

## Report: Texas high school graduation rates rising

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AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Texas' graduation rate for high school students increased 1.9 percent since 2002 to just below the national average, according to a new report by a coalition of education groups.

The report found that high school graduation rates rose from 73.5 percent to 75.4 percent between 2002 and 2009— and pulled almost even with the 2009 average nationwide of 75.5 percent.

The national graduation rate, though, increased faster than the state's, climbing 2.9 percent over the same 7-year period. The biggest gains nationwide came in Tennessee, where rates jumped 17.8 percent, and New York, which increased 13 percent, between 2002 and 2009.

The report did not provide a state-by-state ranking, but comparing results showed that Texas and Colorado are tied for 28th, just behind Oregon and just ahead of Michigan, Rhode Island and Hawaii. Wisconsin led the nation with a graduation rate of 90.7, while Nevada was last with 56.3 percent.

The report will be presented Monday in Washington at the Building a Grad Nation summit sponsored by America's Promise Alliance, a children's advocacy organization founded by former Secretary of State Colin Powell. It was authored by John Bridgeland and Mary Bruce of Civic Enterprises, a public policy firm focused on social change, and Robert Balfanz and Joanna Fox of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University.

The authors used the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate, which tracks first-year students through all their years in high school, since they said it was the best and most-recent data available nationwide.

More good news for Texas came in the state's percentage of 4th graders testing at or above proficient in reading, which increased a single percentage point to 28 percent between 2003 and last year. The percentage of 8th graders testing at or above proficient in math also jumped from 25 percent to 40 percent over the same period.

Texas is in the first year of implementing a new standardized testing system, and some districts have drawn criticism for spending more time preparing kids for statewide exams than they do on actual classroom instruction. But Robert Scott, appointed by Gov. Rick Perry as head of the Texas Education Agency, has maintained that students statewide are improving in reading, math and science — and that their high school graduation rates have increased — despite more-strenuous standardized testing.

Perry spokeswoman Catherine Frazier said, "we have been on the uptick in graduation rates and we're encouraged by that."

As recently as 2010, the Texas Legislative Budget Board reported the state's overall graduation rate ranked a dismal 43rd nationwide. Last month, though, the Texas Education Agency announced that a National Governor's Association report put Texas' graduation rate for the class of 2010 at 84.3 percent, or 10th highest among the 34 participating states who track student performance over their entire high school career. Yet another report by the National Center for Education Statistics found that the state's 2008-2009 graduation rate was 75.4 percent, or 28th in the nation — findings similar to those in Monday's report.

"There's lots of different ways to look at it and everybody's got a different intention," said Frances Deviney, Texas Kids Count director at the left-leaning Center for Public Policy Priorities. But she said other measures, including drop-out rates, have fallen in recent years, providing additional evidence more high schoolers statewide are graduating.

"It is getting better," Deviney said, though she worries that cuts in state funding for programs designed to keep students from leaving school early could eventually undo those gains.

Last summer, the state Legislature cut the Texas school funding formula \$4 billion over the next two years, while reducing funding for education grant programs an additional \$1.4 billion.

A booming population means public school enrollment statewide increases an average of 80,000 per year, and the cuts mean Texas now spends an annual average of \$8,908 per student, down \$538 compared to the last budget, and well below the national average of \$11,463, according to a recent report by the National Education Association.

"Lawmakers had to make tough decisions to prioritize," Frazier said, "but we're confident schools will still be able to use the existing resources they have and offer the quality education Texas students need."