

POLICY ON POINT

August 2012

SREB

Reaching Higher Ground: SREB States Outpace U.S. Growth in High School Graduation Rates

The 2002 *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education called for SREB states to raise the percentages of all groups of students graduating from high school to above the national average, as part of the region's mission "to lead the nation in educational progress." Since then, the gains by the region as a whole and by individual states have been remarkable.

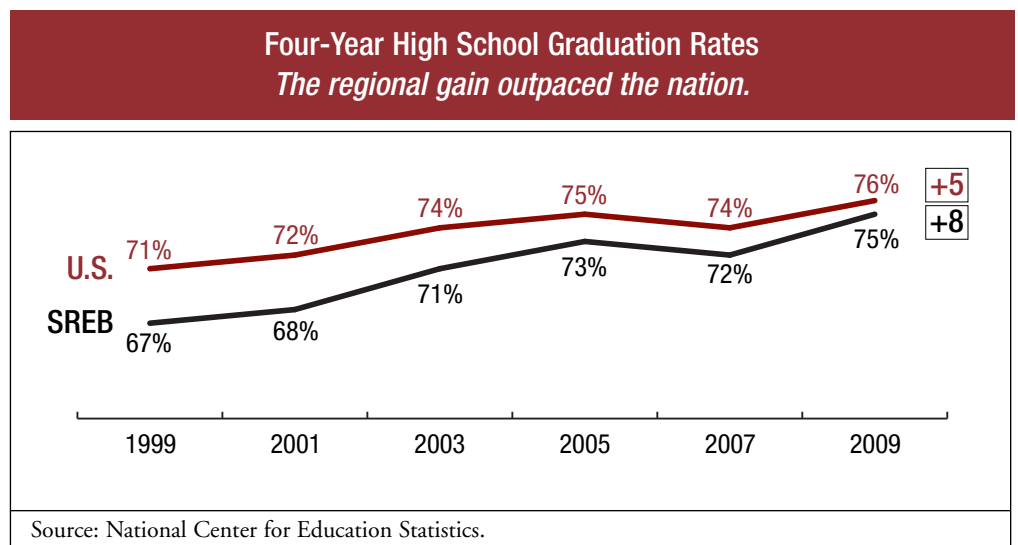
By 2009, the median graduation rate in the region had narrowed its historic gap with the nation to less than 1 percentage point — nearly meeting the rate goal. Moreover, the region almost doubled U.S. graduation rate *growth* — clearly leading the nation. (See Figure 1.) Increases in many SREB

states' rates from 1999 to 2009 also were largely responsible for helping drive up the nation's rate over the period.

Individual states make impressive gains

Almost every SREB state increased its high school graduation rate from 1999 to 2009. And, over half the SREB states *outpaced the nation's gains*. (See the Appendix for rates in all SREB states.) Tennessee's gains were a standout, leading the nation for the period with an increase of 19 points. Three other SREB states — Georgia, Kentucky and North Carolina — were in the top five in rate gains nationwide, along with Tennessee

Figure 1



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and New York. Taken together, the gains in these states helped push up the U.S. rate. But rate improvements alone were not the only factor. There is no doubt that without these states, the nation's gains would have been much smaller. (See Figure 2.)

The remarkable improvement in graduation rates and numbers of graduates in these seven SREB states — plus New York — led noted researcher Robert Balfanz in a 2012 report to name them “drivers” of change. States with large increases in the *number* of graduates also boosted the national rate over the period. These generally came from large states with more modest improvements in graduation rates. The top five states nationwide in increased numbers of graduates were Georgia, Florida, New York, North Carolina and Tennessee.

Student groups gain ground

Throughout the SREB region, a diversity of groups of students made important strides from 1999 to 2009 in pacing gains with their national counterparts and in closing achievement gaps. Black, Hispanic and white students in the region outpaced their peers nationally in increases in

graduation rates over the period. In 2009, the rate for black students in the region matched the rate for their national peers, and the rate for Hispanic students in the region exceeded the rate for their national peers. (See Table 1.) The rate for white students in the region narrowed the gap with their national peers from 7 percentage points to 4 points.

Policy shifts set the stage for gains

What set the stage for these higher graduation rates and increases in the number of graduates? States put in place a range of new policy efforts and reforms over the 10 years, from school accountability and assessment reforms, to curriculum alignment and enrollment strategies, more targeted professional development for teachers and more support programs for students. A strong sign that these comprehensive policy reforms paid off is the improvement in grade-level progression that occurred in most SREB states.

Research shows that as students make the transition from the middle grades to high school, they need to make steady progress from grade-to-grade if they are going to graduate on time, four years later. In SREB states that improved

Figure 2

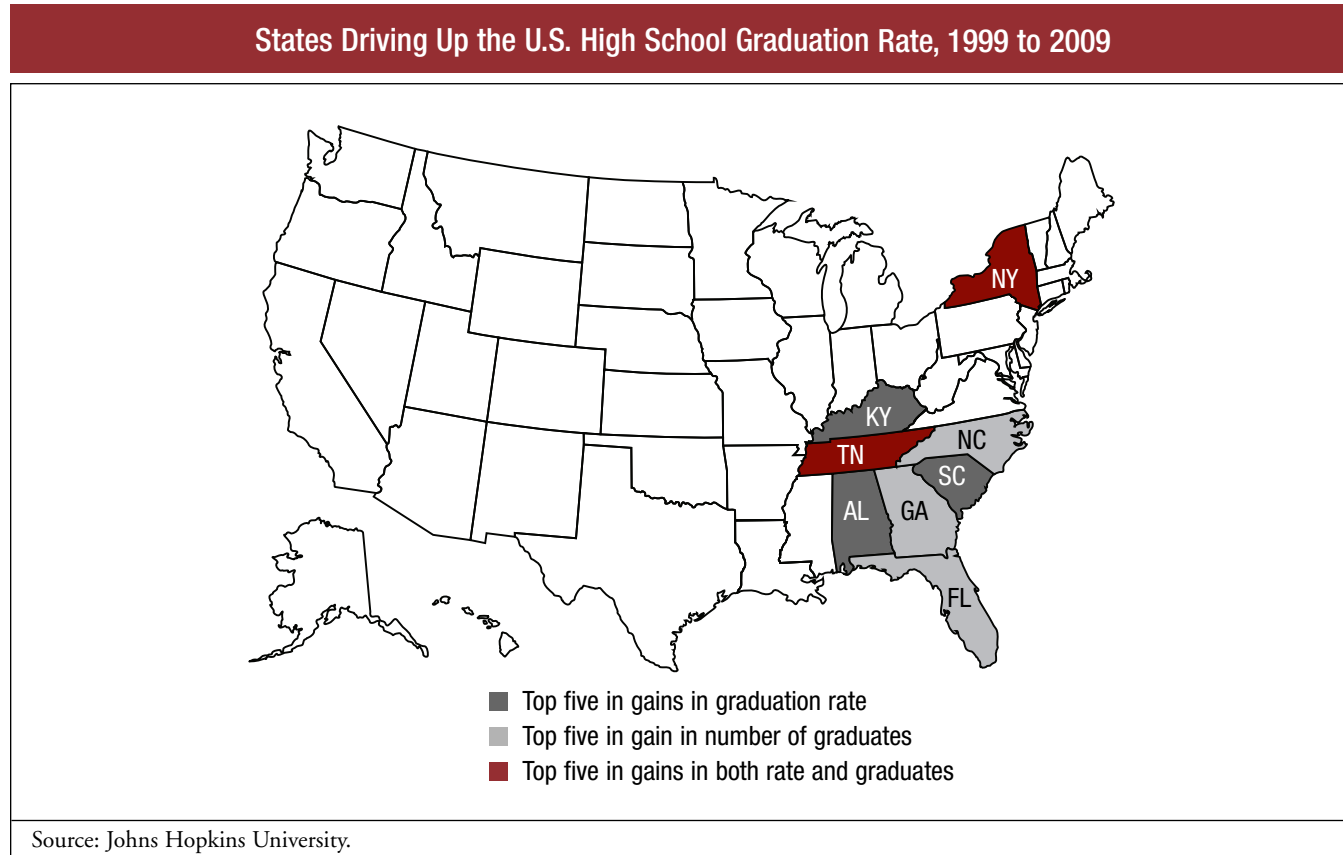


Table 1

Graduation Rates by Student Group					
		1999	2009	Percentage-Point Change 1999 to 2009	SREB Rate Compared with Nation in 2009
Black					
	U.S.	53%	64%	11	Matched
	SREB	52	64	12	
Hispanic					
	U.S.	60	66	6	Exceeded
	SREB	61	69	8	
White					
	U.S.	76	82	6	Trailed
	SREB	69	78	9	

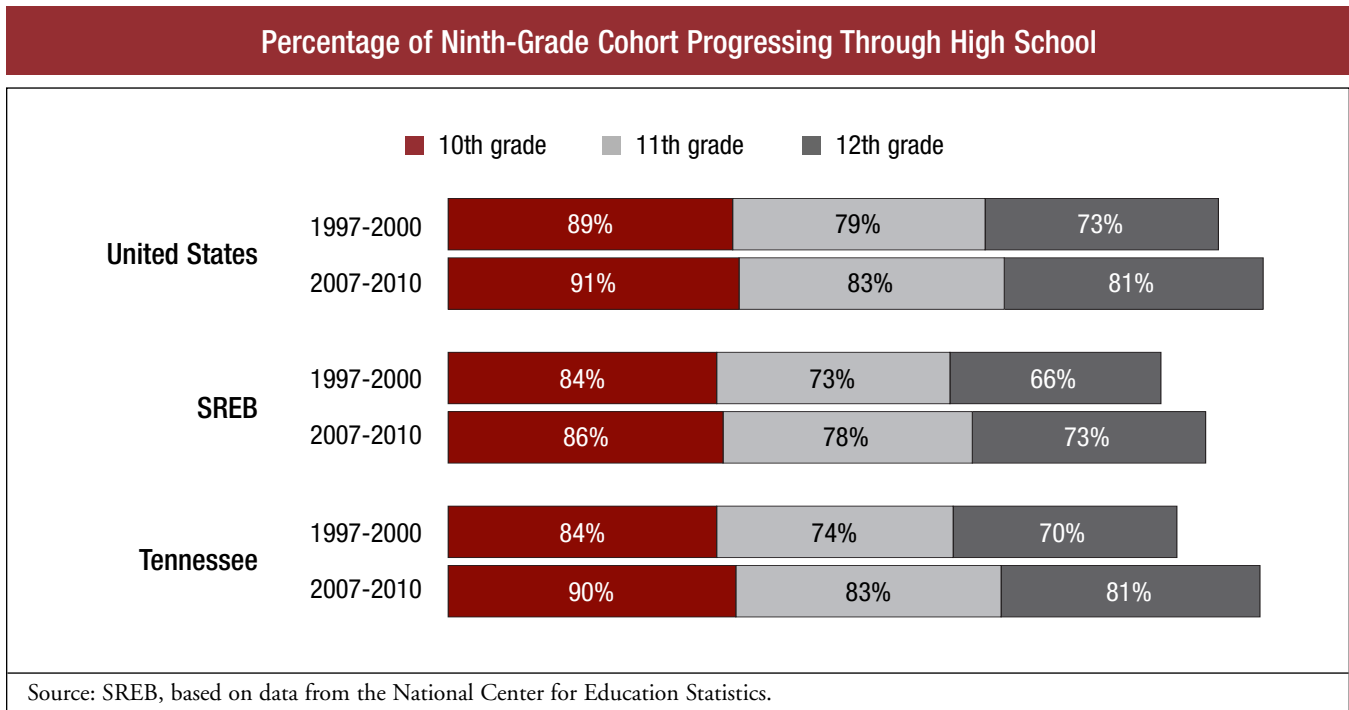
Notes: Rates are based on the Averaged Freshman Graduate Rate. See the Appendix for how it is calculated. Gains by student groups that exceeded U.S. gains are in **bold**.

Source: SREB, based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

grade-level progression, the high school graduation rate also increased. For instance, Tennessee’s astonishing graduation rate gains resulted from steady improvements in the progression of ninth-graders to 12th grade over a decade.

The percentage of ninth-graders from 1997 who entered 12th grade in 2000 was 70 percent; the rate reached 81 percent for 2007’s ninth-graders who entered 12th grade in 2010. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3



“Dropout factories” decline

One specific effort in many SREB states paid off particularly well. SREB states improved in their strategies for intervening in low-performing schools that produce a low percentage of high school graduates — often referred to by researchers as “dropout factories.” A 2012 study from Johns Hopkins University identified 12 states that substantially reduced the number of students attending these “dropout factory” schools — eight were SREB states. The study also identified the 15 top states with increases in high school graduates. Eight of these also were SREB states. In both cases, they were the *same states*: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas. (See Figure 4.) The research team concluded that this was not coincidence; states that reduced the number of students attending dropout factories schools also produced more high school graduates.

States reform assessments

Among the policy changes that SREB states implemented over the decade, one started in the region and has been adopted in 13 SREB states: the switch from comprehensive high school assessments to end-of-course (EOC) exams. It now has been adopted widely in states outside the region. The newer EOC exams are entirely or partially replacing traditional comprehensive exams. State policy leaders believe the exams improve overall accountability, increase academic rigor, and improve alignment between state standards and the high school curriculum. As SREB reported in 2012’s *A Decade of Progress*, several SREB states have tied EOC results to final course grade requirements, and nine now also tie EOC results to their high school diploma requirements. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 4

SREB States Improving High School Graduation Rates Reducing Students in Dropout Factories, 2002 to 2009



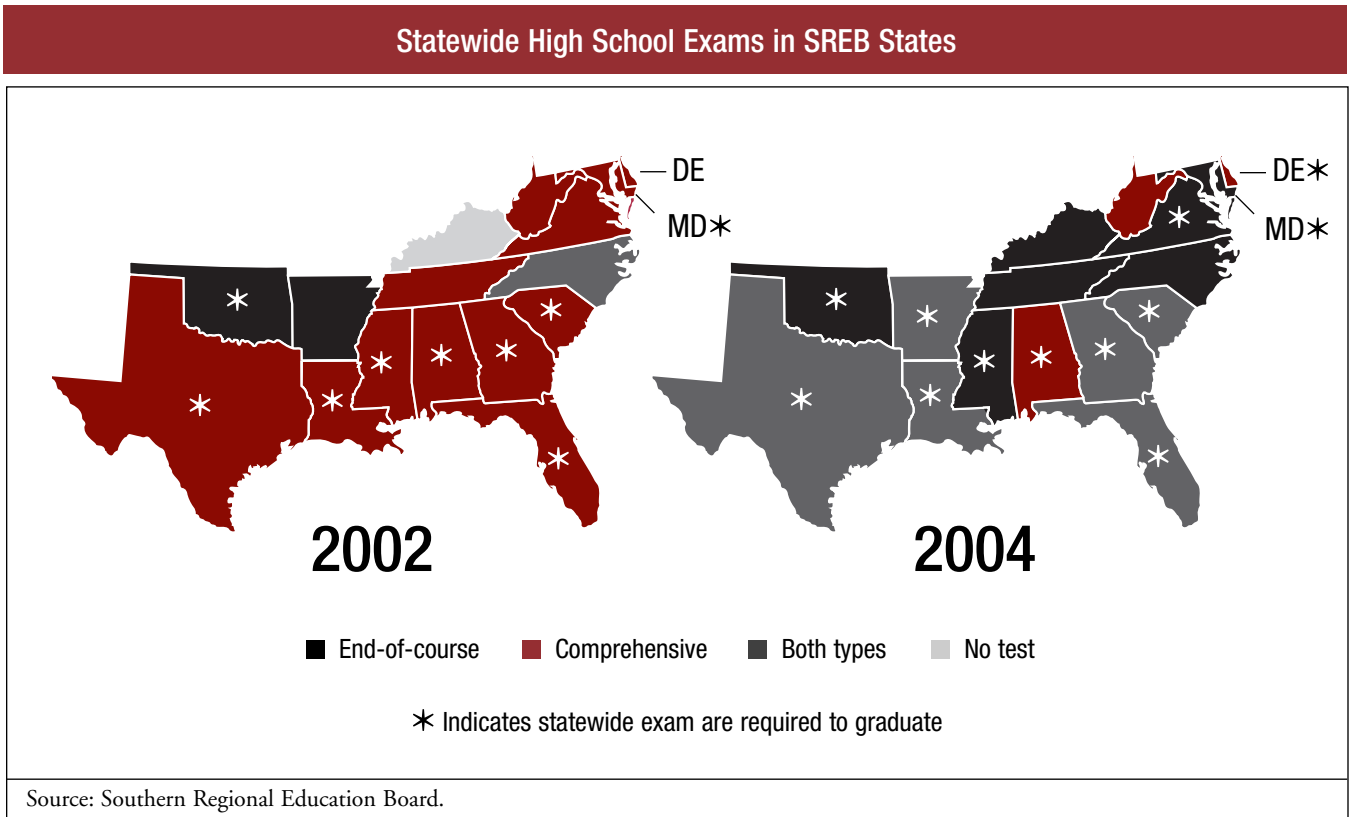
★ Among 12 states in United States with majority of new graduates

★ Among 15 states in United States in reducing students in dropout factories

Note: Dropout factories are schools that get 60 percent or less of ninth-graders to the senior year in three years.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics and Johns Hopkins University.

Figure 5



Summary

SREB states made significant gains in high school graduation rates from 1999 to 2009. More than half of the 16 SREB states achieved graduation rate increases that surpassed the nation’s gains over the 10-year period. Six SREB states even had graduation rates that were higher than the nation’s by 2009, while two more were within a percentage point of the nation by 2009.

Fewer students attended dropout factories, and more were successfully transitioning through each grade level in high school toward the senior year. As a result, greater numbers of ninth-graders across the region completed high school successfully in four years. With a remarkable decade of progress behind them, the SREB states can look ahead knowing that they are on track to reach even higher ground on high school graduation rates.

References

A Decade of Progress. Series of 16 SREB state goals reports. Southern Regional Education Board, 2012.

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Balfanz, Robert, and Nettie Legters. *LOCATING THE DROPOUT CRISIS: Which High Schools Produce the Nation’s Dropouts? Where Are They Located? Who Attends Them?* Johns Hopkins University, Report 70, September 2004.

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Appendix

SREB uses the *Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate* (AFGR) to compare state-level high school graduation rates. The AFGR was adopted in 2004 by the National Center for Education Statistics to calculate a comparable graduation rate for all 50 states and territories. This rate was chosen because it was considered the most accurate way to **estimate** graduation rates until states had more comprehensive data systems that could provide the data needed to calculate **actual** cohort graduation rates. Before the AFGR was adopted, no single rate was available to compare all 50 states.

	Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate, Class of 2009	Percentage-Point Change 1999-2009
United States	76%	5
SREB median	75	12
Alabama	70	9
Arkansas	74	0
Delaware	74	4
Florida	69	8
Georgia	68	11
Kentucky	78	8
Louisiana	67	6
Maryland	80	3
Mississippi	62	3
North Carolina	75	10
Oklahoma	77	1
South Carolina	66	7
Tennessee	77	19
Texas	75	6
Virginia	78	2
West Virginia	77	-1
Notes: The SREB median is the average of the two SREB middle states. States that exceeded national gains and/or the national rate are shown in bold .		
Sources: National Center for Education Statistics and SREB.		

The Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate divides the number of diploma recipients in a senior class by the estimated first-time, ninth-grade class size four years earlier (using an average enrollment figure based on and average of eighth-, ninth- and 10th-grade enrollment). AFGR cannot account for those students who transfer in or out of a class over the four years.

$$\begin{array}{c}
 \text{Number of Graduates} \\
 \text{With a Regular Diploma} \\
 \div \\
 \text{Estimated} \\
 \text{First-Time 9th-Grade} \\
 \text{Enrollment for that Class} \\
 = \\
 \text{Percent Graduating}
 \end{array}$$