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Measuring High School Graduation Rates: A Review of the Literature

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A Review of the Literature

Introduction

Research studies have reported findings that purported to show that there was a high school graduation "crisis" or "silent epidemic" in the US (Balfanz & Legters, 2001, 2004; Barnett & Greenough, 2000; Greene & Winters, 2005; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Swanson, 2004). An estimated 68% of all high school students graduated each year in the US while approximately a third dropped out (Swanson, 2004). For minority students, Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans, the graduation rate was even lower at approximately 50% (Swanson, 2004). These findings have not been disputed. Researchers have found, however, that graduation rates were even lower in large urban school districts and in many districts across the US (Swanson, 2004). Swanson found that New York City, Detroit, and Baltimore had graduation rates below 40%. Detroit, with the 11th largest school district, had the lowest graduation rate in the U.S. at 21.7%. Fourteen major urban school districts in the U.S. had graduation rates below 50%. Miami, Dallas, Denver, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Houston also had graduation rates below 50% (Swanson, 2004). The growing overall trend in research on graduation rates showed that the rate was much lower than the accepted national yearly average of 68%. Graduation rates have come under increased attention and scrutiny because of the accountability and yearly progress requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001).

In 2007, researchers found that many US high schools were "drop out factories" because their graduation rates were below 60% (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Balfanz and Legters found that "there are currently between 900 and 1,000 high schools in the country in which graduating is at

best a 50/50 proposition" and "half or more of high school students do not graduate" (p. 2). Almost 30 percent of all students entering high school in the U.S. never graduate (Greene & Winters, 2005).

Drop out rates were much higher for minority students which was termed "an invisible crisis" (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). Orfield et al. (2004) found the following regarding the minority drop out rate:

> Nationally, high school graduation rates are low for all students, with only an estimated 68% of those who enter 9th grade graduating with a regular diploma in12th grade. But, as the table below [Appendix A] makes clear, they are substantially lower for most minority groups, and particularly for males. According to the calculations used in this report, in 2001, only 50% of all black students, 51% of Native American students, and 53% of all Hispanic students graduated from high school. Black, Native American, and Hispanic males fare even worse: 43%, 47%, and 48% respectively. (p. 2)

These findings have been challenged and disputed (Kaufman, 2001; Mishel & Roy, 2006). Mishel and Roy found that graduation rates had increased steadily over the past 40 years. They argued that, based on their data, the claims of a graduation "crisis" were exaggerated and based on flawed and inaccurate data (Mishel & Roy, 2006, p. 11). They found that using enrollment and diploma data was inaccurate because it did not track students who transferred to another school or district (Mishel & Roy, 2006, p. 8). Mishel and Roy (2006) relied on actual student experiences and U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey (CPS) data of households, which was a more accurate procedure because it took into account those students who transferred.

Mishel and Roy relied on a U.S. Department of Education longitudinal study that tracked a nationally representative sample of 8th grade students beginning in the 1988 school year. That study found that 78% of the students graduated on time and that 83% eventually earned high school degrees or General Educational Development certificates (GED). The survey did not, however, differentiate between those students who received a high school diploma and those who received a GED. The limitation with their research was that relying on U.S. Census Bureau Population Survey data was not conclusive because many taking the survey exaggerated or gave incorrect answers. Many students who dropped out also were from low-income or poverty backgrounds and marginalized and who would be less likely to participate in the surveys. There was thus a coverage bias. The evidence was unreliable because the statements made in the study had not been factually verified and was thus anecdotal. Moreover, that study was outdated because the No Child Left behind Act (NCLBA, 2001) excluded GEDs in measuring graduation rates. Using a study from 1988 was also not conclusive because it ignored changes that had occurred since that time. The study suggested a trend that may or may not be present in 2007. Finally, the study Mishel and Roy relied on, the 1988 U.S. Department of Education longitudinal study, was not designed to measure graduation rates and thus did not analyze all the factors that would ensure accurate results.

There were debates, major conflicts, and controversies over the graduation and drop out rates because there were no consistent, uniform, or standard procedures or strategies to measure high school graduation rates. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) required states to use graduation rates as one of the indicators of progress. The U.S. Department of Education has not, however, set a minimum graduation rate that states are required to meet. Nor do states have to

show improvement in the graduation rate. The NCLB allows states to set their own rates and allows them to determine how quickly they achieve it. The No Child Left Behind Act does not require states to keep statistics on the graduation rates of minority students, students with disabilities, or low income students in determining the graduation rate for Adequate Yearly Progress. Under the No Child Left behind Act, only aggregate graduation rates are measured, not requiring states to disaggregate the data for subgroups such as blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, or low income students. The NCLB defined "graduation rate" as the percentage of students who graduated from a secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years required by that institution to attain the degree. Certificates of attendance and General Educational Development certificates (GED) are excluded.

Cohort Versus Departure Method

Each state has flexibility under NCLB in how it measures the graduation rates so long as they are "valid and reliable" measures. Up to July, 2005, twelve states used the "cohort definition" to measure graduation rates. This approach tracked students who enter the high school up to the time they graduate. Thirty two states used the "departure classification definition", which compared the number of students who drop out over four years and the number who graduated to determine the graduation rate. This approach was less accurate than the cohort definition because it failed to track transfer students, who were classified as drop outs. The remaining states used other definitions and approaches to measure graduation rates.

Following the 2005 National Governors Association compact, by the 2007-2008 school year, most states were committed to adopt the cohort definition because it was the most accurate approach. Since July, 2005, all fifty state governors have signed the Graduation Counts compact

which commits all states to adopt the Cohort Method. The cohort approach takes into account the mobility of students, the fact that students transfer to other schools and districts. It does, however, require audits and more extensive and accurate tracking of students, which necessitates a greater expenditure of time and resources. The number of states that track transfer students has gone up from eight states in 1999 to forty-four states in 2006. This will lead to more accurate graduation rates because states will be able to keep track of whether individual students graduate or not. Finally, in 2007, a bill, Every Student Counts Act (H. R. 29555), was sponsored in the US Congress by Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA) that would make changes in the NCLBA to require states to use the Cohort Method and to track minority students and other subgroups in measuring the graduation rates by disaggregating for race, gender, ethnicity, and disability status.

Research Methodologies: Flaws and Limitations

Greene and Winters (2005), Swanson (2004), and Balfanz and Legters (2001, 2004) used officially reported enrollment and diploma counts from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which is part of the US Department of Education, in making their estimates for the graduation rates. The federal statistical data is stored in the Common Core of Data, or CCD. The NCES requires all states to report graduation data using standardized terms and formats. Using this data base was reliable because it accurately calculated the number of diplomas issued and student enrollment across the states. They also minimized bias due to the "9th grade bulge" by excluding 9th grade private school students (Greene & Winters, 2005). The problem, however, was with validity because the Cohort Method was not used. This data did not track individual students so the problem of transfer students and students in alternative education remains. At best, the findings provided a reliable estimate.

Using U.S. Department of Education enrollment data, Balfanz and Legters (2004) found that many high schools across the U.S. graduated less than 60% of their students. Approximately 1,700 regular or vocational high schools, more than 1 in 10 high schools across the US, graduated less than 60% of their students (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). The research methodology consisted of an analysis of U.S. Department of Education enrollment data compiled for each state. The limitation of this research methodology was that it relied on the Departure Method, which does not track whether students who departed the school eventually graduated. The research analysis found that some of the missing students transferred, while most dropped out (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). The research design tracked data for senior classes for three consecutive years. They compared the number of 12th grade students enrolled at the school to their class size three years earlier in the 9th grade. This was designed to ensure that local events like plant closings did not account for the high drop out rates. There were, nevertheless, gaps in the data collection and analysis because the researchers were not able to determine if those who transferred graduated or not or the eventual status of those who dropped out. The research was limited by this inherent weakness because it was not exhaustive or conclusive. There were too many threats to the internal validity. Balfanz and Legters (2004) argued that the number of students who transferred in was usually or "generally" offset by the number who transferred out which would render their findings valid. But this relied on an unproven assumption. This conclusion was based on speculation and not on evidence or data.

Seventy-eight Michigan high schools, fourteen Metro Detroit high schools, and twenty-one Detroit Public Schools high schools were found to be "drop out factories" because less than 60% of the students graduated (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). There was a limitation in the research

methodology because Detroit had been losing approximately 10,000 students per year within the last ten years. Many of these students enroll in charter schools, while others enroll in other suburban school districts. There was a limitation in the research design because these 10,000 students are not accounted for. This was a serious flaw in the design of the research. Moreover, Balfanz & Legters (2004) relied on U.S. Department of Education enrollment data and statistics which did not determine whether the students eventually graduated or not, only that they were not enrolled. This can skew the results or findings. There was a serious problem with internal validity. The research methodology was designed to only calculate the graduation rate based on the total number of graduates compared with the total number who enrolled four years earlier. This was the Departure Method. Individual students are not tracked. There was, thus, a gap in the investigation and evidence. This was a major flaw that reflected a poorly designed research methodology. The research merely tracked students from the freshman to the senior year at the same high school but without determining whether the students transferred, dropped out, or died.

Balfanz and Legters (2004) analyzed the data on graduation rates over a period of several years to control for the possibility of radical population shifts due to “out-migration”. There was a limitation to this control because it missed the changes that occurred over a longer period of time, ignoring long-term trends and patterns. The Detroit School District, for example, had been losing approximately 10,000 students per year for the past decade, not just during a single school year. Thus, measuring graduation rates in Detroit was reliable but not valid. The massive yearly out-migration may have accounted for the high drop out rate, not the quality or effectiveness of the schools. Because this migration pattern has occurred for a period of several years, no radical shift in demographics was detected. This was another serious flaw in the research methodology.

Moreover, in the Ferndale School District, a large number of students traditionally and historically transferred in and out of the district. This fact will be missed in any analysis of graduation data that does not track each individual student. The research methodology employed by Balfanz and Legters (2001, 2004) did not track each individual student, which skewed, distorted, and inflated the data.

A simple, representative, concrete example illustrated the serious limitations of the research methodology. Balfanz and Legters (2004) found that Ferndale High School was a drop out factory because less than 60% of the students graduated “on-time”, within the four years of high school. The research findings were flawed and inaccurate and misleading because Balfanz and Legters (2004) did not track transfer students in the Ferndale School District. They relied on U.S. Department of Education data that did not take into account transfer students. Ferndale had a high “transient” student population, with many students transferring in and out of the district. The district relied on Michigan Department of Education graduation data which showed that Ferndale High School had a graduation rate of 91.27% in the 2005-2006 school tear. The drop out rate was 2.28% while the retention rate was 97.72%. What accounted for the discrepancy between the research findings and the rates determined by the district was that Balfanz and Legters (2004) did not track students who transferred. In this particular case, this potentially skewed the findings because Ferndale has traditionally had a large student transfer rate which the researchers did not take into account.

The high schools with the lowest graduation rates were in large urban school districts and in poor urban areas in the South and Southwest (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). The problem with this finding was that it was not related to the initial research hypothesis. The drop out rate in poverty

and low-income areas was not due to the quality or effectiveness of the high school, but was due to economic and societal factors that were not related to the schools. This was an extraneous variable. This posed a problem of internal validity. This reflected a poorly designed research methodology because it did not control for socio-economic factors. Balfanz and Legters (2004) revised their research findings by removing twelve schools off of their list of "drop out factories". They conceded that they had inaccurately measured the graduation rates for these schools because they did not take into account unusual or unique local conditions. For example, they did not take into account that one high school that they analyzed was a newly-constructed school that took students away from another school in the area. They incorrectly concluded that the students had dropped out when in fact they had enrolled in the new school.

The research conducted by Swanson (2004) and Balfanz and Legters (2001, 2004) did not state a clear hypothesis and the research methodologies employed were not well-designed. Their hypothesis was that analyzing the number of students who graduated from the same high school using departure data would show that high schools are ineffective and inefficient. The flaw is that they did not examine all the threats to internal validity. This was a serious limitation. Their research methodology could have been designed to track individual students to determine conclusively whether they transferred, moved, or enrolled in an alternative education or career training program. They did not, however, track each student. Their research findings were, therefore, not conclusive and their evidence was not convincing. There was a serious problem with the internal validity of the research studies because there were gaps in the data they analyzed.

Measuring the graduation rate by comparing the number of freshmen students with seniors who graduate at the high school studied, the departure method, can result in misleading findings.

Many students from the 9th grade cohort do not graduate "on-time" four years later at the high school they started at because they have moved, transferred, delayed graduation, or died. This is known as the "9th grade bulge" or "9th grade bubble", because many students are held back in grade, inflating the enrollment and distorting the data.

The alarmist and sensationalized research studies that alleged to have found a graduation "crisis" (Swanson, 2004) and ineffective high schools that were "drop out factories" (Balfanz & Legters, 2004) did not control for transfer students, students who enroll in private or charter schools, students who enroll in alternative education programs, and students in career and training programs. They relied on statistics and graduation data that compared the total number of 9th graders with the number of seniors who graduated at the same high school four years later, "on-time" graduation. This measure was reliable in that accurate numbers are obtained for the total freshman student body and the total number of seniors who graduate at that school which provided the data. But these numbers were not valid to show an accurate graduation rate because the studies do not take into account the fact that students transfer to other schools, move to another district, delay graduation, enroll in an alternative education, career training, or adult education program, or do not graduate due to illness or death. This was a major flaw in the research studies that needed to be addressed in any future research on high school graduation rates in the US.

Potential Research Bias

A further problem with the research was potential bias. The research that purported to show a graduation crisis was sponsored and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which sponsored the Stronger American Schools campaign to advocate for school reform in the 2008 presidential election campaign. There was an impetus to push for dramatic and sensationalized

research findings. Moreover, the NCLBA was coming up for reauthorization which had galvanized those who wanted to make changes. Much of the research was sponsored and funded by advocacy groups and think tanks that had agendas that they sought to advance with the research findings. This was a possible source of bias. Bill Gates, who sponsored the Christopher Swanson study, had declared that "America's high schools are obsolete" and that major changes were needed to reform the US school system. This created potential bias because the researchers were pressured to find results that supported the a priori assumptions of their sponsors and financial backers.

Conclusion

Approximately a third of all US high school students do not graduate each year (Balfanz & Legters, 2001, 2004; Barnett & Greenough, 2000; Greene & Winters, 2005; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Swanson, 2004). Only approximately half of all minority students graduate (Swanson, 2004). The overall trend of research on graduation rates reflected findings that graduation rates were much lower. Researchers found that there was a "graduation crisis" and "silent epidemic" because many urban school districts had graduation rates that fell below 40% (Swanson). Other research studies found that many US high schools were "drop out factories" because they graduated less than 60% of their students (Balfanz & Legters, 2004).

These findings of a graduation crisis were challenged and disputed because they used enrollment and diploma data in their determination of graduation rates, data which did not track students who transferred, enrolled in alternative education or career training programs, or who delayed graduation (Mishel & Roy, 2006). Mishel and Roy used U.S. Census Bureau Population Survey data and actual student experiences. Using this data, they found that there was no graduation crisis. Their research, however, had methodological flaws as well because their studies

were based on outdated data and relied on unverifiable personal statements to determine graduation rates.

Determining whether or not there was a graduation crisis depended on what measuring methodology was chosen by the researchers. Using the Departure Method, by examining enrollment and diploma data only, showed that there was a graduation or drop out “crisis” and that U.S. high schools were “drop out factories” The Departure Method was inaccurate and misleading because it only showed the total number of students who graduated at the school subtracted by the number who did not. The Departure Method ignored the “9th Grade Bulge” and the fact that many students transfer, move, delay graduation, or enroll in career and technical training and alternative education programs Much of the research that purported to show a “crisis” or “silent epidemic” in graduation rates relied on the Departure Method, which most states used to calculate graduation rates. Research that relied on the Departure Method was methodologically flawed, inaccurate, and misleading because it did not take into account the number of students who transferred, moved, died, or enrolled in career and alternative education programs. Research that used Departure Method data was alarmist and sensationalized to focus attention on graduation rates and to advocate for changes to the NCLBA. There was potential bias because many of these research projects were funded and sponsored by interested and biased advocacy groups and think tanks.

The more accurate Cohort Method was used in a minority of states to measure graduation rates and required more time and resources to implement. The researchers did not use the data from the more accurate and detailed Cohort Method, however, because a majority of states continued to use the Departure Method and thus sufficient data was not available. These research findings have thus been challenged because they do not track individual students who may have transferred in or out

of the school, enrolled in an alternative education or career training program, or who delayed graduation. Nevertheless, these research findings have created greater awareness of the need to devise uniform, accurate, and consistent measures of the graduation rate. Moreover, they have brought greater pressure to change the NCLBA to address the national high school drop out rate which is at one third of all high school students, and the minority drop out rate, which is at half.

Possibilities for Future Research

Current research on high school graduation rates was flawed, inaccurate, and misleading because it relied on data that did not track the mobility of the student. Future research on graduation rates has to rely on the more accurate Cohort Method to measure graduation rates because that method tracks the mobility of students. The inherent methodological flaw or problem with using the Departure Method was that it gave misleading, inaccurate, and invalid research results.

As more and more states adopt the Cohort Method, researchers have to rely on that method to obtain more valid and accurate and consistent findings and must design research methodologies that account for student mobility by using data from longitudinal data tracking systems with individual student identifiers which many school systems are adopting. The research studies on graduation rates, however flawed, have contributed to a greater awareness of the inherent problems associated with measuring graduation rates and have been invaluable in showing how future research can be more effectively designed and implemented.

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Appendix A

National Graduation Rates By Race and Gender

By Race/Ethnicity	Nation	Female	Male
American Indian/AK Nat	51.1	51.4†	47.0†
Asian/Pacific Islander	76.8	80.0†	72.6†
Hispanic	53.2	58.5	48
Black	50.2	56.2	42.8
White	74.9	77	70.8
ll Students	68	72	64.1

Appendix B

Powerpoint Presentation

Measuring High School Graduation Rates

A Review of the Literature

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Is there a high school graduation crisis in the US?

- An estimated 68% of all high school students graduate each year in the US while approximately a third drop out (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & , Swanson, 2004)
- For minority students, blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans, the graduation rate is approximately 50% (Swanson, 2004)
- In 2006, researcher Christopher Swanson released data that purported to show that there was a graduation “crisis” and “silent epidemic” in the US
- Swanson found that New York, Detroit, and Baltimore had graduation rates below 40%; the graduation rate for Detroit was 21.7%, the lowest in the US
- In 2007, Robert Balfanz released findings that showed that US high schools were “drop out factories” because many US high schools had graduation rates below 60% (Balfanz & Legters, 2004)
- The graduation crisis has been overlooked because of inconsistent methods of measurement, incomplete or missing data, and due to an exaggeration or inflation of graduation rates by many high schools and school districts

Findings have been challenged

- Other researchers have found that high school graduation rates have increased steadily in the US over the past 40 years (Mishel & Roy, 2006)
- Using data on actual student experiences, tracking their progress through high school, and Census Bureau surveys of households showed that there was no graduation or drop out crisis in the US (Kaufman, 2001)
- Mishel, Roy, and Kaufman argued that using enrollment and diploma data, as Orfield, Losen, Wald, Swanson, and Balfanz had, produced inaccurate results because they did not take into account students who transferred, delayed graduation, or enrolled in alternative or career training programs
- The research purporting to show a crisis was exaggerated to focus attention on graduation rates and to spur changes in the No Child Left Behind Act, which was up for renewal

The Problem: Different Measurement Methodologies

- There is controversy and debate over graduation rates because different measurement methodologies are used that result in different findings

- There is no consistent, standardized, or uniform method to measure graduation or drop out rates

Cohort Versus Departure Method

- There are two major methods to measure graduation rates in US high schools, the Cohort Method and the Departure Method
- The Cohort Method tracks students who enter high school up to the time they graduate, taking into account whether they transfer, move, delay graduation, or enroll in alternative or career training programs
- The Departure Method calculates the graduation rate by taking the total number of students who graduate in a four year period and subtracting the total number who “depart” or who do not graduate. This procedure is less accurate because it does not take into account that students transfer, move, delay graduation, and take alternative education and career training courses
- The Departure Method only examines “on-time” graduation, meaning only the four year span from ninth to twelfth grade

What does the No Child Left Behind Act require?

- The NCLBA (2001) requires all states to determine graduation rates and to use them as one of the indicators of progress
- The US Department of Education has not, however, set a minimum graduation rate that states are required to meet
- Under NCLBA, states do not have to show improvement or increase in the graduation rate
- The NCLBA allows states to set their own graduation rates
- The NCLBA defines “Graduation rate” as the percentage of students who graduate from a secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years required by that institution to obtain the degree.
- The NCLBA excludes certificates of attendance and General Educational Development certificates (GED).
- Each state has flexibility and discretion under the NCLBA in measuring graduation rates so long as they are “valid and reliable”
- The problem with the NCLBA requirement is that states can use either the cohort or the departure method, or another measurement method, provided it is “valid and reliable”.
- The lack of a uniform or standard method has resulted in inconsistent results and inaccurate and incomplete measures of graduation rates (Swanson, 2004)

What method do states use to measure graduation rates?

- Cohort Method: Up to July, 2005, twelve states used the more accurate and detailed cohort method to measure graduation rates
- Departure Method: Thirty-two states use the departure method, which is less accurate and less detailed than the cohort method
- Other Methods: The remaining states use different methods to measure the graduation rate.
- By the 2007-2008 school year, most states are committed to adopting the more accurate cohort method of calculating graduation rates
- While the cohort method is more accurate because it takes into account student mobility, tracking transfer students, students in career and alternative education programs, and students who delay graduation, it does require audits and more extensive recordkeeping
- The cohort method necessarily requires a greater expenditure of time and resources than the departure method

The 9th Grade Bulge: Inherent Problems with the Departure Method

- The inherent problem of the Departure Method is that it does not take into account the "9th Grade Bulge" (Mishel & Roy, 2006)
- Ninth graders do not all stay with their cohort: This is the 9th Grade Bulge
- Some members of the 9th grade cohort do not graduate "on-time" at their high school within four years because they have transferred, moved, delayed graduation, enrolled in a career training program or alternative education, or have died
- Just because students do not graduate on-time does not mean that there is a graduation crisis or that US high schools are ineffective
- The majority of states, however, use this inaccurate, misleading, incomplete, and flawed Departure Method to measure graduation rates
- The central problem with the issue of graduation rates is the lack of an accurate and consistent measuring method

Why do high school students drop out?

- High school students drop out for many reasons: Socio-economic status, the degree of parent and family involvement and encouragement, financial factors, personal motivations, academic aptitude, and socio-historical factors, the “education debt”.
- In a survey of 470 high school students across the US who had dropped out, a researcher found that the largest number, 47% of the students surveyed, stated that boredom with school and the curriculum was the major reason that they dropped out (Azzam, 2007)
- High school students drop out due to a lack of adult mentors and tutors and role models (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004)
- Minority students drop out because of an “education debt”, poverty, low socio-economic status, due to economic, social, and political disadvantages accumulated due to discrimination and unequal treatment in US history (Ladson-Billings, 2006)
- Bill Gates, who sponsored much of the research that found that there was a graduation crisis, has argued that “America’s high schools are obsolete” because they no longer meet the core needs of students (Swanson, 2004)
- Low student self-esteem is a factor in why students drop out (Scott, 2005)

How can graduation rates be increased?

- Career and technical education (CTE) programs have been found to increase graduation rates (Plank, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2005)
- The greater the percentage of CTE classes in the total student course load or curriculum, the greater the probability that a student would graduate (Stone & Alfeld, 2004)
- Parental encouragement and support, high parental expectations, a high parental value of education will lead to a higher graduation rate (Strom & Boster, 2007)
- Teachers who encourage and support students by raising student self-esteem by creating a positive and accepting learning environment increase graduation rates (Scott, 2005)
- Adult mentoring programs have reduced the drop out rate for minority students (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004)
- The achievement gap for minority students can be narrowed and the graduation rate increased if federal, state, and local planners take into account the “education gap”, a history of discrimination and unequal treatment of minorities, who were economically, socially, and politically disadvantaged (Ladson-Billings, 2006)

Is there a graduation crisis or not?

- Determining whether or not there is a graduation crisis depends on what measuring methodology is chosen by the researcher
- Using the Departure Method, by examining enrollment and diploma data only, will show that there is a graduation or drop out "crisis" and that US high schools are "drop out factories"
- The Departure Method is inaccurate and misleading because it only shows the total number of students who graduated at the school subtracted by the number who did not
- The Departure Method ignores the "9th Grade Bulge", the fact that many students transfer, move, delay graduation, or enroll in career and technical training and alternative education programs
- Much of the research that purports to show a "crisis" or "silent epidemic" in graduation rates relies on the Departure Method, which most states use to calculate graduation rates
- Research that relies on the Departure Method is inaccurate and misleading because it does not take into account the number of students who transfer, move, die, or enroll in career and alternative education programs
- Research that uses Departure Method data is alarmist and sensationalized to focus attention on graduation rates and making changes to the NCLBA
- The more accurate Cohort Method is used in a minority of states and requires more time and resources to implement
- Using the more accurate and detailed Cohort Method, however, results in research findings that do not show a crisis in graduation rates
- Even under the Cohort Method, researchers have found that approximately a third of all US high school students do not graduate
- Graduation rates can be increased by allowing at risk students to take career and technical training courses (CTE), by providing adult mentors to minority students, by increasing student self-esteem, and by increased parental involvement and encouragement

What is needed for future research?

- Research on high school graduation rates is flawed and inaccurate and misleading because it relies on data that does not track the mobility of the student
- Future research on graduation rates has to rely on the more accurate Cohort Method to measure graduation rates because that method tracks the mobility of students
- The inherent problem with using the Departure Method is that it gives misleading, inaccurate, and invalid research results
- The Cohort Method ensures greater validity because it takes into account or tracks the mobility of students
- As more and more states adopt the Cohort Method, researchers have to rely on that method to obtain more valid and accurate and consistent findings

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