

Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report

CHAPTER 2



Secondary School Completion



Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report

By Lorelle L. Espinosa, Jonathan M. Turk, Morgan Taylor, and Hollie M. Chessman

This chapter is part of a larger report by the American Council on Education (ACE) titled *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report*. The report and its accompanying microsite provide a data-informed foundation for those working to close persistent equity gaps by providing a comprehensive review of the educational pathways of today's college students and the educators who serve them.

Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report and the microsite were made possible through the generous support of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Visit www.equityinhighered.org to learn more about the project and to download the full report containing more than 200 indicators on race and ethnicity. Also available on the site are downloadable figures, detailed data, and other resources on race and ethnicity in higher education.

ACE American Council on Education | RACE AND ETHNICITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

HOME ABOUT INDICATORS DATA SOURCES DATA TABLES RESOURCES

RACE AND ETHNICITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Welcome! Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education provides a data-informed foundation for those working to close persistent equity gaps by providing a glimpse into the educational pathways of today's college students and the educators who serve them.

[EXPLORE THE REPORT](#)

Featured Findings:

45.2% of Undergraduates were Students of Color

32.0% of Graduate Students were Students of Color

Explore the Report's Findings

This report examines data across 11 chapters that provide a foundation from which the higher education community and its many stakeholders can draw insights, raise new questions, and make the case for why race and ethnicity still matter in American higher education. [Download the Report >](#)

[RACE AND ETHNICITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A STATUS REPORT RELEASE CONVENING](#)

[View the Event's Livestream >](#)

POPULATION TRENDS AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Explores U.S. population growth and differences in educational attainment, by race and ethnicity.

SECONDARY SCHOOL COMPLETION

Examines the racial and ethnic composition of secondary school completers, GED® test performance, and public high

ENROLLMENT IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

Explores patterns in undergraduate enrollment, including where students enroll, program award level, and field of

ABOUT THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION

ACE is the major coordinating body for the nation's colleges and universities. Our strength lies in our diverse base of member institutions. We represent nearly 1,800 college and university presidents and the executives at related associations, and are the only major higher education association to represent all types of U.S. accredited, degree-granting institutions: two-year and four-year, public and private. For more information, visit acenet.edu.

INTRODUCTION

The country's demographic shifts explored in Chapter 1 of this report, "Population Trends and Educational Attainment," have had great bearing on the makeup of the nation's high schools. Between 2000 and 2012, the total number of public high school graduates grew by 23.3 percent, increasing from 2.5 million to over 3.1 million. The greatest growth during this time occurred for non-White students, including a 110.5 percent increase for Hispanic students and a 42.1 percent increase for Asian or Pacific Islander students. Although the overall number of high school graduates will soon plateau, enrollment growth by students of color will nonetheless continue (Bransberger and Michelau 2016). By 2026, non-White students will represent 51.0 percent of public secondary school graduates.

While postsecondary credentials are on the rise and often required for a growing number of jobs in America, the high school diploma remains a prevailing signal of individual educational achievement. Therefore, measuring the success of individual groups in securing a diploma provides a picture of educational opportunity realized or missed that has lasting implications for individuals and families. Multiple measures aimed at describing high school completion rates exist, each with their own strengths and limitations (Murnane 2013; Heckman and LaFontaine 2010). In this chapter, we look to the high school status completion rate and four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate metrics to explore high school completion in the United States. Overall, the percentage of individuals completing high school credentials—both diplomas and alternative credentials such as the GED® credential—has increased over time. Yet longstanding gaps in completion remain. For example, in 2016 the high school graduation rate gap between White and American Indian or Alaska Native students was 16 percentage points—the highest gap between White students and any group of non-White students. And given the aforementioned demographic shifts, these gaps have tremendous consequence for our country's economic and social progress.

KEY FINDINGS

- In 2000, about seven in 10 students graduating from high school were White. By 2012, that share had fallen to nearly six in 10, as the share who were Hispanic increased substantially. Projections predict this trend will continue, with Whites representing just under half of all public high school graduates in 2026.
- Between 2013 and 2016, public high school graduation rates¹ increased for all racial and ethnic groups, with those of Black² students increasing by nearly 6 percentage points, compared with around 2 percentage points for American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, and White students.
- Between 1996 and 2016, the total share of all 18- to 24-year-olds who had completed a high school diploma or alternative credential increased. By race and ethnicity, Hispanics and African Americans experienced the largest growth. The status completion rate of Black students increased from 83.0 percent to about 92 percent, while that of Hispanic students increased from about 62 percent to 89.1 percent.
- The share of 18- to 24-year-old American Indian or Alaska Native men and women who had completed a high school education or alternative credential declined between 2006 and 2016—the only racial and ethnic group to do so.
- Between 2014 and 2018, the pass rate of all GED® test takers varied greatly by race and ethnicity. About seven in 10 White test takers passed the exam, the highest of any group. African Americans were the only group for whom less than half of all test takers passed the exam.

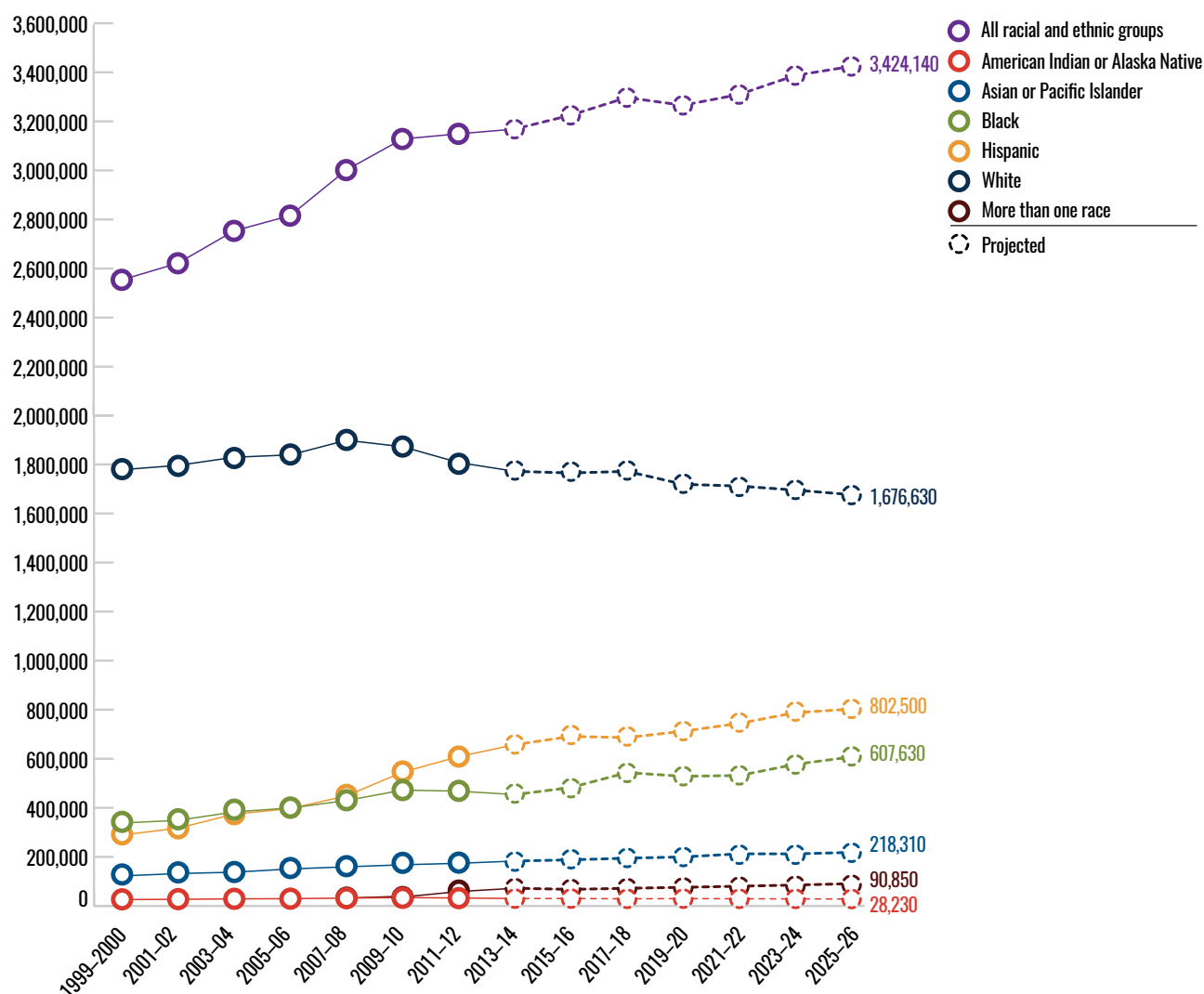
1 Data reflect adjusted cohort graduation rate, which measures the percentage of students within a given cohort who graduate within four years of enrolling in ninth grade.

2 The terms Black and African American are used interchangeably.

PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES: 2000 TO 2026

Over 90 percent of high school students in the United States attend public high schools, thus offering researchers the most robust trend lines and projections of demographic change (Bransberger and Michelau 2016). The total number of public high school graduates grew from 2.5 million in 1999–2000 to over 3.1 million in 2011–12,³ an increase of 23.3 percent. Hispanics experienced the greatest growth among all racial and ethnic groups over these years, followed by Asians or Pacific Islanders. Projections indicate that the growth in the number of high school graduates will slow. Between 2011–12 and 2025–26, projections show the total number of public high school graduates will increase by a little more than 274,000 students, or 8.7 percent, 14.6 percentage points less than over the earlier 12-year period.

Figure 2.1: The Number of Public High School Graduates, by Race and Ethnicity: 2000 to 2026



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics, 2017, Table 219.30

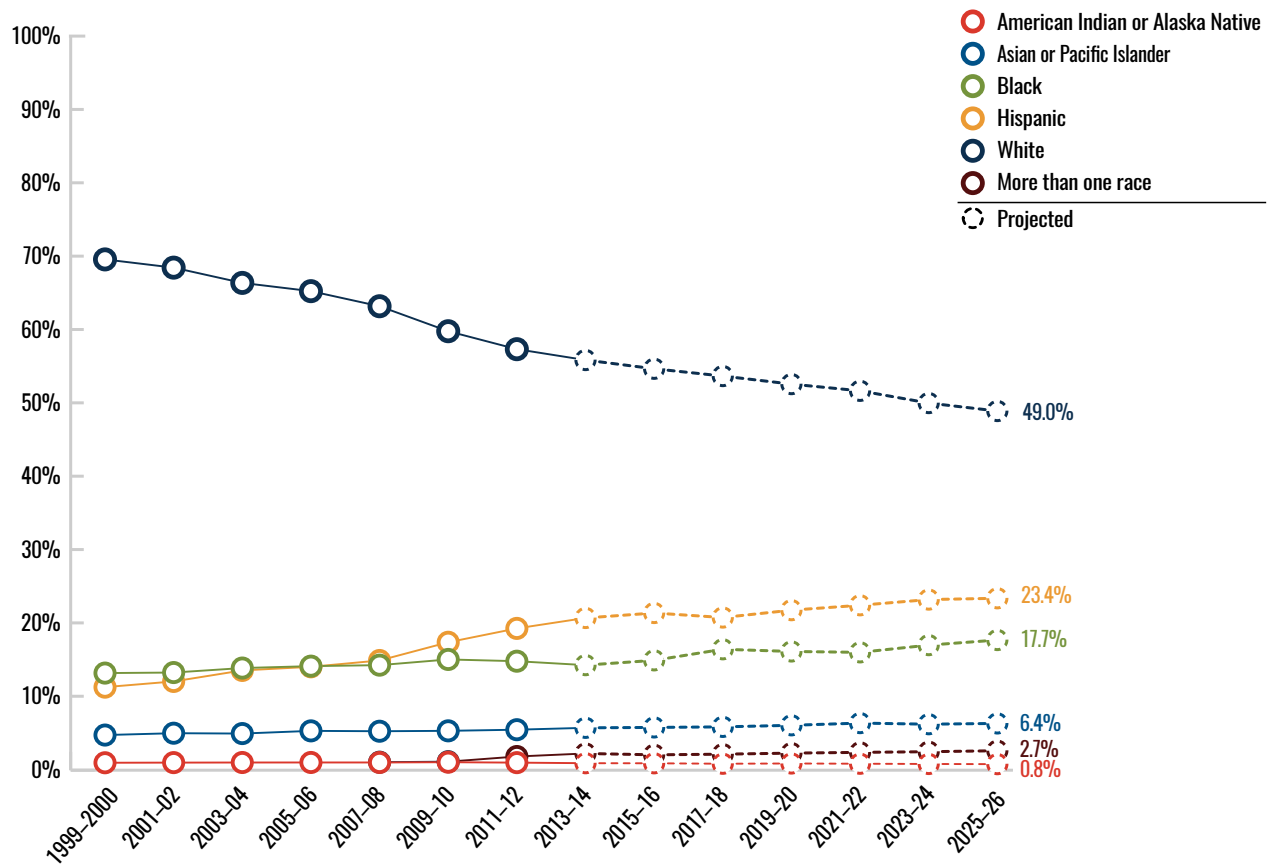
Notes: Data for 1999–2000 to 2011–12 reflect actual values; data for 2013–14 to 2025–26 reflect projected values. | Prior to 2007–08, data on students of more than one race were not collected separately. | Data on students of more than one race were not reported by all states; therefore, the data are not comparable to figures for 2010–11 and later years. | Data on students of more than one race were not available prior to 2007–08.

³ Data in this section reflect actual public high school graduation rates for 2000–2012 and projected rates for 2014–2026. The data presented were the most recent publicly available data at the time of analysis.

- Between 1999–2000 and 2011–12, the total number of Hispanic public high school graduates grew by 110.5 percent, the highest percentage change among all racial and ethnic groups. This growth involved an increase of over 319,000 public high school graduates.
- Asian or Pacific Islander students had the second highest rate of growth between 1999–2000 and 2011–12, growing by nearly 51,500 graduates or 42.1 percent.
- The total number of Black public high school graduates grew by more than 129,000 students, an increase of 38.4 percent.
- Among all racial and ethnic groups, Whites experienced the lowest rate of growth, increasing by just 1.6 percent.
- Projections show that the total number of high school graduates will grow across all racial and ethnic groups between 2011–12 and 2025–26, with the exception of American Indians or Alaska Natives and Whites, where the total number of graduates is expected to decline by 13.0 percent and 7.2 percent, respectively.
- The groups predicted to see the most growth by 2025–26 are Hispanic and Black students. The number of Hispanic graduates will grow by nearly 194,000 students and Blacks by nearly 140,000 students, by 2025–26, representing growth of 31.8 percent and 29.9 percent, respectively.

In 1999–2000, Whites represented 69.6 percent of all high school graduates. While Whites remained the majority in 2011–12, their total share of all public high school graduates decreased to 57.4 percent. Projections predict this trend will continue, with Whites representing 49.0 percent of all public high school graduates in 2025–26.

Figure 2.2: Public High School Graduates, by Race and Ethnicity: 2000 to 2026



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics, 2017, Table 219.30

Notes: Data for 1999–2000 to 2011–12 reflect actual values; data for 2013–14 to 2025–26 reflect projected values. | Prior to 2007–08, data on students of more than one race were not collected separately.

| Data on students of more than one race were not reported by all states; therefore, the data are not comparable to figures for 2010–11 and later years.

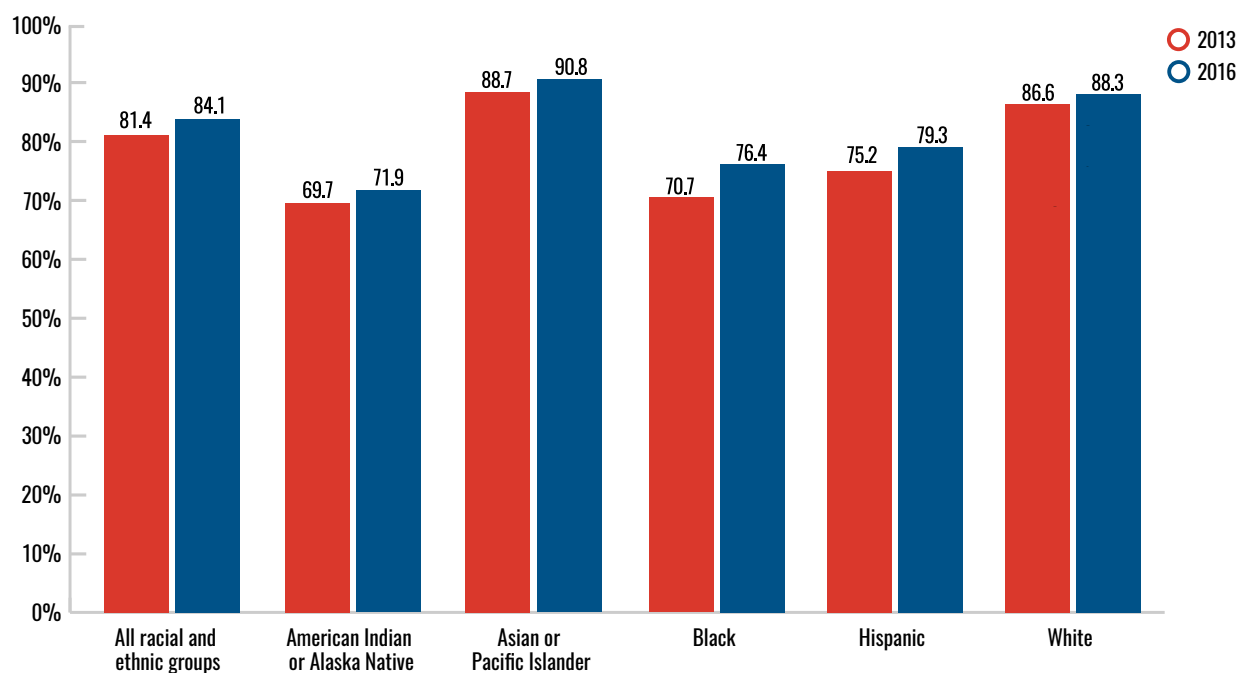
- The total share of Hispanics among all public high school graduates increased from 11.3 percent in 1999–2000 to 19.3 percent in 2011–12—the largest growth of any racial and ethnic group. Projections predict Hispanics will represent slightly less than a quarter of all public high school graduates by 2025–26.
- The total share of Asian or Pacific Islander graduates is expected to increase from 5.5 percent in 2011–12 to 6.4 percent by 2025–26, and the total share of Black graduates is expected to increase from 14.9 percent to 17.7 percent.
- The share of American Indians or Alaska Natives is expected to decrease slightly from 1.0 percent in 2011–12 to 0.8 percent in 2025–26.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE

The adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for public high schools was first collected in 2010–11. The ACGR measures the percentage of students within a defined cohort who graduate with a high school diploma within four years of enrolling in ninth grade. The cohort is defined as first-time ninth graders in a specified academic year and is adjusted to include any new students who transfer into the cohort and to exclude any students who transfer out, leave the United States, or pass away. States calculate ACGRs at the school, district, and state levels.

Across the nation, the graduation rate of public high school students increased gradually from 81.4 percent in 2013 to 84.1 percent in 2016. Black students had the largest increase, from 70.7 percent in 2013 to 76.4 percent in 2016 (a 5.7 percentage point increase). The public high school graduation rate for Hispanic students increased 4.1 percentage points, from 75.2 percent to 79.3 percent. The graduation rate for American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, and White students all increased about 2 percentage points.

Figure 2.3: Public High School Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, by Race and Ethnicity: 2013 and 2016



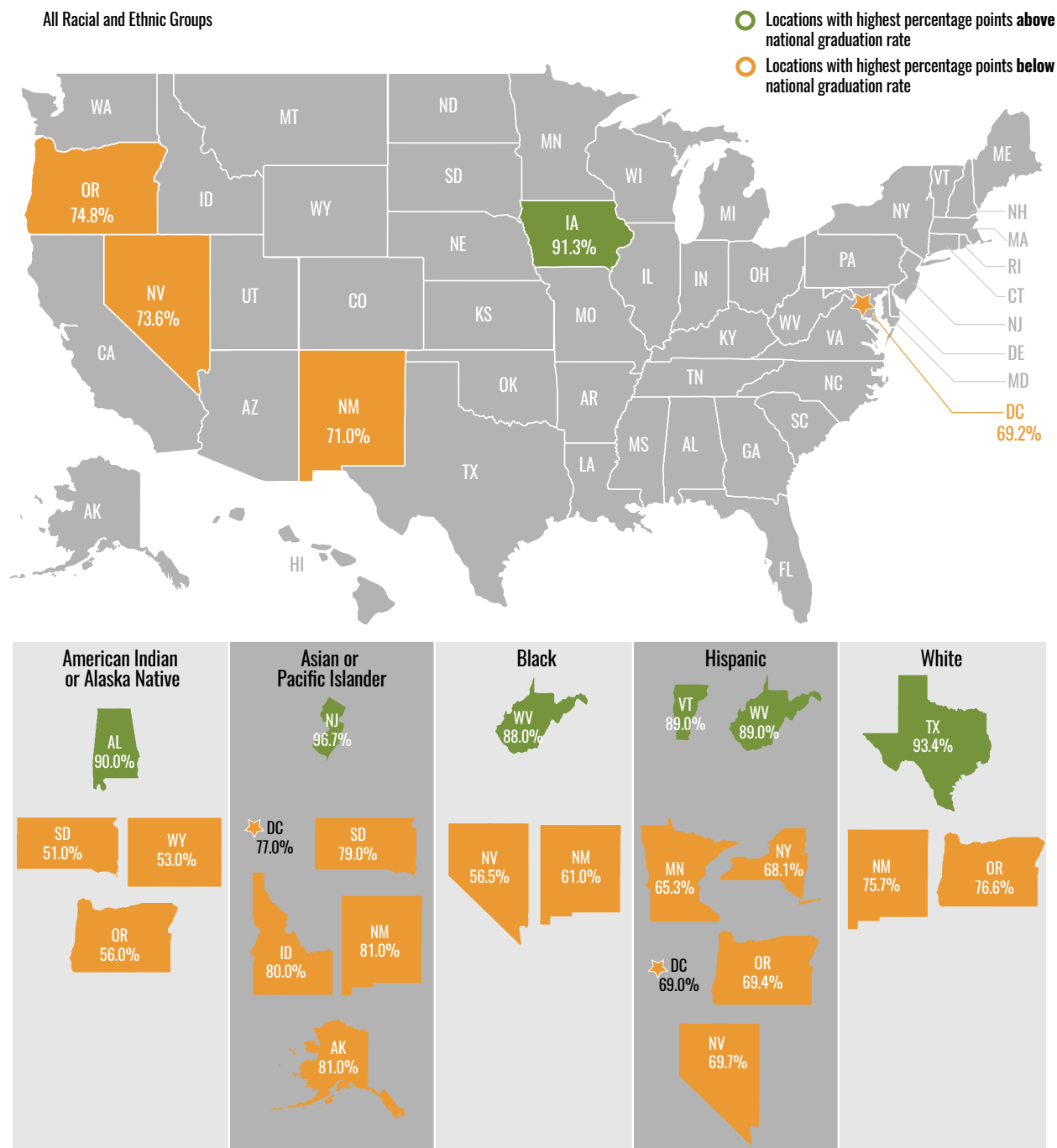
Source: U.S. Department of Education, EDData Data Groups 695 and 696, School Year (SY) 2015–16; October 25, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, EDData/Consolidated State Performance Report, SY 2012–13

Notes: Implementation of requirements for the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) varied by state. As a result, calculation of the ACGR may vary by state. Year-over-year variation of +/- 5% for any group for which cohort size was over 50 was reviewed through the U.S. Department of Education's Coordinated Data Quality Review. All states, with the exception of West Virginia, provided explanations for these variations. The data steward did not accept state comments for California, Illinois, Louisiana, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and the District of Columbia. These states and the District of Columbia, along with West Virginia, received notification of concerns around data quality that are expected to be resolved in the submission of future data. | Data for Idaho were not available for the 2012–13 academic year due to an approved reporting extension from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Although there was an increase in public high school graduation rates across all groups, differences remained in 2016 by race and ethnicity and location. In 2016, the national graduation rate of Asians or Pacific Islanders was 90.8 percent, compared with 88.3 percent for Whites, 79.3 percent for Hispanics, 76.4 percent for Blacks, and 71.9 percent for American Indians or Alaska Natives.

Figure 2.4: Public High School Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, by Location and Race and Ethnicity: 2016

	All racial and ethnic groups	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian or Pacific Islander	Black	Hispanic	White
National graduation rate	84.1%	71.9%	90.8%	76.4%	79.3%	88.3%



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Common Core of Data: America's Public Schools, 2016

Notes: For full state comparisons, please visit www.equityinhighered.org. Implementation of requirements for the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) varied by state. As a result, calculation of the ACGR may vary by state. Year-over-year variation of +/- 5% for any group for which cohort size was over 50 was reviewed through the U.S. Department of Education's Coordinated Data Quality Review. All states, with the exception of West Virginia, provided explanations for these variations. The data steward did not accept state comments for California, Illinois, Louisiana, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and the District of Columbia. These states and the District of Columbia, along with West Virginia, received notification of concerns around data quality that are expected to be resolved in the submission of future data.

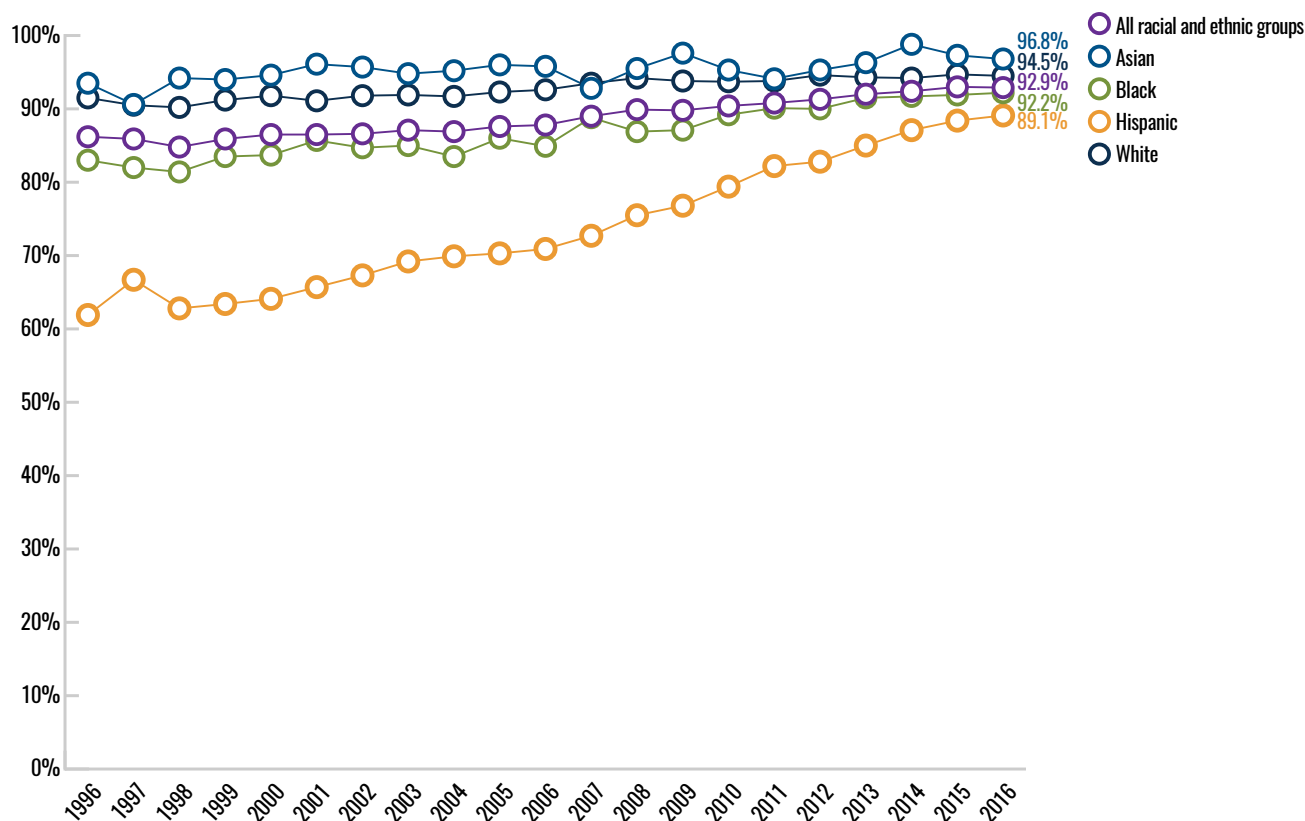
- In 2016, the public high school graduation rate for all students in Iowa was 7.2 percentage points higher than the national graduation rate (91.3 percent compared with 84.1 percent). The District of Columbia, New Mexico, and Nevada all had public high school graduation rates 9.3 percentage points or more below the national graduation rate.
- The public high school graduation rate of American Indians or Alaska Natives was highest in the state of Alabama (90.0 percent)—18.1 percentage points above the national rate of 71.9 percent for that group. South Dakota, Wyoming, and Oregon were 15.9 percentage points or more below the national graduation rate for these students.
- Asians or Pacific Islanders had the highest public high school graduation rates in New Jersey (96.7 percent)—5.9 percentage points higher than the national rate of 90.8 percent for these students. The District of Columbia, South Dakota, Idaho, Alaska, and New Mexico all had graduation rates 9.8 percentage points or more below the national public high school graduation rate for these students.
- Black students in West Virginia had the highest public high school graduation rate (88.0 percent). This rate was 11.6 percentage points higher than the national rate of 76.4 percent. Both Nevada and New Mexico were below the national rate for this group by more than 15 percentage points.
- The public high school graduation rates of Hispanic students in Vermont and West Virginia were almost 10 percentage points higher than the national rate of 79.3 percent for this group. Comparatively, Minnesota, New York, the District of Columbia, Oregon, and Nevada had high school graduation rates of almost 10 percentage points or more below the national rate for Hispanic students.
- The public high school graduation rate of White students in Texas was 5.1 percentage points higher than the national rate of 88.3 percent for this group. Both New Mexico and Oregon had graduation rates of more than 11 percentage points below the national rate for Whites.

HIGH SCHOOL STATUS COMPLETION RATE

Another metric of high school completion is the high school status completion rate. The high school status completion rate measures the percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States who have completed a high school diploma or alternative credential, such as a GED® credential. This rate excludes non-civilian and institutionalized members of the population and those still enrolled in K–12 education (NCES 2017). The high school status completion rate is calculated using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS), which allows for a look at long-term trends. Prior to 2003, the CPS reported only on Hispanic; White; Black; American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut; and Asian or Pacific Islander groups. In 2003, the Census Bureau changed the CPS to include new categories for Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders and individuals of more than one race, aligning CPS data with the outcomes of Census 2000. Because these changes provide individuals the opportunity to select the racial and ethnic groups with which they most identify, they present a more complete picture of the evolving demographics of the U.S. population (Bowler et al. 2003).

The high school status completion rate of adults ages 18 to 24 years old increased gradually from 86.2 percent in 1996 to 92.9 percent in 2016. Over these 20 years, completion by most racial and ethnic groups increased, although some groups saw greater increases than others.

Figure 2.5: High School Completion Rate of 18- to 24-Year-Olds Not Enrolled in High School (Status Completion Rate), by Race and Ethnicity: 1996 to 2016



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics, 2017, Table 219.65

Notes: The status completion rate is the number of 18- to 24-year-olds who are high school completers as a percentage of the total number of 18- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in high school or a lower level of education. High school completers include those with a high school diploma, as well as those with an alternative credential, such as a GED®. | Prior to 2003, Asian included Pacific Islander. | Current Population Survey data are based on sample surveys of the civilian noninstitutionalized population, which excludes persons in the military and persons living in institutions (e.g., prisons or nursing facilities). | Totals include other racial/ethnic groups not separately shown.

- Hispanic adults experienced the greatest growth in high school status completion rate, increasing from 61.9 percent in 1996 to 89.1 percent in 2016.
- The status completion rate of Black adults increased about 9 percentage points, from 83.0 percent in 1996 to 92.2 percent in 2016.
- Whites and Asians had the highest high school status completion rates in 1996, with slight increases of around 3 percentage points by 2016.

In 2006, women had a slightly higher high school status completion rate than men (89.2 percent and 86.5 percent, respectively). While the status completion rate for both groups increased over time, this gender gap remained. In 2016, women had a status completion rate of 94.3 percent, compared with 91.6 percent for men.

Table 2.1: High School Completion Rate of 18- to 24-Year-Olds Not Enrolled in High School (Status Completion Rate), by Gender and Race and Ethnicity: 2006 to 2016

		2006	2016
Men	All racial and ethnic groups	86.5%	91.6%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	78.8%	70.3%
	Asian	95.2%	97.4%
	Black	86.1%	88.7%
	Hispanic	65.7%	86.8%
	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	‡	‡
	White	92.0%	93.8%
	More than one race	90.8%	95.3%
Women	All racial and ethnic groups	89.2%	94.3%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	84.7%	79.8%
	Asian	96.4%	96.2%
	Black	83.9%	95.5%
	Hispanic	76.6%	91.3%
	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	‡	‡
	White	93.2%	95.1%
	More than one race	88.7%	97.1%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics, 2017, Table 219.67

Notes: The status completion rate is the number of 18- to 24-year-olds who are high school completers as a percentage of the total number of 18- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in high school or a lower level of education. High school completers include those with a high school diploma, as well as those with an alternative credential, such as a GED®. | Current Population Survey data are based on sample surveys of the civilian noninstitutionalized population, which excludes persons in the military and persons living in institutions (e.g., prisons or nursing facilities). | ‡ Reporting standards not met (too few cases for a reliable estimate).

- In 2016, American Indians or Alaska Natives had the largest gender gap, with 79.8 percent of women having completed a high school diploma or alternative credential, compared with 70.3 percent of men. Blacks had the second highest gender gap, with 95.5 percent of Black women having completed a high school diploma or alternative credential, compared with 88.7 percent of Black men.
- The status completion rate of Black women edged out that of White women by 0.4 percentage points (95.5 percent for Black women and 95.1 percent for White women).

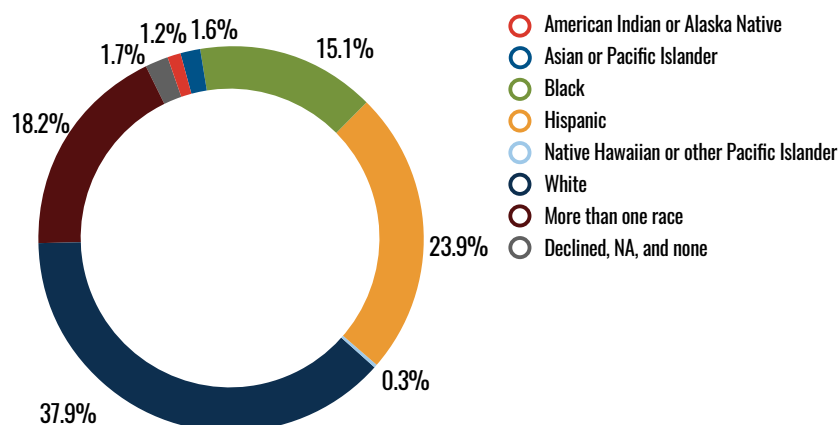
GED® TEST

The GED® test is a high school equivalency exam founded in 1942 by the American Council on Education (ACE). It is now administered by the GED Testing Service (GEDTS), which is a joint venture between ACE and Pearson. The GED® test focuses on four different subject areas: Mathematical Reasoning, Reasoning Through Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science (GED Testing Service 2018).

Between 2014 and 2018, over 965,000 people took one or more subject-area modules of the GED® test, one of the country's most well-known high school equivalency exams. Whites represented the largest share (37.9 percent), followed by Hispanics (23.9 percent), individuals of more than one race (18.2 percent), Blacks (15.1 percent), individuals who did not provide race and ethnicity information (1.7 percent), Asians (1.6 percent), American Indians or Alaska Natives (1.2 percent), and Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders (0.3 percent).⁴

The majority of GED® test takers between 2014 and 2018 completed the exam (70.2 percent), which means that they took all four subject-area modules of the test. Among those who completed, 85.3 percent passed the exam and received their GED® credential. The pass rate of all test takers, including those who did not complete the exam,⁵ was 59.9 percent. However, there was considerable variation across racial and ethnic groups in completion and pass rates.

Figure 2.6: GED® Test Takers, by Race and Ethnicity: 2014 to 2018



Source: GED® Testing Service

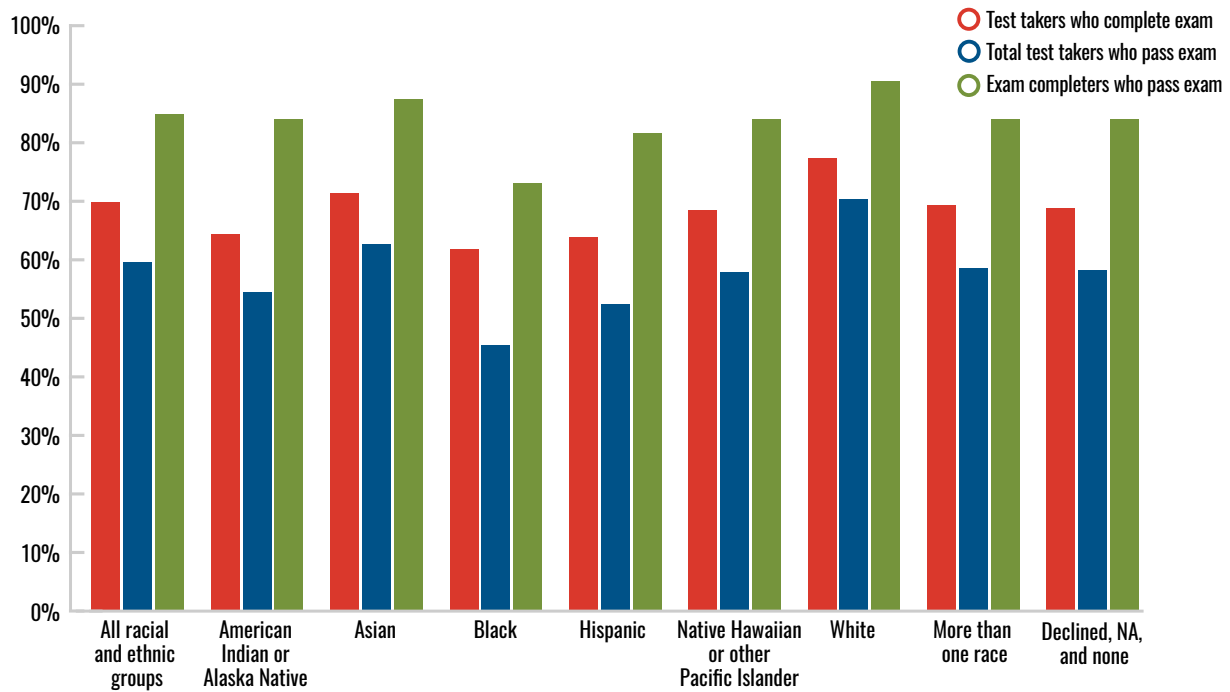
Note: Figure includes people who took at least one GED® operational test between 2014 and 2018.

- Whites and Asians had the highest completion rates (77.7 percent and 71.7 percent, respectively), while Hispanic and Black test takers had the lowest completion rates (64.2 percent and 62.2 percent, respectively).
- Among all test takers, including both completers and non-completers, Whites had the highest pass rate (70.7 percent), followed by Asians (63.0 percent). Blacks were the only group among whom less than half of all test takers passed the exam (45.7 percent).
- More than nine in 10 White test takers who completed the exam passed (91.0 percent)—the highest of any group. The greatest gap in pass rate among completers was between White and Black test takers, at nearly 18 percentage points.

⁴ Information on GED® test takers are updated regularly through GEDTS. Therefore, the data presented in this chapter reflect an estimation of the racial and ethnic backgrounds of GED® test takers as of the time of analysis.

⁵ The GED® test is structured in a way that allows test takers to take the four sections of the exam in any sequence or combination. Reasons for why students do not complete the exam vary, and may include but are not limited to family and work obligations, change in employment, and financial reasons.

Figure 2.7: GED® Test Performance, by Race and Ethnicity: 2014 to 2018



Source: GED® Testing Service

Note: Figure includes individuals who completed all four sections of the GED® exam between 2014 and 2018.

REFERENCES

- Bowler, Mary, Randy E. Ilg, Stephen Miller, Ed Robison, and Anne Polivka. 2003. *Revisions to the Current Population Survey Effective in January 2003*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. <https://www.bls.gov/cps/rvcps03.pdf>.
- Bransberger, Peace, and Demarée K. Michelau. 2016. *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates, 9th ed.* Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.
- GEDTS (GED Testing Service). 2018. "Test Subjects." https://ged.com/about_test/test_subjects.
- Heckman, James J., and Paul A. LaFontaine. 2010. "The American High School Graduation Rate: Trends and Levels." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 92 (2): 244–262.
- Murnane, Richard J. 2013. "U.S. High School Graduation Rates: Patterns and Explanations." *Journal of Economic Literature* 51 (2): 370–422.
- NCES (National Center for Education Statistics). 2017. *Digest of Education Statistics 2017*, Table 219.65. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_219.65.asp.