

The mystery of the disappearing students

guest commentary

By Jared Polis and Patricia Haynes

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Colorado is about to solve a major mystery.

The state currently reports a high school graduation rate of more than 93 percent. Yet national analysts and the Colorado Children's Campaign find that only about two-thirds of all Colorado's ninth-graders finish high school on time. More than 30 percent of our students never get a diploma, and about half of Colorado's black and Hispanic students fail to graduate. So if only two-thirds of our ninth-grade students go on to graduate four years later, how could the state graduation rate be 83 percent?

The mystery will soon be solved. Colorado's official graduation rate is about to drop dramatically – and that's actually going to be a good thing. The "official" rate will not decrease because more children are leaving high school without a diploma, but rather because the state recently improved the way we count students and compute statistics. The new approach is going to generate much more accurate, meaningful and sobering numbers and will finally bring the official data in line with reality.

Teachers and school leaders need not to feel defensive about Colorado's graduation crisis. This is not a time to weaken out support for public education. Instead, we urge people to look at this information and ask: What can be done to remedy this problem?

Much can be done. Armed with this more realistic information regarding the size of the dropout problem, it is time to take action and make the changes necessary in our public high schools so that more students graduate and are prepared with the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century.

For the past 18 months, Colorado's state leaders have discussed the urgent need for high school reform. We led some of these discussions by co-chairing the Colorado Commission for High School Improvement, a bipartisan group of education and policy leaders convened by the Colorado Children's Campaign.

The commission developed four recommendations, each accompanied with specific strategies to raise student performance, close the achievement gaps and prepare all students for success. (The commission's report is available online at www.coloradokids.org) Specifically, the commission urges schools and districts to improve student transitions to and from high school and by approaching education from preschool through college as an integrated and seamless system; and educating students and parents about college admissions and financial aid. Expand school choice and alternatives by creating small high schools and identifying and replicating high-performing schools; empowering parents, students and teachers with high-quality information to make school choices; establishing high performance standards and holding all schools accountable; providing additional pathways for earning a diploma and college credits, including online education and expanded dual enrollment options, and ensuring equitable outcomes of choice systems.

Use existing and new resources and data more effectively by investing in additional supports for low-performing students; increasing the amount and improving efficiency in the use of resources, enhancing school-level control and flexibility; and improving the quality and use of outcome data, including more accurate and reliable student achievement, high school graduation and dropout rates, as well as school finance data.

Since each community has different characteristics, challenges and strengths, the commission encourages approaches that are tailored to the unique needs of each district's students and families.

We have many fine high schools across the state and many effective programs. Thousands of teachers, school leaders and parents are doing tremendous work, fundamentally enriching the lives of the young people they inspire, teach, mentor and love. These successful and innovative models can be replicated and expanded.

If we all accept the challenge of pursuing significant high school reform, we must also find the will and resources to create change.

Many educational leaders in our state have begun working on these tasks. We invite and encourage all Coloradans to join us in this vital effort. In the long run, we look forward to Colorado's graduation rate going back up again, not by reverting to bad math, but by helping all our young people graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills the need to succeed as adults.

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