

# Does Philadelphia really lead all big cities in improving the graduation rate?

By Ruth Curran Neild

It seems that barely six months go by without the release of new statistics on high school dropouts in Philadelphia, most of them sobering. Far too many of Philadelphia's public high school students do not earn a diploma. And so, in a report issued last week by the research arm of *Education Week*, it was a bit of a shock for Philadelphia to be identified as the exemplar of a city that can improve its high school graduation rate – allegedly, even dramatically so.

According to the report, entitled [Cities in Crisis 2009: Closing the Graduation Gap](#), Philadelphia made greater strides in increasing the graduation rate than any other of the fifty largest cities in the United States. The report estimates that from 1995 to 2005, the graduation rate for the city's public schools rose by 23 percentage points – from 39 percent in 1995 to 62 percent in 2005.

Most of the other 49 largest districts posted graduation rate gains of between 3 and 13 percentage points.

The research was commissioned by [America's Promise Alliance](#), a civic collaborative founded by retired Gen. Colin Powell.

The report also identifies the Philadelphia metropolitan area as having made the most progress in closing the graduation-rate gap between urban and suburban districts, citing the progress made by the city as the chief reason for this.

However, the *Cities in Crisis* estimate of the 2005 graduation rate for Philadelphia is considerably higher than local calculations. In 2006, a [report issued by Project U-Turn](#), a collaborative of public and private organizations in the city, indicated that just over half, or 52 percent, of Philadelphia's class of 2005 graduated on time – still an improvement over prior years, but considerably below 62 percent. And for the classes of 2000 through 2003, the proportion of students who graduated within *six* years of starting high school (not four years), never exceeded 60 percent. (At the time the Project U-Turn report was released, data were not available to calculate the six-year graduation rate for the class of 2005.)

However, while our local calculations and the *Cities in Crisis* estimates differ in where they place the overall graduation rate, they both show that the Philadelphia graduation rate was rising between 2003 and 2005. (The local researchers did not examine data all the way back to 1995.) [Recent data from the School District](#) show continued incremental gains in the graduation rate since 2005.

## Where does the *Cities in Crisis* data come from?

The *Cities in Crisis* estimates of the graduation rate are derived from the publicly available “[Common Core of Data](#),” a database maintained by the US Department of Education. The database compiles basic information from school districts across the country, including each district’s enrollment figures by grade and the number of diplomas granted each year.

To estimate how many students from the Class of 2005 graduated on time, the *Cities in Crisis* researchers compared enrollments across the high school years of the same cohort of students. Specifically, they created a ratio of ninth grade enrollment from the 2001-2002 school year to tenth grade enrollment a year later, to determine the percentage of ninth graders who were promoted. Similarly, it created a ratio of tenth grade enrollment to eleventh grade enrollment a year later, and so on. The combination of these ratios forms the *Cumulative Promotion Index*, an estimate of the graduation rate.

But this method is not as accurate as following the educational progress of actual, individual students over time. This is what the local researchers, including myself, did for Project U-Turn.

And none of the researchers who have worked with longitudinal data from the District believe that the city actually experienced a 23 percentage point increase in the graduation rate from 1995 to 2005.

At the same time, we believe that there are important things to be learned from the *Cumulative Promotion Index* – and more particularly from the individual grade-to-grade enrollment ratios.

The accompanying [table](#) shows Philadelphia’s enrollment data by grade and year from the Common Core of Data. It also shows the estimated graduation rate based on these data for each school year between 1995 and 2005, and the grade-to-grade enrollment ratios for all the cohorts.

## What can we learn from these estimates?

There are several notable trends in the Common Core data from 1995 to 2005 for Philadelphia that may help to explain the rising graduation rates noted both in local graduation rate calculations and those of the *Cities in Crisis* report.

They appear to reflect real work on *helping students make a good transition to high school* and *helping those who are close to graduation to actually graduate*.

**First, over a 10-year period, Philadelphia appears to have done better in moving ninth graders to 10th grade.** In 1995-1996, the number of tenth graders was only about 70 percent as large as the number of ninth graders the year before, meaning that only an estimated 70 percent of the 1994-1995 ninth graders were promoted to tenth grade for the next year. By 2003-2004, the number of tenth graders was about 75 percent of the number of ninth graders during the previous school year. For the final year of data (2004-2005), the tenth grade class was 85 percent as large as the

ninth grade class a year earlier. This represents a very large jump from the previous year, and it remains to be seen whether this increase can be maintained.

The chart also shows a declining number of ninth graders over the years, which may be the result of a smaller number of students entering the city's public high schools and more going to charters. But it may also be the case that fewer freshmen were being retained, since the ninth grade numbers do not distinguish between first-timers and repeaters. This could mean that the District's investments in ninth grade academies – including the Talent Development High Schools program put in place between 1999 and 2003 in a number of neighborhood high schools – were paying off.

**Second, there appear to have been improvements in moving students along to graduation once they reached 11<sup>th</sup> grade.** From 1995-96 to 1997-98, the twelfth grade class was about 80 percent as large as the eleventh grade class, but by 2004-05, the figure was 87 percent. Again a simple way of thinking of this is that 87 percent of the eleventh graders were promoted to twelfth grade in 2004-2005, in comparison to 80 percent in earlier years.

Further, in 2003, 2004, and 2005, the number of diplomas awarded was actually larger than the number of seniors during the year before.

These two bits of data together most likely show the effect of the administration of Paul Vallas to provide overage students opportunities to accelerate their progress towards a diploma and to recapture those who had dropped out.

During this period, the District provided more “credit recovery” opportunities, meaning that students still enrolled in regular District schools could attend Saturday or afterschool sessions to pass courses they had previously failed. The District also opened several “twilight” schools for students who had to work and couldn't attend school on a regular schedule. Many of the students taking advantage of these opportunities were probably not classified as seniors when the year began, but were awarded diplomas by its end.

The “accelerated schools” that now exist in the District did not open until 2005 or later and would not have had an impact on the data.

Using a consistent, reliable method for calculating graduation and dropout rates is important. We don't want to overstate the progress that has been made at tackling the dropout problem in Philadelphia. But by building on what we have learned about how and when students fall off track, Philadelphia should be able to continue to achieve real gains in graduation rates.

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