educators for their schools' accountability metrics, teachers can feel immense pressure from administrators on their grading practices.

In postings on social media, *Education Week* asked high school teachers if they'd ever felt pressure to give passing grades to students who hadn't done the work.

"Never mind high school. I feel that pressure in 3rd grade," said Annie, an elementary school teacher in central Virginia. She asked *Education Week* not to identify her so she could discuss sensitive issues.

She said her principal has cautioned her not to fail any student or recommend that they repeat a grade because she "doesn't want anyone to feel bad about not succeeding." When she gave a student a D recently, she was summoned to a meeting with the principal, Annie said.

"She was upset. She said, 'Why didn't you work harder to get the student to turn in missing work, or re-do work?' She sees a D as a teacher's failure. But I think it's a disservice to kids to give them grades they haven't earned."

John R. Tibbets, who teaches economics at Worth County High School in rural Sylvester, Ga., and is the state's 2018 teacher of the year, said his district's policy doesn't include course-failure rates in teachers' evaluations. But his principal recently sent teachers an email conveying word from their superintendent that "failure rates ... will be taken into consideration" in their evaluations anyway.

A Change of Approach

Tibbets said he would like to replace that "threatening" posture with a more collaborative one.

"If the superintendent is concerned with course-failure or graduation rates, what we really need is for him to have a conversation with teachers about what we need to do to improve, what policies we can implement," he said.

Education advocates who believe accountability can be a force for good worry that graduation-rate scandals could tarnish a tool that's important for shining a light on inequities and applying pressure for school improvement.

They hope, instead, that uncovering problems can spark a rebalancing of the pressures and supports built into accountability systems, and change school practice to respond better to issues like students' poor academic skills and chronic absenteeism.

“We shouldn’t stop paying attention to high school grad rates, or not have them in accountability systems,” said Michael Cohen, the president of Achieve, which works with states to raise academic expectations.

“The right response to all of this is to double down on efforts to support students, and to support teachers, early and consistently, so they’re not pressured to game the system and they can give kids what they need.”

Experts who study and track graduation rates acknowledge that in some places, the rates are inflated by cheating or inaccurate reporting. But they contend that those cases account for a tiny share of schools overall. Robert Balfanz, a Johns Hopkins University researcher who studies graduation rates, estimates that those cases account for 2 to 4 percentage points in the national graduation rate.

'Hard-Earned Gains' Are Real

John Bridgeland, the chief executive officer of Civic Enterprises, a think tank that examines graduation rates for the [annual “Grad Nation” reports](#), said his team has visited dozens of schools to find out what they’re doing to produce significant gains in their graduation rates.

In a few places, he said, he and his colleagues have had to shave 2 to 4 percentage points off the rates districts were reporting because they were improperly counting some types of students who shouldn’t be included, such as those who started home schooling in their junior year of high school.

But with few exceptions, Bridgeland said, his team has found that “the hard work” of better instruction and student support explains higher graduation rates.

“We need to call out the problems when gaming or cheating appears,” he said. “But at the same time, taking isolated examples of gaming the system and saying that high school grad rates are not real diminishes and undermines the many schools, districts, and states that have hard-earned gains and clear progress to showcase,” he said.

Those who study graduation-rate calculations point out that while they’re still imperfect, they’ve been much more reliable since 2008 when federal regulations began requiring all schools to calculate them the same way—the portion of each freshman class that earns regular diplomas four years later.

Balfanz said that more stringent calculation and reporting requirements “without a doubt” have been responsible for a very real rise in states’ graduation rates.

“People don’t remember the bad days before 2008, when schools were allowed to measure graduation rates however they wanted,” he said. “Kids dropped out, schools would code them as ‘whereabouts unknown,’ not as a dropout. No one knew, and no one cared. That wasn’t a good place. Accountability makes schools pay attention to a key outcome, like graduating our kids from high school.”

But even those experts acknowledge that there are still too many hidden variations in the way states report graduation-rate data. To get a more accurate understanding of schools’ graduation rates, they’ve quietly identified about a dozen variations that should be ferreted out and handled in uniform ways.

For example, even though federal rules don’t allow states to count summer graduates, or those who earn high school equivalency certificates, some still do. Some schools include summer graduates, or students in juvenile justice facilities. Others include teenagers who “transfer” into home schooling late in high school.