

Better Late Than Never



Districts don't benefit when students fail to graduate in four years, but helping them get a diploma has many long-term positives

Every year, a number of high school students fail to walk across the stage and receive their diplomas with their classmates.

Not all fail to graduate, however. For some, it just takes a little longer.

But do schools get credit for not letting these students drop out? Do they get credit for helping the students stick with it until they earn a diploma? Well, no.

Most state graduation rates only count students who earn a diploma in four years or less. Schools do not get credit for working hard and putting time and resources into ensuring that those who fall behind eventually graduate. And no credit means no incentive for schools to use their limited resources on such students.

It's just like former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings used to say: "What gets tested gets taught." When it comes to graduation rates, the students who get counted get the resources.

But schools definitely should get credit, according to *Better Late Than Never: Examining Late High School Graduates*. The new report by the National School Boards Association's Center for Public Education shows that late graduates are more successful after high school than classmates who never receive a diploma. More than that, they are almost as successful as those who graduated on time.

Facts about late graduates

This report found that 4.6 percent of students who started high school in the fall of 1988 needed more than four years to earn their high school diploma. This equates to approximately 130,000 students in the class of 1992 alone.

This may not sound like a huge number. But for some schools, especially those in urban districts, the number of late

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graduates can be quite high. For example, according to data provided by Chicago Public Schools for the class of 2006, nearly 700 students took five years to graduate.

These numbers equate to about the size of an average U.S. high school. It means that each year in Chicago—just one district—a full school's worth of graduates are not counted simply because they needed extra time to complete their graduation requirements.

For some schools, getting credit for students who graduate late may mean the difference between being labeled as failing or not.

If students are no better off when they graduate late, as opposed to never, then no reason exists to give schools credit. To answer this hypothesis, the center compared the postsecondary outcomes of late graduates to students who:

- Earned a General Educational Development (GED) credential or equivalent;
- Left high school without receiving any type of credential before 2000; or
- Were of similar socioeconomic status and achievement level and graduated in four years or less with a standard diploma.

"Postsecondary outcomes" were not limited to postsecondary education. The center looked at employment, civic, and health outcomes as well. What we found was late graduates are better off in almost all areas than GED recipients and dropouts. When compared to similar on-time graduates, they are not doing as well in some areas, but they are in others.

Specifically, comparing late graduates to GED recipients and dropouts, the center found late graduates are:

- Much more likely to obtain either a bachelor's or associate's degree;
- More likely to be employed, and employed full-time;
- Doing significantly better in terms of job benefits by having health insurance;
- More likely to work for an employer that offers retirement benefits; and
- More likely to vote, to be a nonsmoker, and to exercise regularly.

Comparing late graduates to similar on-time graduates, the center found that late graduates are:

- Less likely to receive a bachelor's or associate's degree;
- Less likely to have health insurance;
- Earn \$2,400 less per year than similar on-time graduates;
- Just as likely to be employed and to have an employer that provides retirement benefits; and
- Just as likely as to vote, volunteer in their community, and exercise regularly. However, late graduates were less likely to be nonsmokers.

Overall, the answer to the question, "Are students better off graduating late than never?" is a resounding "Yes." In fact, similar on-time graduates are doing no better than late graduates in several areas. However, for students to have the greatest chance of success after high school, the goal should be for them to graduate on time.

Why more time is needed

Who exactly are we talking about? Remember, 4.6 percent of students graduate late, 7.7 percent earn GEDs, 9.4 percent drop out, and 78.3 percent graduate on time or earlier.

Minority and low-income students are more likely to be late graduates. Eight percent of Hispanic students and 11 percent of African-American students graduate late compared to just 3 percent of whites. In terms of family income, 7 percent of students within the lowest socioeconomic status quartile are late graduates, while just 2 percent from the highest quartile need more time.

Language-minority students (8 percent) are twice as likely as non-language-minority students (4 percent) to graduate late. Urban students (7 percent) are more likely to graduate late than those who go to schools in the suburbs (4 percent) and rural areas (3 percent).

Why do these kids need more time? To answer this question, the center examined how students performed in the eighth grade and high school by examining courses taken as well as the students' grades and test scores.

On-time graduates—on average—took more rigorous courses and were higher achievers than late graduates. However, when late graduates were compared to GED recipients and dropouts, the numbers shifted slightly.

In terms of eighth-grade math courses, late graduates are not more prepared to move to high school math than are GED recipients or dropouts. They had not taken more rigorous

courses. About one-third (34 percent) took algebra in eighth grade, which is not significantly more than GED recipients (27 percent), though it is significantly more than dropouts (19 percent). Late graduates (12 percent) also took remedial math courses at about the same rate as GED recipients and dropouts (14 percent and 16 percent).

With respect to math achievement, late graduates perform similarly to GED recipients and dropouts. They are not more likely to receive As and Bs in their sixth- through eighth-grade courses, and their scores were similar to GED recipients on standardized tests.

The numbers—similar results were found in English courses—showed that late graduates are not substantially more prepared for high school than GED recipients or dropouts and are less ready than on-time graduates. Since the difference between late graduates, GED recipients, and dropouts is relatively small, we looked at high school performance to provide some insight into why these students complete 12th grade with a diploma.

What happens in high school?

Despite the similarities entering ninth grade, late graduates' performance begins to look different in high school. They start earning more credits and higher grades.

Late graduates earned more credits in their first four years of high school in both math and English. Of course, most GED recipients and dropouts leave high school within the first two years. The late graduates also earned higher grades—a 1.8 GPA compared to 1.6 for GED recipients and 1.3 for dropouts.

From the start, all three groups fall behind their classmates in high school requirements. Just under half (43 percent) of late graduates fall behind early in their high school careers by taking nonacademic math courses—if any math at all—in ninth grade. This is similar to the 42 percent of GED recipients but less than the 62 percent of dropouts.

So, is late better than never? The center's report shows the answer is definitely yes.

Schools should continue to focus on graduating students on time so they have the greatest chance for success in all aspects of life after high school. Nevertheless, the center recommends that policymakers design accountability systems that encourage—not discourage—schools from continuing to work with students that have fallen behind their peers. The difference, in many cases, is a diploma.

At the same time, all late graduates should be counted, not just certain groups of students. By giving schools credit where credit is due, graduation rates will more accurately reflect the effectiveness of our high schools. Also, schools will have the incentives they need to spend the time and money to help all students receive a diploma.

Ultimately, isn't that what public schools are all about? ■

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