



# Honoring Progress

An Update on the NGA Center Honor States

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This bimonthly newsletter provides information about the progress of the Honor States Grant Program, a \$23.6 million, governor-led effort to improve college and work ready graduation rates. Launched at the 2005 National Education Summit, this initiative includes 26 states and is supported by a consortium of eight foundations.

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## IN THIS ISSUE

In this issue we explore strategies governors are employing for dropout prevention and recovery. We also highlight the progress three states have made in the area and list some resources for policymakers interested in learning more.

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## Facts at a Glance

- Three out of every 10 students who enter high school do not graduate in the typical four years (*Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Web site*).
- Approximately 5.4 million youth between the ages of 16 and 24 are out of school and out of work (*Financing Alternative Education Pathways, National Youth Employment Coalition, August 2005*).
- In 2005 governors of all 50 states signed the Graduation Counts Compact and made an unprecedented commitment to a common method for calculating each state's high school graduation rate. In 2006, 13 states will report their graduation rate publicly according to the Compact formula; by 2010 this number will grow to 39 states.
- Eighteen states have a maximum compulsory school attendance age of 18.
- Three states exempt children from compulsory attendance requirements upon completion of 10th grade (*Education Commission of the States Attendance Statenote, March 2006*).
- Over 20,000 alternative schools and programs are currently in operation, most of which aim to help students at risk of failing or dropping out (*Alternative Schools Research Project*).

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## Rising to the Challenge: Georgia, Indiana, and Virginia Tackle the Dropout Problem

The dropout problem in the United States is daunting. At least one-fifth of all students drop out of high school. Nearly a third of all students and about half of African American and Latino students fail to graduate high school on time. All of society suffers, as dropouts are less likely than others to be employed, more likely to be receiving public assistance, and much more likely to be incarcerated. To address the problem, states are taking a two-pronged approach, focusing on dropout prevention and dropout recovery.

Dropout prevention efforts often focus on students who are at greatest risk of dropping out of school. Research has shown students who are chronically truant, behind on credits, or held back in ninth grade are more likely to drop out of school than others, as are students with poor performance on achievement tests. By targeting dropout prevention efforts toward at-risk students, states seek a successful return on investment.

Broadly conceived, however, dropout prevention also includes all aspects of K-12 education and complementary learning supports such as early childhood education, out-of-school-time programs like afterschool and summer programs, and parent and family involvement in education. For example, students are more likely to complete school successfully if they have received high-quality early childhood education.



Dropout recovery systems and programs provide dropouts with another chance for high school success. The modes and locations of dropout recovery programs vary widely, but successful programs often share the characteristics of flexibility, meaningful links to post-secondary education and employment, and strong student supports. More than half of the students who drop out of school eventually earn a high school diploma or an alternative credential, such as a General Education Development certificate (GED).

Georgia, Indiana, and Virginia are among the Honor States that have recently made significant strides in addressing the dropout problem in their states.



## Georgia

In Georgia, Governor Sonny Perdue has made improving graduation rates one of the state's top priorities while promoting local decision making, accountability, discipline in the classroom, and respect for educators. The state's graduation rate has increased each of the last three years, from 62 percent in 2002 to 69 percent in 2005, according to the Governor's Office of Student Achievement.



To build on this success and further improve graduation rates, Georgia is investing \$15.4 million to offer each high school in the state a grant to employ a full-time graduation specialist whose sole focus will be to improve graduation rates in individual schools. The graduation specialists will identify students at risk of dropping out and work with them to develop a plan for successfully completing high school.

Of course, graduation specialists cannot do it all on their own; it is imperative for school leaders to create a culture in their schools in which all students are expected to receive the supports they need to graduate. Georgia recently established

a \$2.3 million grant program to attract high-performance principals to middle and high schools in need of improvement. The program will provide grants of up to \$15,000 annually to high-performance principals to lead schools on the state's "Needs Improvement" list.

Recognizing the problems that lead students to drop out of high school often begin earlier in their schooling careers, Georgia is targeting interventions at the middle grades. Georgia is investing \$1.4 million to provide students who are behind in grades six to eight with the remedial education supports they need to improve their academic achievement. To increase eighth-graders' school engagement and understanding of how their schooling relates to future job opportunities, Georgia is expanding an initiative that partners postsecondary institutions with secondary schools to counsel eighth-grade students on potential career paths.

## Indiana

In 2005 and 2006, Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels signed legislation to combat the dropout problem aggressively on a variety of fronts.

In grade eight, all students in Indiana develop a flexible career plan that includes relevant high school coursework. School staff review student plans annually and counsel students who are not making progress about credit recovery options and services to support on-time graduation.

With few exceptions, students in Indiana now are required to attend school until age 18. If students drop out, they lose their work permits and driving privileges. Students truant from school for 10 days also lose their work permits.

School Flex, a dropout prevention program, provides 11th- and 12th-graders at risk of dropping out the opportunity to pursue a high school diploma at least half-time, while working in a job or enrolled in a postsecondary education program aligned with the student's career plan.

Fast Track, a dropout recovery program, allows students ages 17 and older to earn a high school diploma from a state college or university while enrolled in an associate's degree or certificate program. Students must pass the state graduation exam or an approved equivalent. High school coursework is paid for by the school district for students ages 17-18.

Double-Up empowers colleges and universities to partner directly with high schools to offer early college, dual credit, and dual enrollment opportunities to high school students. This free-market approach provides students access to postsecondary education up to an associate's degree. High school or postsecondary institution resources cover low-income students' costs.

Each Indiana high school must now report its total numbers of student suspensions, dropouts, work permits revoked, driving permits revoked, School Flex enrollees, and freshmen not earning enough credits to become sophomores. Indiana is on track to report the NGA four-year graduation rate this year.

## Virginia

Virginia Governor Tim Kaine is working to prevent dropouts by leveraging the new P-16 council and boosting the state's Honor States efforts, which support 30 Honor Schools that had higher-than-average ninth-grade retention rates. A primary focus of the P-16 council is to promote successful transitions into high school and to postsecondary education and the workforce.

Through Project Graduation, a statewide initiative that helps at-risk students earn the credits they need to graduate, Virginia has provided Honor Schools with additional grants of up to \$5,000 each to provide tutorial and remedial services in reading, writing, and algebra to juniors and seniors during the school year and the summer.

Virginia has made available to each Honor School a two-year, \$26,000 Ninth Grade Transition grant to support student transitions to high school, identify students at risk of failure, and improve student motivation, literacy, and academic success.

Virginia has expanded its Algebra Readiness Initiative by making \$5,000 grants available to all Honor Schools to provide summer programs for rising ninth graders at risk of failing Algebra I. Each program includes a student pretest to inform instruction and a post-test to measure student gains.

Virginia has provided Honor School principals, counselors, and teachers with training in assisting at-risk students and has placed 50 career coaches in 12 Honor Schools. The career coaches are community college employees who help students plan careers and connect with local businesses and community colleges.

Additional dropout prevention and recovery programs target students in high schools across Virginia. For example, the Career Prep Academy, a pilot program operating in three community college service areas, allows students who did not graduate on time to earn their remaining high school credits and an industry certification on an accelerated schedule.

Virginia will begin reporting high school graduation and dropout rates in 2008, using formulas based on NGA recommendations.

For more information about dropout prevention and recovery, please contact Daniel Princiotta at [dprinciotta@nga.org](mailto:dprinciotta@nga.org) or 202-624-5387.



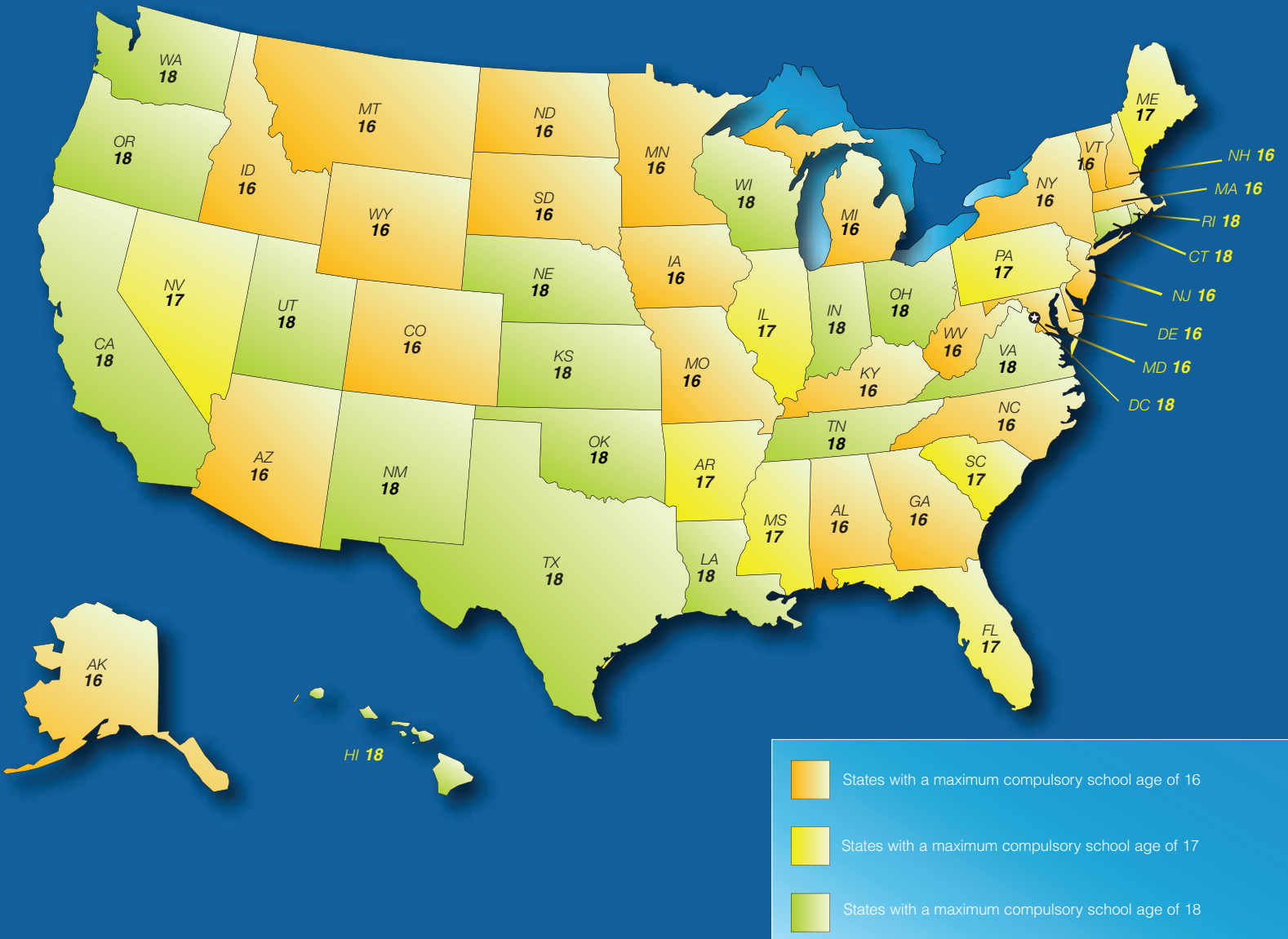
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## A Bird's-Eye View: Maximum Age of Required School Attendance

This map presents information on the maximum compulsory school attendance age, by state. In recent years, several states have raised the age (*click here* for more on recent state policy changes). Although raising the age requirement does not directly affect many of the causes of dropping out of school, it can be an important part of a comprehensive plan to increase graduation rates and a strong signal that a state is taking the dropout problem seriously.



NOTE: Map presents maximum compulsory school attendance age as of January 1, 2006. Nearly all states have exemptions to age requirements related to employment, behavioral problems, or other considerations. For more information on exemptions, see the source document.

SOURCE: Department of Labor (2006), *Employment Related Provisions in State Compulsory School Attendance Laws — January 1, 2006*.

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[www.nga.org/center](http://www.nga.org/center)

## Leading the Charge: Anne Higdon, Improved Solutions for Urban Systems (ISUS)

In 1992, Anne Higdon launched an innovative program to transform the lives of out-of-school youth. Higdon created Improved Solutions for Urban Systems (ISUS) to give these young people a chance to rise above the usually low expectations communities hold for them. Earlier this summer *Honoring Progress* talked with Anne about ISUS and how it is making a difference in the lives of children in Ohio.

**Can you describe how ISUS works?** *We are a 501(c)(3) organization that combines the principles of entrepreneurship and philanthropy. We aim to create value — whether it is contributing to the personal growth of the youth we serve or their communities. We figure out how to be useful from other people’s perspective. Our first charter, for example, was a construction charter designed to teach vocational skills. In a traditional program, students aren’t required to build anything that stands. They build a vacation house in a lab, then tear it down at the end of the year.*

*After talking to people in the industry, we created an educational environment where students are building homes in one of the poorer areas in Dayton. From 2001 until now, students have built 28 homes.*

**How has ISUS been successful in reaching students who have dropped out of the traditional education system?** *We created an educational environment where the relevance is apparent. We rewrite the math curriculum so it relates to a career. The math we teach for health care is different from the math we teach for construction.*

*We make education fun. We give stories, lessons for life. We tell young people, “When you work just hard enough not to get fired, you are probably getting paid just enough to keep you from quitting.” They don’t remember the preaching, but they remember the stories.*

**What inspired you to create ISUS?** *The Japanese word for teacher is “sensei” — one who has gone before. I understand what it takes to rise out of poverty.*

*I grew up in Harlem. I had a big mouth and a bad attitude. I could tell from the faces of the teachers they would rather I didn’t show up. And I didn’t. By the time I entered my senior year I had straight Ds. One teacher — an English teacher — somehow persuaded me to write a paper. I submitted it—she scrawled across it, “You are profound and eloquent!!” I didn’t want her to know I was a D student. So I brought my grades up so she would not see that I was a D student. I passed the NYC regents exam with 80s and 90s.*

**Tell us a student success story.** *I had a gentleman come by — he has a business that makes cabinetry. He came by to say, “Oftentimes I have orders that exceed what we can do. I don’t want to hire people and let them go. Can I build a relationship where ISUS can provide young people to work in my business periodically?” We went to visit his business at his invitation. He was already hiring ISUS graduates; he just didn’t know it.*

An ISUS education prepares youth for the challenges of today’s high-demand occupations and offers employers trained graduates who emerge ready to work, ready to achieve, and ready to give back to the community. Higdon explains that through ISUS, “*We’re out there showing that these kids can become assets, not impositions.*”

For more information about Anne Higdon and ISUS, please visit the *ISUS Web site*.

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## Federal Update: AC/SMART Grants Available to Students Now!

The nation's governors are urging qualified Pell Grant-eligible students to apply for new grants worth between \$750 and \$4,000 that will help make college more affordable. The new Academic Competitiveness (AC) grants and the National Science and Mathematics Access to Retain Talent (SMART) grants provide \$790 million in funding for this fall and \$4.5 billion over the next five years.

Governors stressed the importance of making the awards available quickly. To this end, NGA worked with the U.S. Department of Education to help states identify a "rigorous" program of study and develop a comprehensive outreach plan.

Students can receive more eligibility and application information for both grant programs online or by calling 800-4FEDAID.

For more information, contact Joan Wodiska or Kathryn Young at 202-624-5300.

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## Resource Box

Best practice research and successful program strategies can be useful for states engaged in efforts to improve their graduation rates. Resources in this section highlight shared characteristics of successful dropout prevention programs, opportunities to re-engage youth, and methods to create an early warning data system to improve existing interventions, along with two program models that have led to student graduation rates of over 90 percent.

### American Youth Policy Forum

Entitled *Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities Are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*, this recent report profiles successful dropout recovery efforts in communities in **Arizona, California, Kentucky, Maryland, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, and Wisconsin**. While the 12 case studies vary widely in their program design, the report highlights characteristics common to successful dropout recovery programs. These include open entry and exit, clear codes of conduct, extensive support, and use of relevant, real-world curricula. Also included is an overview of major national initiatives such as Job Corps and YouthBuild.





## Identifying Potential Dropouts: Key Lessons for Building an Early Warning Data System

Early warning data systems signal which students and schools may require intervention. This paper, sponsored by Achieve, Inc., reviews research on the dropout problem and offers strategies to build a comprehensive data system. It recommends a two-step process to identify effective and efficient risk factors and to build a data system to capture the information. The cost of constructing such a system is relatively minor and provides a significant return by improving existing programmatic interventions or system reforms.

## National Center for School Engagement

The National Center for School Engagement focuses on school attendance, attachment, and achievement to improve outcomes for youth who are at the greatest risk of substance abuse, delinquency, and dropping out of school. Services include training and technical assistance, research and evaluation, and information and resources.

### Program Models:

#### ■ The Big Picture Company

The first of the 34 Big Picture Schools, Met Providence, has reported a 94.6 percent graduation rate. The Big Picture Company aims to revolutionize American education by building and supporting break-the-mold, personalized schools that partner with the greater community to provide a relevant, rigorous education to students. All Big Picture public high schools share a commitment to personalization, real-world learning via internships, an innovative advisory structure, teamwork and providing leadership opportunities for all students.

#### ■ Early College High School Initiative

Existing Early College High Schools report average attendance rates over 90 percent, indicating high levels of student engagement and commitment to the academic program. These high schools provide a unique opportunity for traditionally underserved students to earn a high school diploma and two years of college credit that can be applied toward an associate's or a bachelor's degree. The design of early college high schools is intended to raise of college readiness levels, particularly among minority and low-income youth, while reducing the time and the money it takes to earn a postsecondary degree.

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## Foundation Corner: “Connected by 25,” an Effort of the Youth Transition Funders Group

The transition from childhood into the adult world is fraught with complex challenges. In response, philanthropic foundations have formed a network to help all youth make a successful transition to adulthood by age 25.

While individual foundations continue to make grants, the Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) adds value as a connective agent, increasing the impact of grant-making through collaboration and strategic alliances. YTFG work spans three areas: youth served by the foster care system, youth in the juvenile or adult criminal justice system, and youth who have dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out.

The out-of-school-youth working group is focused on leading cities committed to educating all youth, not just those in school. To date, the cities of Portland (Oregon), Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, and San Jose (California) have each received \$275,000 grants to build systemic strategies and cross-sector partnerships that reduce high school dropout rates and reconnect students not on track for graduation with educational opportunities. Funders include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

### **Ultimately, YTFG believes that being “connected by 25” will result in five outcomes:**

- Educational attainment in preparation for career and civic participation;
- Gainful employment, or access to career training, or both;
- Connections to a positive support system;
- The ability to be a positive and nurturing parent; and
- The capacity to participate in the civic life of one's community.

For more information, go to the *Youth Transition Funders Group Web site*.

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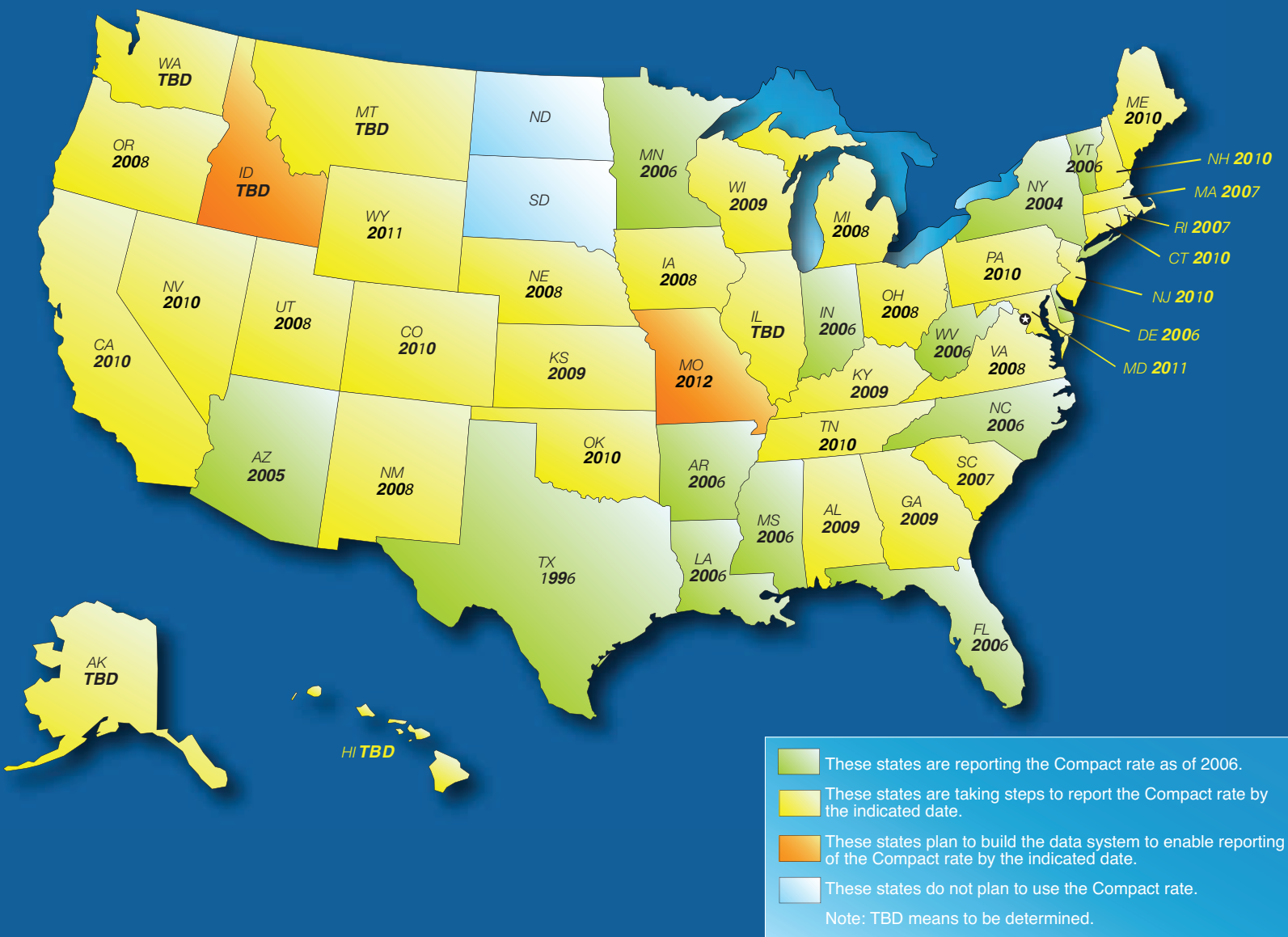
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## The Graduation Counts Compact: State Progress to Date

In 2005, the governors of all 50 states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico signed the Graduation Counts Compact and made an unprecedented commitment to a common method for calculating each state's high school graduation rate.

In addition to agreeing to a common formula for calculating the graduation rate, the governors committed to leading efforts to improve state data collection, reporting, and analysis; reporting additional indicators on outcomes for students; and reporting annually on their progress toward improved high school graduation, completion, and dropout data. The governors undertook this commitment because they understand the imperative to gather more accurate, comparable data on how many of their students graduate from high school on time.

### State Use of the Compact Graduation Rate



## So Now What? How States Can Address Dropout Prevention and Recovery

- 1) **Consider school choice** to provide multiple pathways to graduation via traditional public schools, magnet schools, charter schools, private schools, virtual schools, and alternative education programs that provide students another chance for academic success.
- 2) **Develop early warning systems** to focus academic and social service interventions on students who are at risk of failure or dropping out.
- 3) **Collect data** to hold districts, schools, and teachers accountable for graduation rates and to inform policymakers of where progress is being made and where additional efforts or resources are needed.
- 4) **Increase the relevance** of high school through dual enrollment programs, career and technical education, and other programs that create meaningful links between high school, postsecondary education, and the workforce.

These recommendations are adapted from existing NGA Center publications and resources, found on the *NGA Center Web site*.



The NGA Center for Best Practices is the nation's only consulting firm dedicated to governors and their key policy staff. The Center's mission is to develop and disseminate innovative solutions to public policy challenges.

The Honor States Grant Network is supported by a consortium of foundations: the BellSouth Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the GE Foundation, Lumina Foundation, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, Prudential Foundation, and State Farm Insurance.



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If you have any questions, please contact Alex Harris at [aharris@nga.org](mailto:aharris@nga.org).