

OPINION & COMMENTARY

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Dropout factories

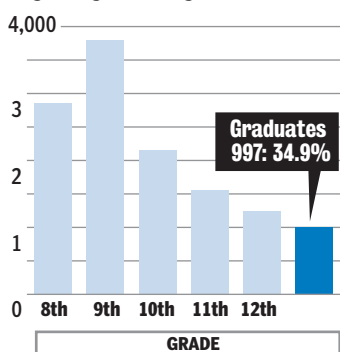
IPS high schools are among nation's worst in producing graduates.

WHERE DID THEY GO?

The number of students in the Indianapolis Public Schools class of 2004 declined precipitously from eighth grade until graduation.

IPS Class of 2004 enrollment

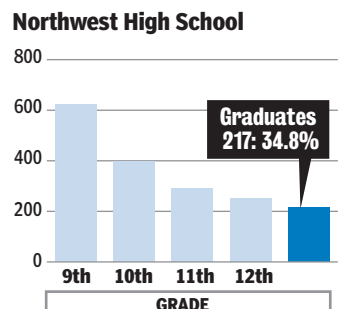
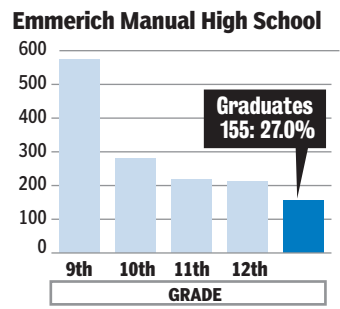
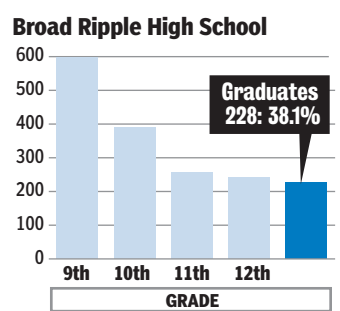
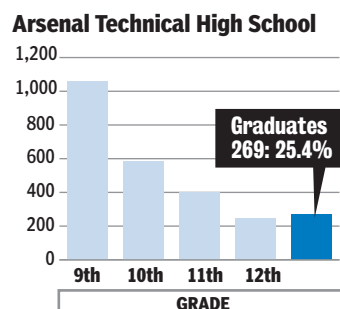
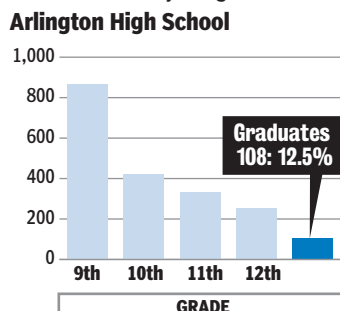
Total IPS students enrolled at the beginning of each grade:



Note: Completion rate based on eighth-grade enrollment

IPS graduates by high school

Total students enrolled at the beginning of each grade in the district's five major high schools:



Note: Completion rate based on ninth-grade enrollment
Source: Indiana Department of Education
Jennifer Imes / The Star



Adriane Jaecle / The Star

One on one: At Manual High School, freshman Andrew Dyke gets homework help from media center director Lucille Koors, a former math and chemistry teacher. On average just 125 of the 450 freshmen who enter Manual in a typical year progress to their senior year on time.

Indianapolis Public Schools operates some of the worst dropout factories in the nation. Hundreds of students each year quit school, most landing in dead-end jobs or prisons. In some families, dropping out has become a way of life with neither parents nor children completing high school.

IPS claims an official graduation rate of 90 percent. District administrators, however, admit the number is lower — shockingly lower.

IPS Board President Kelly Bentley, in a meeting with editorial writers, pegged the district's graduation rate at 28 percent. A Star Editorial Board analysis found a 35 percent completion rate for the class of 2004. National and local researchers report IPS graduation rates ranging from 28 to 47 percent, depending on the formula used.

Manual High School Principal Ken Poole admits that "what we're doing right now is not working."

It's not for lack of trying. Manual freshmen who didn't make it out of middle school until age 16 — and other at-risk students — are put under the watchful eye of Shiril Miller-Smith, who keeps tabs on their grades and attendance as the "mother hen" of the Alpha Program.

To keep students from skipping class, they're put to work tending children in Manual's all-day kindergarten.

Social workers scour neighborhoods to find students who haven't shown up for class. Occasionally, they pick them up and drive them to school.

Yet, on average just 125 — 27 percent — of the 450 freshmen

who enter Manual in a typical school year progress to their senior year on time. One freshman, David Kline, who turns 16 this month, already declares, "I'll finish this year out and then that'll probably be it."

Manual's "promotion power," or ninth- to-12th grade attrition rate, is the worst in the state.

In fact, all five IPS high schools promoted less than 60 percent of their freshmen to seniors on time. IPS fares worse than school systems in New York City, Detroit and Chicago. "This is the first district I have seen where all high schools are doing this poorly," said Robert Balfanz, a Johns Hopkins University researcher who analyzed the data for The Star.

IPS Superintendent Pat Pritchett says dropping out is so prevalent that eighth-grade graduations — the only commencement many students will ever experience — have become major celebrations at some schools.

Yet, IPS officials also claim that many of the lost students transfer to other school districts. Balfanz, however, notes that IPS' enrollment has declined in all grades. He says migration "can't really be used to explain away these findings."

IPS' dropout crisis reflects the woes of the neighborhoods the district serves. About 81 percent of IPS students qualify for free and reduced-priced meals, a prime indicator of poverty. Manual High Guidance Director Janet Huck says 75 percent of this year's senior class worked an average of 27 hours week "to put food on the table."

The temptation to make money on the streets also pulls students from school. "You wouldn't believe how many young people are selling drugs," says Reda Stewart, a senior at the Pacers Academy, an alternative school. "It's crazy."

The seeds of failure sprout well before high school. Only 50 percent of Manual's incoming

freshmen for the 2005-06 school year passed the eighth-grade ISTEP exam. That number, although still low, is significantly better than in previous years when a mere 20 percent of incoming students passed the state's test of basic skills.

The district's high suspension and expulsion rates also contribute to students giving up on school. Two IPS middle schools — Coleman and Longfellow — were among the top 20 in the state in the rate of expulsions last year.

Expelled students, by IPS policy, generally are not allowed to attend alternative classes or enroll in another district. A year out of school means troubled students fall farther behind, or into more trouble.

As Joseph Matthews III, president of the Indiana Opportunities Industrialization Centers State Council, notes, in "a year . . . you can disappear. Your life can go to hell in a hand basket."

District leaders like Bentley are beginning to acknowledge the scope of the dropout epidemic. IPS' new small-schools strategy, scheduled to roll out next school year, is designed to help more students earn diplomas.

The true test of whether IPS can improve, however, will come in how the community reacts to finally hearing the facts about the high dropout rate. Outrage? Yes. Blame? Let's not waste much time there.

The greater need is for Indianapolis' political, business, academic and religious leaders to rally together to begin confronting a problem that will not easily pass.

Next: Graduation rates are painfully low in several suburban Marion County school districts.

LEFT BEHIND

A STAR EDITORIAL BOARD SERIES

Why you should care

About three out of 10 students in Indiana quit high school before graduating. Many become an enormous drain on taxpayers because they land in prison or require extensive social services. The dropout rate also hinders economic growth. Employers increasingly demand a well-educated work force. But Indiana is 46th in the nation in the education attainment level of the population. The high dropout rate means a loss of human capital that makes Indiana far less economically competitive.

Let's talk

What can the community do to reduce the number of students who drop out of school? What can the schools and the students themselves do?

State and local educators as well as community activists and students will discuss answers to those questions and others during a community town hall at 7 p.m. May 24 in the auditorium at Ben Davis High School, 1200 N. Girls School Road. To register call 444-6170 or send e-mail to kim.mitchell@indystar.com.

"We don't want to lose a generation that's about to be lost."



Luke Kashman, Arsenal Technical High School sophomore

About the series

Sunday: State and local educators claim 90 percent of students graduate from high school. Reality is far more dismal.

Tuesday: Indianapolis Public Schools operates some of the worst dropout factories in the nation.

Wednesday: In Indianapolis and across the nation, more black males are dropping out of high school than graduating.

Thursday: IPS hopes to turn around its failing high schools by adopting a small schools strategy. But the achievement gap begins to develop early, and by the time students are in high school many believe they can never catch up.

Friday: More than 20,000 students who drop out every year in Indiana are an economic drain on the state and its cities.

Saturday: Educators say the challenge of turning dropout factories into centers of excellence falls heavily on teachers.

Sunday: Community leaders must engage in honest discussion about how to remedy the dropout epidemic.

ONE PERSON'S STORY

'Everybody has their blinders on'

Toya Cosby is outraged. The Northwest High School sophomore has seen friends drop out after being caught up in the street life. She's watched girls quit school after getting pregnant. What she has not witnessed, at least not on any large scale, is an honest discussion about the dropout epidemic in Indianapolis.

"It seems everybody has their blinders on," she says. "They either don't know or don't want to know."

Toya is determined to make people listen. She recently created three

panels for a quilt designed to raise awareness about the dropout epidemic and helped conduct a student-led research project on problems in IPS schools.

Toya is driven in part by her own family's experiences. Her mother quit school before returning to earn a degree when Toya was in kindergarten.

She speaks with the bluntness of a teenager — but also with the passion of someone who has seen too many friends leave school. "We're in a system that's designed for us to fail," she says.

