National Student Clearinghouse™ Research Center™
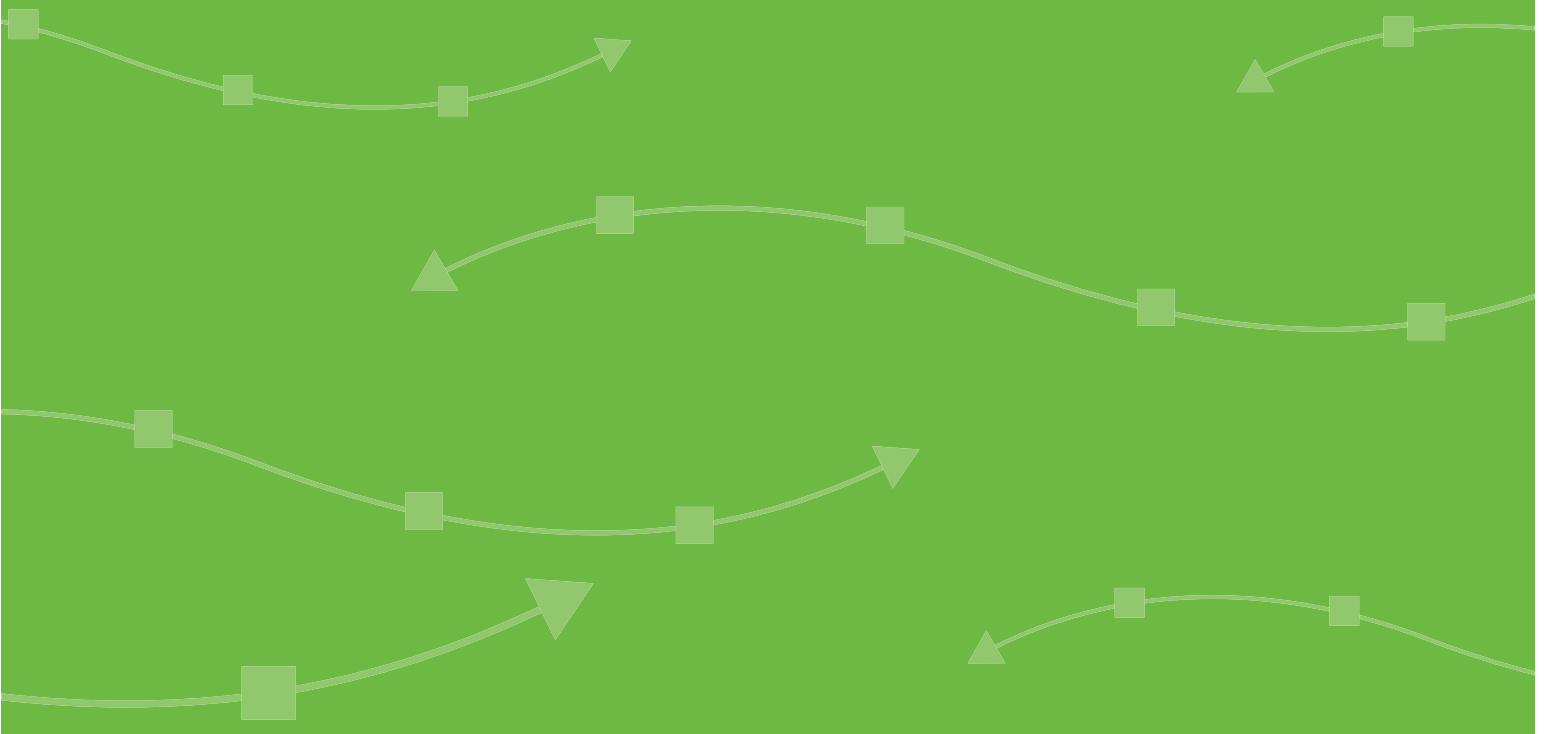
HIGH SCHOOL BENCHMARKS

COVID-19 Special Analysis
Update & Correction

March 2021

National College Progression Rates

This report provides new fall 2020 college enrollment rate estimates for recent high school graduates. Our preliminary results published in December 2020 have been updated with the addition of approximately 50 percent more data from high schools and colleges and restated to correct a process error. This error resulted in an overestimate of the rate of decline in college enrollment counts throughout the report.

The latest data covers approximately 860,000 graduates, from nearly 3,500 high schools, and their immediate fall enrollments in 87 percent of all postsecondary institutions that participate in the Clearinghouse. In addition to the main findings described below, more information about participant high school profiles and enrollment outcomes can be found in the Appendix on page 7.

KEY FINDINGS

- The year-over-year percent change in fall college enrollment shows a decline of 6.8 percent, 4.5 times larger than the 2019 rate (pre-pandemic). While smaller than the 21.7 percent estimate reported in December, this remains an unprecedented one-year decline.

- The pattern of disparities among high schools of different characteristics remains largely the same as originally reported. The pandemic disproportionately affected graduates of low income, high poverty, and high minority high schools, with their enrollments dropping more steeply than their more advantaged counterparts. For instance, enrollment declines are 2.3 times steeper for low income high schools compared to higher income schools.

- Urban and rural schools showed roughly equal rates of decline, and a larger enrollment rate gap from their suburban counterparts.

- Community college enrollment dropped the most in low income high schools while public four-year enrollment is unaffected by the pandemic for high income high schools.

1. **Data continued to show little impact of COVID-19 on high school graduation in 2020.**

   With 50 percent more high schools reporting, the overall high school graduate numbers remained at last year's level (-0.1%; see Appendix), indicating that high school graduation was unaffected by COVID-19. Notably, low income and high poverty high schools showed small declines from last year (-0.7% and -1.3%, respectively) while their more advantaged counterparts had even smaller increases (+0.4% and +0.3%, respectively). In terms of school location, suburban high schools continued to decline at a similar rate (-0.6% or less) whereas urban and rural schools had small increases from the previous year (+0.2% and +0.7%, respectively). Despite the slight increases or declines across differing high school characteristics, the overall 2020 graduate numbers from participant high schools remained stable from the previous year.

2. **In 2020, immediate fall enrollments dropped by 4.5 times the pre-pandemic rate of decline (-6.8% versus -1.5%). Large disparities among high schools became apparent during the pandemic.**

   Between the 2019 and 2020 high school classes, overall fall enrollments declined by 6.8 percent (**Figure 1**). This decline was 4.5 times greater than the drop between the 2018 and 2019 classes (-1.5%). Prior to the pandemic, the year-over-year changes in enrollment numbers varied little by high school characteristics such as poverty, income, minority, and urbanicity. However, large disparities became apparent during the pandemic.

While the pre-pandemic rate of decline was on a par with each other, high and low poverty schools grew apart in 2020 with high poverty schools falling by four times greater than the rate of decline in low poverty schools (-11.4% and -2.9%, respectively).

Low income high schools saw a larger college enrollment decline (-10.7%) than higher income high schools (-4.6%), a reversal of the pre-pandemic pattern of change.

For high minority high schools, college enrollees in 2020 declined 9.4 percent compared to a 0.9 percent decline in 2019, whereas low minority schools reported a 4.8 percent decline in 2020 compared to a 2 percent decline the year prior.

Fall enrollments also declined more precipitously during the pandemic regardless of high school location. Urban and rural schools both fell by 7.5 percent, over four times the rate of their pre-pandemic changes (-1.8% and -1.6%, respectively), while suburban schools declined by 6.1 percent in 2020 as opposed to a 1.3 percent drop the previous year.

Figure 1. Percent Change in Immediate Fall Enrollments by High School Characteristics
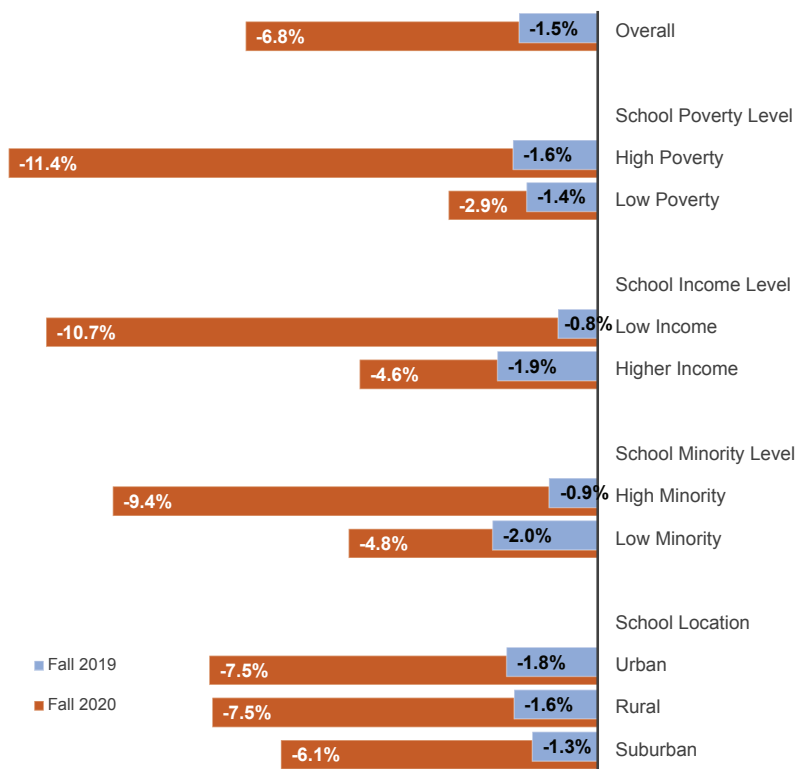
3. The immediate college enrollment rate declined in 2020 by almost seven times the decline in 2019 (-4.1 versus -0.6 percentage points).

The overall college enrollment rate (college enrollees as a share of all high school graduates reported) declined 4.1 percentage points to 56.5 percent in 2020 from 60.5 percent in 2019 (see Appendix). This was nearly seven times the decline between 2018 and 2019 (0.6 percentage point drop from 61.2% in 2018 to 60.5% in 2019).

Depending on high school income, poverty, minority and urbanicity characteristics, the fall 2020 college enrollment rate declined 2 - 5 percentage points. More importantly, in 2020, the enrollment rate gaps grew wider across income, poverty, and minority high school characteristics.
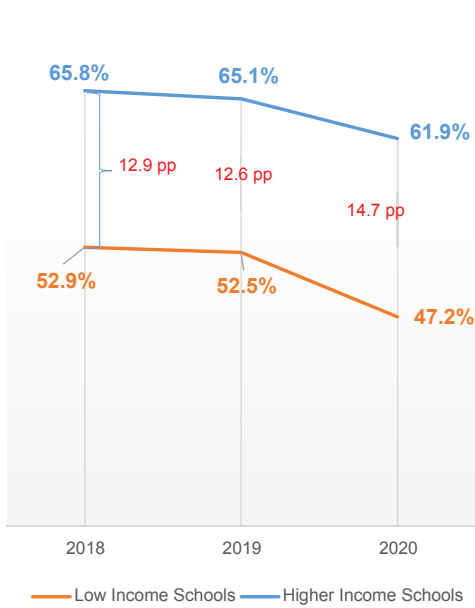
For example, between 2019 and 2020, students from low income high schools showed a 5.3 percentage point decline in the college enrollment rate (52.5% to 47.2% as shown in **Figure 2**) while higher income high schools declined by 3.2 percentage points (65.1% to 61.9%).
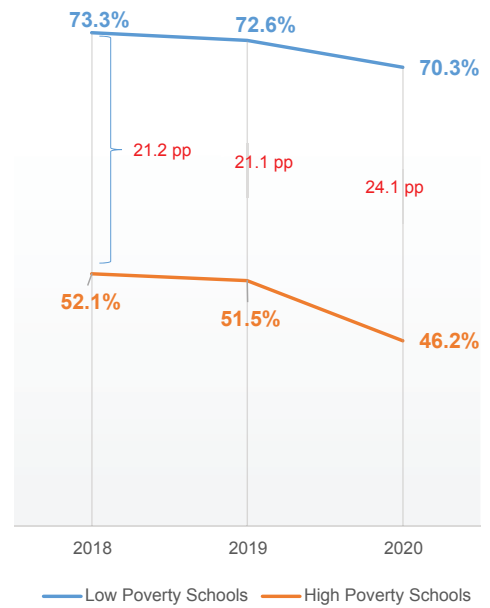
Method in Brief

The High School Benchmarks COVID-19 Special Analysis estimates the impact of the pandemic on high school graduation as well as the immediate postsecondary enrollment pathways for the graduating class of 2020. Two analytical approaches were used to estimate the impact: First, the change in the number of high school graduates from fall 2019 to fall 2020 was compared to the corresponding change occurring between fall 2018 and fall 2019 (the pre-pandemic baseline). Second, the immediate fall college enrollment rate was compared between the 2019 and 2020 high school graduates.

Comparisons are based on a fixed panel of both high schools and colleges (the same subset of high schools and the same subset of colleges that reported data to the Clearinghouse within the same time frame across all three comparison years, 2018-2020). Since the last publication, approximately 50 percent more high schools and colleges have been added. It covers a total of 859,449 graduates from 3,498 high schools and their immediate fall enrollments in 87 percent of colleges that participate in the Clearinghouse as of November 16th, 2020. Given that the participating high schools represent no more than 14 percent of the nation's high schools, and low income high schools are slightly overrepresented in the data, our results are not intended to be national estimates of immediate college going rates.
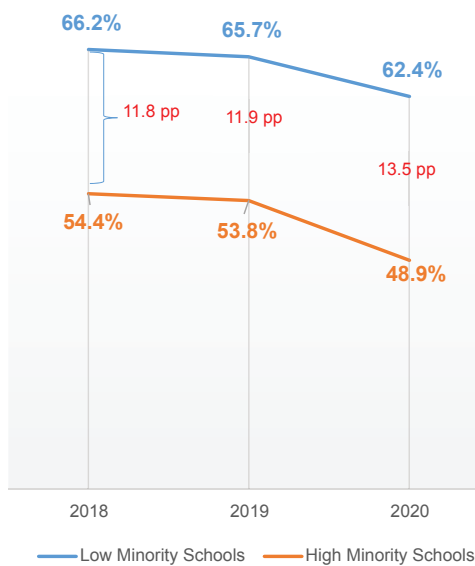
Figure 2. Immediate College Enrollment Rate by Income Level of High Schools

65.8%   65.1%   61.9%

12.9 pp   12.6 pp   14.7 pp

52.9%   52.5%   47.2%

2018   2019   2020

— Low Income Schools   — Higher Income Schools

Figure 3. Immediate College Enrollment Rate by Poverty Level of High Schools

73.3%   72.6%   70.3%

21.2 pp   21.1 pp   24.1 pp

52.1%   51.5%   46.2%

2018   2019   2020

— Low Poverty Schools   — High Poverty Schools

Figure 4. Immediate College Enrollment Rate by Minority Level of High Schools

66.2%   65.7%   62.4%

11.8 pp   11.9 pp   13.5 pp

54.4%   53.8%   48.9%

2018   2019   2020

— Low Minority Schools   — High Minority Schools

Figure 5. Immediate College Enrollment Rate by Urbanicity of High Schools

62.7%   62.2%   58.7%

58.6%   57.9%   53.4%

58.2%   57.6%   52.9%

2018   2019   2020

— Rural   — Suburban   — Urban
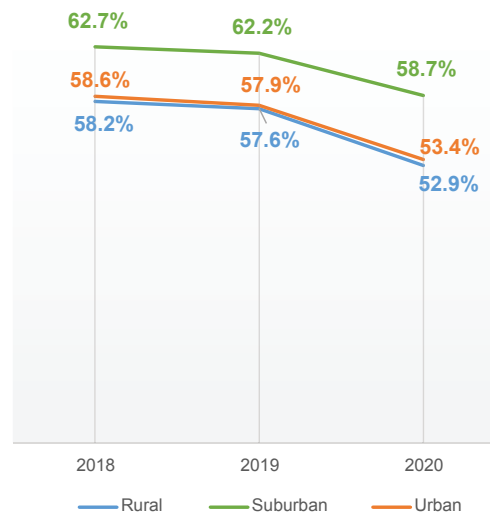
The enrollment rate gap grew wider, by 2 percentage points, from 12.6 percentage points in 2019 to 14.7 percentage points in 2020, a reversal from 2018 and 2019 graduates where the gap had narrowed by 0.3 percentage points (12.9 to 12.6 percentage points).

Likewise, because high poverty high schools declined 5.3 percentage points (51.5% to 46.2% as **Figure 3** shows) compared to a 2.3 percentage point decline for low poverty schools (72.6% to 70.3%), the enrollment rate gap thus widened to 24.1 percentage points in 2020 from 21.1 percentage points in 2019, whereas the gap remained unchanged between 2018 and 2019.

Students graduating from high minority schools demonstrated a 4.9 percentage point decline in the immediate enrollment rate between 2019 and 2020 (53.8% to 48.9%, as shown in **Figure 4**) while students from low minority schools showed a 3.3 percentage point decline (65.7% to 62.4%). This resulted in a 1.6 percentage point increase in the enrollment rate gap for 2020 graduates between high and low minority high schools (from 11.9 to 13.5 percentage points), in contrast to the relatively stable enrollment rate between 2018 and 2019 graduates.

Finally, as **Figure 5** shows, graduates from rural and urban high schools displayed similar college enrollment rates (52.9% and 53.4%, respectively) along with similar rate declines between 2019 and 2020 (-4.7 and -4.5 percentage points). In both types of high schools, the enrollment rate gap increased slightly from their suburban peers (1 to 1.2 percentage points). Suburban high schools had a 3.5 percentage point decline in the fall enrollment rate between 2019 and 2020.

4. **Enrollment declines were 2.3 times steeper for low income high schools compared to higher income schools (-10.7% versus -4.6%). Community college enrollment dropped the most in low income high schools while public four-year enrollment was unaffected by the pandemic for high income high schools.**

2020 graduates entering a community college declined by 13.2 percent in contrast to a 1.3 percent increase in 2019 (**Figure 6**). This represents a decline 4 times greater than the decline of entrants to public four-year institutions (-3%), and 2.5 times greater than the decline at private nonprofit four-year institutions (-5.2%). These results indicate that community colleges remain the worst hit sector by COVID-19 while public four-year colleges appear to be the least affected, with a small drop from the prior year (-2.6% to -3.0%).

In addition to the variation by institution sector in the overall declines, the inequitable effect of the pandemic is manifested in enrollment changes along income lines. The level of college enrollment declines during the pandemic correlates highly with the income level of high schools. Graduates of low income high schools fell at considerably higher rates than their more advantaged counterparts, most conspicuously in the community college sector (-18% versus -8.8%, as shown in **Figure 7**). Before the pandemic, these students were making greater gains in the sector (+2.4% versus +0.4%). At public four-year colleges, in contrast, high income high schools remain essentially the same as in the previous year (-2.1% in 2020 versus -2.4% in 2019) whereas low income high schools show greater in-pandemic declines (-4.9% versus -3.1%).

Figure 6. Percent Change in Immediate Fall Enrollments by Institution Sector
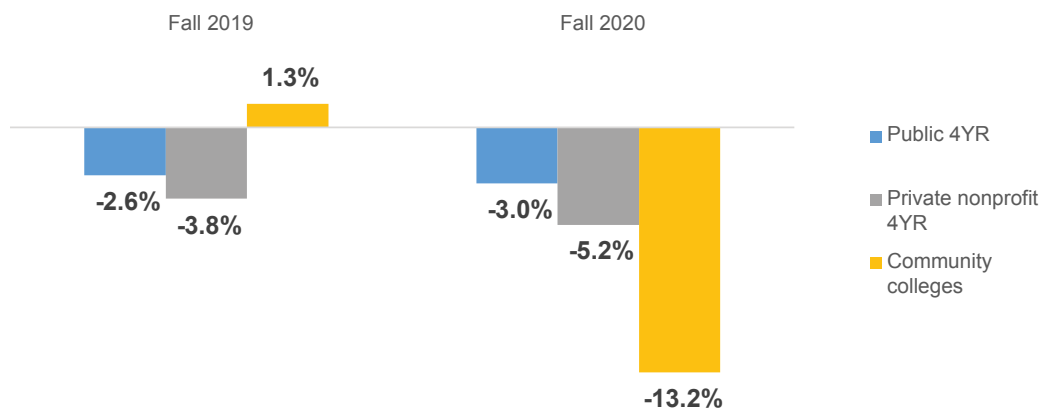
Note: For-profit four-year and private two-year colleges are not shown due to small numbers.

Figure 7. Percent Change in Immediate Fall Enrollments by Institution Type and Income Level of High Schools
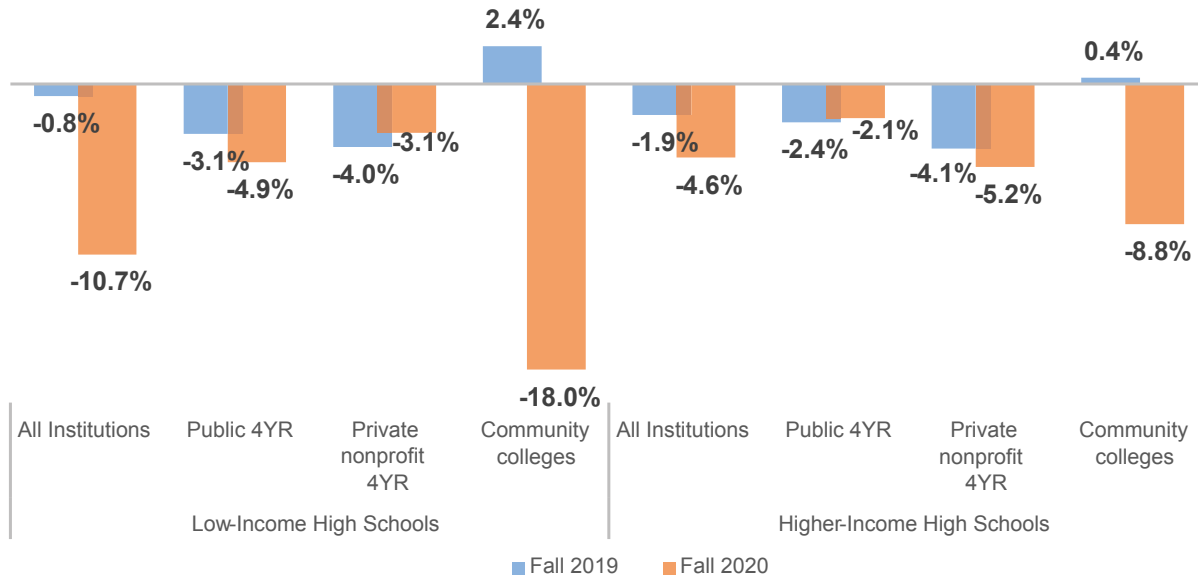
Note: *All Institutions* include for-profit four-year and private two-year colleges that are not shown due to small numbers.

Summary

This report shows a more complete postsecondary enrollment picture for the 2020 high school graduating class, with the addition of approximately 50 percent more data since the preliminary report published in December 2020. It also corrects a process error that resulted in an overestimate of the rate of decline originally reported. The resulting estimate of 6.8 percent fewer 2020 high school graduates immediately enrolling in college shows the large impact of the pandemic on access to higher education.

The updated results echo our preliminary findings, showing much larger impacts on disadvantaged high school students. While COVID-19 barely affected high school graduation, immediate college enrollments were impacted considerably. In addition to the variation by institution sector, where community colleges remain the most affected and public four-year colleges are largely unaffected, immediate fall enrollment gaps are clearly evident along income and poverty lines. Enrollment disparities are magnified for graduates of low income and high poverty high schools. Moreover, these students are showing much larger declines in their enrollment at public colleges than their more advantaged counterparts. These findings further illustrate how COVID-19 has hindered low income students' access to postsecondary education, even at the more affordable options in the public sector.

COVID-19 Special Analysis Appendix

Changes in High School Graduates, Immediate College Enrollees, and Immediate College Enrollment Rates by High School Characteristics

High School Characteristic	Graduating Class 2018			Graduating Class of 2019					Graduating Class of 2020				
	High School Graduates (as a share)	Immediate College Enrollees (as a share)	Immediate College Enrollment Rate	High School Graduates (as a share)	Immediate College Enrollees (as a share)	High School Graduates (% Change from Previous Year)	Immediate College Enrollees (% Change from Previous Year)	Immediate College Enrollment Rate	High School Graduates (as a share)	Immediate College Enrollees (as a share)	High School Graduates (% Change from Previous Year)	Immediate College Enrollees (% Change from Previous Year)	Immediate College Enrollment Rate
Overall			61.2%			-0.5%	-1.5%	60.5%			-0.1%	-6.8%	56.5%
Income Level													
Low Income	41.9%	36.7%	52.9%	42.2%	37.0%	0.1%	-0.8%	52.5%	41.9%	35.5%	-0.7%	-10.7%	47.2%
Higher Income	58.1%	63.3%	65.8%	57.8%	63.0%	-0.9%	-1.9%	65.1%	58.1%	64.5%	0.4%	-4.6%	61.9%
Minority Level													
Low Minority	50.8%	55.7%	66.2%	50.5%	55.4%	-1.1%	-2.0%	65.7%	50.6%	56.6%	0.2%	-4.8%	62.4%
High Minority	49.2%	44.3%	54.4%	49.5%	44.6%	0.2%	-0.9%	53.8%	49.4%	43.4%	-0.3%	-9.4%	48.9%
Poverty Level*													
Low Poverty	59.2%	67.1%	73.3%	59.2%	67.2%	-0.4%	-1.4%	72.6%	59.6%	69.2%	0.3%	-2.9%	70.3%
High Poverty	40.8%	32.9%	52.1%	40.8%	32.8%	-0.4%	-1.6%	51.5%	40.4%	30.8%	-1.3%	-11.4%	46.2%
Urbanicity													
Rural	15.7%	15.1%	58.2%	15.7%	15.1%	-0.6%	-1.6%	57.6%	15.8%	15.0%	0.7%	-7.5%	52.9%
Suburban	45.4%	47.1%	62.7%	45.4%	47.2%	-0.5%	-1.3%	62.2%	45.2%	47.6%	-0.6%	-6.1%	58.7%
Urban	39.0%	37.8%	58.6%	39.0%	37.7%	-0.5%	-1.8%	57.9%	39.1%	37.5%	0.2%	-7.5%	53.4%

*About 40% of the participating high schools have an assigned poverty level. High poverty schools have at least 75% of students, and low poverty schools have no more than 25% of students, who are eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program.

Changes in Immediate College Enrollments by High School Income Level and Institutional Sector

High School Income Level and Fall 2020 Institutional Sector	Graduating Class 2018 — Enrollees (as a share)	Graduating Class 2019 — Enrollees (as a share)	Graduating Class 2019 — Enrollees (% Change from Previous Year)	Graduating Class 2020 — Enrollees (as a share)	Graduating Class 2020 — Enrollees (% Change from Previous Year)
Low Income					
Public 4YR	44.0%	43.0%	-3.1%	45.8%	-4.9%
Private Nonprofit 4YR	11.1%	10.8%	-4.0%	11.7%	-3.1%
Public 2YR	44.1%	45.5%	2.4%	41.8%	-18.0%
Other	0.8%	0.8%	-0.5%	0.7%	-12.5%
Higher Income					
Public 4YR	52.9%	52.6%	-2.4%	54.0%	-2.1%
Private Nonprofit 4YR	19.6%	19.2%	-4.1%	19.1%	-5.2%
Public 2YR	27.2%	27.8%	0.4%	26.6%	-8.8%
Other	0.4%	0.4%	2.1%	0.4%	-10.1%
All					
Public 4YR	49.3%	48.8%	-2.6%	50.8%	-3.0%
Private Nonprofit 4YR	17.9%	17.5%	-3.8%	17.8%	-5.2%
Public 2YR	32.3%	33.2%	1.3%	30.9%	-13.2%
Other	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%	-10.8%

About Participating High Schools

High School Characteristics	Participating High Schools		All US High Schools		Participating High Schools as a Share	
	No. of High Schools	No. of Graduates	No. of High Schools	Grade 12 Enrollment	High Schools	Graduates
Overall	3,498	859,449	24,912	3,664,048	14.0%	23.5%
Low Income	1,425	348,154	7,889	1,271,467	18.1%	27.4%
Higher Income	1,847	482,934	11,609	2,150,260	15.9%	22.5%
High Poverty	698	141,767	3,327	487,250	21.0%	29.1%
Low Poverty	686	209,300	3,185	781,257	21.5%	26.8%
Poverty unranked	2,114	508,382	18,400	2,395,541	11.5%	21.2%
High Minority	1,433	410,699	6,222	1,383,799	23.0%	29.7%
Low Minority	1,839	420,389	13,276	2,037,928	13.9%	20.6%
Urban	1,223	324,768	4,539	978,987	26.9%	33.2%
Suburban	994	375,255	4,650	1,386,056	21.4%	27.1%
Rural	1,055	131,065	10,309	1,056,684	10.2%	12.4%
Missing/Unknown	226	28,361	5,414	242,321	4.2%	11.7%

Note: Most participating high schools are public schools (96%). Calculations based on the latest 2018-19 Common Core Dataset by NCES.
Poverty unranked schools also includes schools with missing income information (226).

Methodological Notes for the COVID-19 Special Analysis

This special analysis is designed to estimate impacts of COVID-19 on immediate postsecondary enrollment for the 2020 graduating class of high school seniors, based on partial enrollment data reported as of November 16, 2020, in comparison to historical data from 2018 and 2019 as pre-pandemic baselines.

This special analysis differs from the traditional High School Benchmarks report in that it employs a fixed panel of high schools and postsecondary institutions that reported data on high school graduates and fall enrollment as of November 16, 2020.

Two analytical approaches were used to estimate the impact: First, the change in the number of high school graduates from fall 2019 to fall 2020 was compared to the corresponding change occurring between fall 2018 and fall 2019 (the pre-pandemic baseline). Second, the college enrollment rate for fall 2020 was compared to the 2019 rate. Comparisons are based on a fixed panel of both high schools and colleges (the same high schools and the same colleges that reported data to the Clearinghouse within the same time frame across all three comparison years, 2018-2020).

As of November 16, 87 percent of colleges that participate in the Clearinghouse had submitted enrollment data. Only those high school graduates that enrolled in one of these colleges are counted in the results. .

Pre-Pandemic Baseline Development

To accurately assess the impact of COVID-19 on the immediate high school to postsecondary enrollment pathway, the analyses focused on a fixed panel of all high schools and institutions that submitted data to the Clearinghouse during the same time frame across all comparison years. We created the panel to control for year-to-year variations in school and institutional coverage as well as the variations in postsecondary data submission dates. To control for coverage, only the high schools and institutions that submitted enrollment data in 2018, 2019, and 2020 were included in the analyses. Institutions that discontinued or only started submitting enrollments at any point within these years were excluded. To control for submission timing among postsecondary institutions, only fall term data that was submitted within the data submission window in each of the three years was included. However, it is important to note that even with these controls, enrollments at some institutions in the panel may have been overcounted or undercounted for 2020 due to unusual file submission patterns. Our investigations suggest that such data noise is minor.

Student Population

This study includes only postsecondary enrollments of degree-seeking students who were enrolled at a Title IV, degree-granting institution in the U.S. in the fall of the applicable year, as reported by November 16. This definition also includes students who were dual enrolled prior to the beginning of their postsecondary career but excludes current dual enrollees. To track the immediate high school to postsecondary enrollment rate, graduate files submitted by high schools are matched to the enrollment files submitted by institutions. The enrollment rate calculations are based on students who graduated from a select, limited panel of high schools, who then enrolled in a select, limited panel of institutions.

High School Characteristics

We used the Common Core of Data (CCD) to construct the sampling frame of schools. The CCD is the Department of Education's primary database on public elementary and secondary education in the United States. From the CCD, we created a sample frame that contains all regular public schools with a 12th grade. In order to enable public, non-charter high schools to compare their own outcomes with those of similar high schools, the outcomes in this report are presented on the basis of school-level characteristics: low income and higher income; high minority and low minority; and urban, suburban, or rural. Membership in these categories for each academic year is based on CCD data for the corresponding year. Low income schools are defined as schools where at least 50 percent of the

entire student population (not just graduating seniors) is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Minority schools are defined as those schools where at least 40 percent of the students are Black or Hispanic. Locale is defined by the NCES urban-centric locale code. Schools with a code from 11 to 13 are defined as urban. Schools with a code from 21 to 23 are defined as suburban. And those with a code 31 to 43, covering both town and rural areas, are defined as rural. Combinations of these characteristics results in seven groups of high schools. Thus, the outcomes are presented for the following categories of high schools:

- Low income schools

- Higher income schools

- Low minority schools

- High minority schools

- Urban schools

- Suburban schools

- Rural schools

Suggested Citation

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