



What's Going On with High School Graduation Rates in Missouri?

Published on *Show-Me Institute* (<https://showmeinstitute.org>)



By: Susan Pendergrass

If you google “What is the value of a high school diploma?” you get some pretty inspiring results: *“Though it may seem like a cliché, the value of a high school diploma cannot be overstated. Graduating from high school offers tangible career benefits as well as intangible value to the holder.”* Or: *“A high school diploma is more than just a piece of paper. It’s a promise we make to our children: put in the hard work to earn one, and you’ll be on the path to achieve your goals in life.”*

I guess it’s good news that Missouri’s graduation rate in 2017 was nearly 90 percent—higher than the national average. But have we really put those students on the “path to achieve their goals in life”? Or has a high school diploma become little more than a participation trophy?

Consider that in 2017, the percentages of Missouri 11th-graders who scored Proficient or above on the state assessments were 35 percent in English/language arts, 15 percent in math, and 20 percent in science. And, according to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), just 42.5 percent of 2017 graduates were “College or Career Ready”—meaning that they met or exceeded the state standards for the ACT, SAT, COMPASS, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) or they received and industry recognized credential (IRC).

This is backed up by a 2011 study commissioned by the Missouri Department of Higher Education, which found that 64 percent of Missouri students who were first-time

undergraduates at public two-year institutions took at least one remedial course, including 56 percent who needed remedial math. At public four-year institutions the numbers were better, but still one in five students took at least one remedial course. Taking remedial courses is expensive and discouraging.

Recently, stories of “graduation rate malfeasance” have surfaced in nearly 10 states. Nationally, graduation rates are at an all-time high even as rates of proficiency have stagnated or declined. What good is it to increase graduation rates if academic performance and college readiness aren't improving?

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in 2015, moves much of the responsibility for school accountability back to states. ESSA required states to submit accountability plans that include graduation rates as a measure of school quality. Most states are now implementing their approved plans and, sure enough, graduation rates are taking off. Does that mean we're holding schools more accountable? Probably not.

As was pointed out in a recent essay by the Show-Me Institute, accountability plans—even the most complicated ones – can be toothless, gamed, and even ignored. Missouri has an opportunity to design and implement an accountability plan that gives parents meaningful information about how their child's school is performing. They can also give parents options when their child's school doesn't measure up or isn't a good fit.

A high school diploma should be more than a piece of paper. Missouri's education system is responsible for doing more than just issuing diplomas - they should be making sure that there is something behind the diplomas they issue.

About the Author



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Susan Pendergrass was Vice President of Research and Evaluation for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools before joining the Show-Me Institute. Prior to coming to the National Alliance, Susan was a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of Education during the Bush administration and a senior research scientist at the National Center for Education Statistics during the Obama administration. She earned a Ph.D. in Public Policy from George Mason University.

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