

KNOCKING AT THE COLLEGE DOOR

Executive Summary

Projections of High School Graduates • December 2016

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For nearly 40 years, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) has produced projections of high school graduates. The purpose of *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates* is to equip decision-makers at all levels with information about how the numbers of high school graduates are likely to change in the years ahead. These projections inform a broad audience; stakeholders including policymakers, elected officials and their staffs, state departments of education and higher education, postsecondary system heads, K-12 and school district leaders, administrators at public and private colleges and universities, researchers, policy organization staff, media, and others rely on them for a broad variety of uses.

This 9th edition of *Knocking at the College Door* spans school years 2000-01 through 2031-32. As in previous editions, it examines data on public and private schools and projects the number of high school graduates for the nation, four geographic regions, the 50 states, and the District of Columbia. And, for the first time, WICHE also includes projections for Guam and Puerto Rico. Finally, *Knocking* also presents projections for public high school graduates, disaggregated by race/ethnicity.

U.S. High School Graduating Classes Have Reached a Plateau

After steady increases in the overall number of high school graduates over the last 15 years, the U.S. is headed into a period of stagnation.

WICHE's projections indicate that the number of graduates in each graduating class will average around 3.4 million through 2023, before peaking at 3.56 million prior to 2026. At the same time, the number of high school graduates from private religious and nonsectarian schools is projected to decline. Key points include:

- ▶ The nation is projected to produce fewer high school graduates in all of the 10 graduating classes between 2014 and 2023, compared to the highest recorded number of graduates in 2013. The year of greatest decline is projected to be 2017, with about 81,000 fewer graduates (2.3 percent). Three years of growth are projected for 2024 to 2026, reaching about 94,000 more graduates in 2025 (2.7 percent) than in 2013. Between 2027 and 2032, the average size of graduating classes is expected to be smaller than those in 2013.
- ▶ The number of high school graduates from private religious and nonsectarian schools is projected to decline at an even greater rate than the overall trend, from 302,000 in 2011 (the last year for which confirmed graduate counts are available for private schools) to about 220,000 by the early 2030s – a decrease of 80,000 graduates, or 26 percent. Furthermore, graduates from private schools will represent a gradually smaller share of the total by the end of the projection period, from 10 percent of all graduates nationally in 2000 to 9 percent in 2010 to 7 percent by the early 2030s.

Visit www.wiche.edu/knocking to access data, individual state profiles, presentations, and copies of the report.

Swift Change in the Racial/Ethnic Composition of Public High School Graduates

The pending national plateau is largely fueled by a decline in the White student population and counterbalanced by growth in the number of non-White public school graduates – Hispanics and Asian/Pacific Islanders in particular. Overall, there will be consistent declines in the number of White public high school graduates and robust growth in the number of public high school graduates of color (or, technically speaking, “non-White” graduates) in the coming years. Key points include:

- ▶ **White public high school graduates.** By 2030, the number of White public school graduates is projected to decrease by 14 percent compared to 2013. Even in 2024-26, when the nation is projected to see some overall increase in the number of high school graduates, there will be about 110,000 fewer White public high school graduates than there were in 2013. The pace of the decline in the number of White public high school graduates is projected to further accelerate after 2025. By 2032, the number of White public high school graduates is projected to be 1.6 million, which is about 252,000 fewer than in 2013. Between the first (2013-14) and last (2031-32) projected years, the share of total high school graduates represented by White high school graduates is projected to drop six percentage points, and over the three decades between the first historical year (2000-01) and the last projected year (2031-32) included in this edition, that share is projected to drop 19 percent.
- ▶ **Non-White public high school graduates.** Between 2018 and 2028, growth in the number of non-White public high school graduates is projected to replace the numerical decrease in White graduates to a varying extent. In the first five of those years, between 2018 and 2023, the projected increase in the number of non-White public high school graduates could replace the decline in the number of White high school graduates (public and private combined) almost one-to-one. In the years of rapid increase in the number of non-White public high school graduates from 2024 to 2028 – when non-White public high school graduates are projected to number between 1.5 and 1.6 million – for every 100 White high school graduates “lost,” there will be an increase of 150 non-White high school graduates. However, in the last years of the projections (2029 to 2032), the number of non-White high school graduates will then fall back to below 1.5 million, which is about the same level as 2020 but still 12 percent higher than in 2013 – an effect of the overall decline in birth rates that began after 2007.
- ▶ **Hispanic public high school graduates.** The number of Hispanic high school graduates is projected to increase by 50 percent or more from the first projected year, 2014, to the high point of 920,000 graduates around 2025.
- ▶ **Asian/Pacific Islander public high school graduates.** About 58,000 more Asian/Pacific Islander public high school graduates are expected by the early 2030s compared with 2013, representing an increase of up to 30 percent.
- ▶ **Native Hawai’ian/Pacific Islander public high school graduates.** Although it was not possible to produce reliable projections for Native Hawai’ian/Pacific Islander public high school graduates, the data indicate that between 2010-11 and 2013-14, Hawai’ian/Pacific Islanders represented about 7 percent of the total combined number of Asian/Pacific Islander students, or about 10,000 public high school graduates on average in these years.
- ▶ **Black public high school graduates.** The number of Black public high school graduates recently reached a high of about 480,000 in 2010 through 2012. But between now

and the early 2030s, the number of Black, non-Hispanic public high school graduates is projected to gradually decline by about 6 percent.

- ▶ **American Indian/Alaska Native public high school graduates.** American Indian/Alaska Native public high school graduates represent only about 1 percent of the total number of public high school graduates currently, or about 32,000 graduates annually in recent years. This group is projected to decline in number in every year of the projections, to about 25,000 by 2025 and 23,000 by the early 2030s, at which point it will make up only about 0.7 percent of all public high school graduates.
- ▶ **Two or More Races public high school graduates.** It was not possible to produce reliable projections from the available data for public high school graduates of Two or More Races. The data, however, indicate that students of Two or More Races represented 1 to 3 percent of all non-Hispanic public high school students in the years between 2010-11 and 2013-14.

Regional Variation

The national projections of the total number of public and private high school graduates mask significant variations among the nation's four geographic regions. In general, two overriding patterns have been identified among the four regions throughout the years projected: growth in the number of high school graduates in the South and West, and continuing declines in the number of high school graduates in the Midwest and Northeast. Key points include:

- ▶ **The South.** The South is the only region that is projected to experience an increase in the number of high school graduates for every year of the projections, although that number is expected to contract after 2025. In the early 2000s, about one-third (33 percent)

of the nation's high school graduates were located in the South, and the region's share of the national total grew to 43 percent, or 1.23 million high school graduates, by 2013. During the few years of high growth that are expected to end around 2025, it is projected that Southern states will generate almost 47 percent of the nation's high school graduates, or 1.35 million graduates. By that point, it is projected that the number of graduates in the region will be about 10 percent more than the 2012-13 figure. After this high point, the South is projected to produce about 45 percent of the nation's high school graduates through the end of the projection period – an annual average of 1.25 million high school graduates.

- ▶ **The West.** The West generated 25 percent of the nation's high school graduates in the early 2000s. By 2010, high school graduates from the West represented about 29 percent of the national total (813,400 graduates); that number is projected to be about 30 percent of the total throughout the projection period. The West is projected to reach its new high point in 2024 with about 860,000 high school graduates. It will remain the second-highest-producing region behind the South during the course of the projections, although it is expected to drop back slightly to 28 percent of the total (about 784,000 graduates) by the early 2030s.
- ▶ **The Midwest.** In 2013, the Midwest generated 22 percent of the nation's high school graduates (about 762,000). That share is projected to decrease to 19 percent by 2030, meaning 93,000 fewer high school graduates by that time (a decline of 12 percentage points compared to 2013).
- ▶ **The Northeast.** The trend is broadly the same for the Northeast, which produced around 639,000 graduates in 2013, or 18 percent of the national total. By 2030, the number of high school graduates in the Northeast is projected to decrease to around 567,000

graduates. This number will represent 72,000 fewer graduates by 2030 (a decline of 11 percentage points compared to 2013), and will lead to the Northeast contributing only 16 percent of the nation's high school graduates by the early 2030s.

First-Time Projections for U.S. Pacific Territories and Freely Associated States

For the first time, WICHE attempted projections for Guam and Puerto Rico (data limitations prevented WICHE from making projections for the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands). Key points include:

- ▶ **Guam.** Projections indicate that Guam will continue to steadily produce an average of 1,500 public high school graduates per year through the Class of 2023, after which it appears there will be an uptick in high school graduates to about 1,800 on average, per year, related to growth in the number of births from 2006 to 2012 and solid enrollment progression.
- ▶ **Puerto Rico.** Puerto Rico public schools produced between 29,000 and 32,000 high school graduates in the years between 2000-01 and 2008-09. Declines in births and enrollments begins to show at the high school level most notably beginning in 2009-10, and continuing in each subsequent year. The projections indicate that the Class of 2020 public high school graduates will fall below 20,000. And that by the Class of 2028, there will be less than half the number of public high school graduates as 20 years prior, below 15,000.

Trends with Younger Youth Drive High School Graduate Production

WICHE relies on data about the number of recent births and recent K-12 enrollment counts to generate the high school graduate projections

in *Knocking at the College Door*. While these births and enrollment data are not the focus of this publication, WICHE does generate K-12 enrollment projections and makes them available because they provide useful information about the young children who will ultimately move through the educational pipeline and emerge as high school graduates over the course of the next 15 years or so. Key points include:

- ▶ **White public school students.** The greatest declines are among the numbers of White public school students, whose enrollments declined 8 percent (from 26.3 million to 24.2 million) between 2000-01 and 2010-11, and are projected to decline another 7 percent (to 22.4 million) by 2020-21. White students comprised 54 percent of total public school enrollments in the 2010-11 school year, and 56 percent of middle and high school enrollments, respectively. By school year 2020-21, White students are projected to represent just 50 percent of public school enrollments overall, and this number is projected to dip below 50 percent in the middle and high school grades by school year 2028-29, the last year of WICHE's high school enrollment projections.
- ▶ **Hispanic public school students.** Data show just how substantial the contribution of Hispanic students was to public school enrollments overall between 2000 and 2010, increasing from 6.8 million in 2000-01 to 10.1 million in 2020-21 – an increase from 16 percent to 23 percent of all public school students. By grade level, the number of Hispanic public elementary school students increased by 39 percent, 49 percent at the middle school level, and 68 percent at the high school level. The number of Hispanic middle and high school students is projected to continue increasing at a swift pace, by 29 percent and 35 percent, respectively, between 2010-11 and 2020-21. However, the

previous rates of increase do not appear to be sustained at the elementary school level, at which the number of Hispanic elementary school students is projected to increase by only 1 percent through 2020-21. Past 2020-21, trends in the number of Hispanic public high school students will follow the overall trend downward. By school year 2020-21, Hispanic students are projected to account for 26 percent of all public school first- through fifth-graders. Also by school year 2020-21 and going forward throughout the projections, Hispanic students are projected to account for 26 to 28 percent of all public middle school and high school students.

- ▶ **Black public school students.** The total number of Black public school students is expected to remain relatively steady compared with the other student populations. The number of Black public elementary school students is projected to decline by 3 percent from 3.01 million in 2010-11 to around 2.93 million by 2020-21. The number of Black public middle school students will increase by 2 percent from 1.82 million in 2010-11 to 1.86 million students by 2020-21, and then decline by about 7 percent, to about 1.74 million students, by 2025-26. The number of Black public high school students is projected to decline by 7 percent from 2.47 million in 2010-11 to 2.31 million by 2020-21, and then decline another 2 percent by 2028-29. Between 2000-01 and 2010-11, the number of Black public high school students declined by a percentage point among total enrollments, in part due to small numerical declines but primarily as a result of the strong increase in the number of Hispanic students. By 2010-11, Black public high school students comprised 16 percent of public school elementary and middle school enrollments and 17 percent of public high school enrollments. The percentage of Black students enrolled in public high school is expected to remain at or very

near this number throughout the course of the projections.

- ▶ **Asian/Pacific Islander public school students.** Asian/Pacific Islander public school students are the only student population that is projected to consistently add K-12 public school enrollments throughout the projections, at all school levels. Between 2010-11 and 2020-21, Asian/Pacific Islander public school elementary enrollments are projected to increase by 7 percent (an increase of about 308,000 students), middle school students by 12 percent (155,000), and high school students by 11 percent (224,000). Even in the later years of the projections, when all other student populations are expected to decline in number, the number of Asian/Pacific Islander students is expected to increase. The projections show there will be an additional 7 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander middle school students between 2020-21 and 2025-26, and 10 percent more Asian/Pacific Islander public high school students between 2020-21 and 2028-29. The total number of Asian/Pacific Islander public high school students is projected to increase past 1 million by 2028-29.
- ▶ **Native Hawai'ian/Pacific Islander public school students.** Due to data limitations, WICHE was unable to produce reliable projections for Native Hawai'ian/Pacific Islander public high school students. The available data, however, indicate that between 2010-11 and 2013-14, Hawai'ian/Pacific Islanders represented about 7 percent of the total combined number of Asian/Pacific Islander students at each school level – elementary, middle, and high school (the number of Native Hawai'ian/Pacific Islander public school students decreased about 2 percent between school year 2012-13 and 2013-14, which is somewhat contrary to the expected trend).

► **American Indian/Alaska Native public school students.**

American Indian/Alaska Native students make up roughly 1 percent of all public school students at all levels. Overall, the number of American Indian/Alaska Native students is projected to decrease over the course of the projections. The number of American Indian/Alaska Native public elementary school students is projected to decline by 14 percent between 2010-11 and 2020-21, from about 215,000 to about 184,500 students. At the middle school level, the number is projected to decline by 13 percent by 2020-21 and another 11 percent by 2025-26, from about 131,000 students in 2010-11 to 101,500 students by 2025-26. The number of American Indian/Alaska Native public high school students is projected to decline by 28 percent (from about 175,000 to about 125,000 students) between 2010-11 and 2028-29.

► **Two or More Races public school students.**

Due to data limitations, WICHE was not able to produce reliable projections for public school students in the Two or More Races category. Students of Two or More Races represented 3 percent of non-Hispanic students in the first through fifth grades in 2010-11, and 5 percent by 2013-14, a 33 percent increase over these four years. In 2013-14, they represented 4 percent of non-Hispanic sixth to eighth graders, and 3 percent of high school students. Nationally, the number of reported students increased by 10 percent or more each year between 2010-11 and 2013-14. These are unusually high rates of growth, which make the accuracy of extrapolated results questionable.

► **Private school students.** The number of private school students dipped below 10 percent of total high school enrollments by 2010-11, and this population is projected to decline in both number and share throughout the projection period – down to 6 to 8

percent of total enrollments across school levels in the later years of the projections. The declines are projected to be steepest over the next few years, and then should level off somewhat. The number of private elementary and middle school students is projected to decrease 9 percent and 14 percent, respectively, from 2010-11 through 2020-21. Private high school enrollment is expected to decline 22 percent over this period. Private school enrollment at the middle school and high school levels is projected to decline at about the same rate as overall enrollments in the later years of the projections.

Policy Questions and Implications

Many public policy questions and implications arise from an examination of the data in *Knocking at the College Door*, including short- and long-term considerations to be addressed all along the educational pathway, from the K-12 achievement and postsecondary attainment gaps between certain populations of students to related implications for the workforce. WICHE encourages all those with a stake in education to use these data in schools, districts, and institutions, as well as in state and federal policymaking, to provide more high-quality educational opportunities for all students.



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