

# Graduation rates decline, study says

The study found that making it to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade has become a hurdle for U.S. students

## *The Boston Globe*

More American high school students are not making it to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, shrinking the graduation rate and leading to a “national emergency,” according to a Boston College study released Sunday.

Analyzing three decades of federal enrollment statistics for all 50 states, researchers found that the rate at which ninth-grade students do not reach 10<sup>th</sup> grade has tripled. The problem is especially serious in Southern states. The 1999-2000 academic year had 12 percent fewer high school sophomores than freshman the previous year – something the researchers attribute to growing waves of students held back in ninth grade as states toughen academic standards. In the early 1970’s, the attrition rate hovered around 4 percent.

In addition, according to the study, fewer teens are graduating on time from high school. Some 24 states posted graduation rates of 75 percent or less in 2000-01. Nationally, the figure was 74.4 percent, meaning that just three out of four eighth-graders eventually left with a diploma.

The study, “The Education Pipeline in the United States 1970-2000,” adds evidence of the need to overhaul high schools. The authors take aim at exams required for graduation, such as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test. The researchers say such tests will bring declines in the graduation rate because poorly performing students will drop out or be pushed out by schools eager for good scores.

Under President Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act, high schools will be judged on graduation rates. Just two states, New Jersey and Wisconsin, met the national goal of a 90 percent graduation rate, according to the study. The current rate of about 75 percent in 2000-01 is essentially the same as in 1979-80.

“When students are squeezed out of the...pipeline and do not even graduate from high school, this has dire consequences not just for these young people but for society as a whole,” the study says.

Grade nine appeared to be the trouble spot, with more students held back and fewer going to 10<sup>th</sup> grade – “lost” students, according to the authors. Jay Greene, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute who has studied graduation rates, disagreed.

“There’s no doubt that the retention of students in ninth grade has gone way up,” Greene said. “But that’s not the same thing as attrition, and when you call it that, you make people think that all of these kids are dropping out, and they’re not. Some are. Some aren’t.

The 72-page study, financed by the Ford Foundation, singles out Florida for having among the worst graduation rates, ninth-grade attrition rates, and rates of ninth-graders being held back.

A bright spot: Kindergarten enrollment has climbed over the past 30 years, with 94 percent of children enrolling nationally. Kindergarten is not required in all states.