

The commentary was published in the *Indianapolis Recorder* March 25, 2005 p. A 11
file:///C:/Users/John/Downloads/INR-2005-03-25_01.pdf

MISLEADING GRADUATION RATES HURT BLACK CHILDREN

A February 17 *Indianapolis Star* editorial questioned Indiana graduation rate numbers. The 72 percent figure from the Manhattan Institute study disputed the 91 percent rate for 2002 claimed by the state. A February 27 *Star* commentary on the state dropout problem by State Senator Luke Messer mentioned that 3 major Indiana cities had a graduation rate of less than 50 percent. He noted one Indianapolis high school had a graduation rate of just over 10 percent. This was topped off by the recent governor's summit on education where Bill Gates called traditional high schools obsolete.

Indeed, Indiana's rate is worrisome, but what about the rates for black students? This study stated the national graduation rate for African-Americans as 56 percent. The Indiana rate was 52 percent.

According to a 2004 Harvard/Urban Institute study, "Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis," only 50 percent of all black students graduated from high school in 2001. The problem was even worse for black males at 43 percent. The 2001 Indiana graduation rate was 72.4 percent. The Indiana African-American rate was 53 percent. The total graduation rate for IPS was 30.6 percent; yet, IPS reported a 91.1 percent 2001 rate. Which is correct? This brings doubt to the IPS high school that claimed a 2004 graduation rate of 99 percent.

The above study also concluded that inaccurate and misleading graduation data hide problems from public view. Nationally, half or more of Black, Latino and Native American youth are getting left behind in a "hidden crisis" obscured by U.S. Department of Education regulations that "allow schools, districts, and states to all but eliminate graduation rate accountability for minority subgroups."

Recent Schott Foundation research, "Public Education and Black Male Students," noted the 2002 national graduation rate for black males was 41 percent. In Indiana, the rate was 39 percent. The IPS rate was 33 percent, and an astounding 23 percent for white males.

In a 2003 Johns Hopkins report, "Weak Promotion Power," schools with weak promotion power--schools in which the senior class has 50 percent or fewer students than the freshmen class four years earlier---were ranked by district. Throughout the 1990s, of the 100 largest, IPS was the only school district where all of its high schools had weak promotion power.

This point was iterated in, “Locating the Dropout Crisis.” Hopkins researchers flagged 2,000 high schools as “dropout factories.” In the study, between 1990 and 2002, other than Stockton, CA with 3 high schools, IPS was the only district in the nation where students had, and continue to have, no choice but to go to a dropout factory—a place where they have an outlandish 70-75 percent chance of not graduating!

This brings attention to this fact: our African-American community is misinformed as to the poor performance of Indiana and Indianapolis public schools. Lack of candor about the extent of our educational problems produces the most serious casualty of all: the minority students whose low graduation rates we are failing to admit. Blurring graduation rates feeds and perpetuates a growing underclass of citizen workers. African-American families must be told the truth. Indiana’s black community, education, and government leaders cannot begin to make sound decisions about problems with deceptive inflated statistics. Concealing the problem is tantamount to ignoring it.

Solutions? We must continue to raise concerns about existing measures and demand formulas that produce honest graduation rates. Also, IPS is breaking its large high schools into small learning communities that emphasize relationships. We must support this restructuring. The Black and Latino Policy Institute also recommends community support of the IPS/NUA reading program, reinventing special education, a culturally relevant curriculum, and democratic schools. As well, supporting the expansion or duplication of popular magnet programs while encouraging teachers, parents, and students to create small innovative schools can counter these disguised and alarming graduation rates.

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