

Michigan flunks report on minority dropout rates

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LANSING -- Michigan has one of the worst minority student graduation rates in the country, in what a national report calls a "hidden crisis."

Citing its low Hispanic student graduation rate, the report released Wednesday ranked Michigan as one of the 10 worst states for the "hide-the-minority syndrome."

"The dramatic difference of graduation rates by race amounts to a crisis," Christopher Edley, co-director of the Civil Rights Project, said at a news conference in Washington, D.C.

"Losing our Future: How Minority Youths are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis," is a joint effort of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and the Urban Institute, both policy research centers.

Using district enrollment figures reported to the federal government, researchers found that 68 percent of ninth-graders nationwide will graduate within four years, but one in every two minority students will drop out before graduation.

In Michigan, just over a third of Hispanic students earn diplomas, the report found, while African-American rates could not be established for the state because of poor data from Detroit Public Schools.

Michigan reports its overall graduation success at nearly 88 percent. Using a different measurement, the report found that to be inflated, pegging it instead at 74 percent.

It is the second national report questioning Michigan's graduation claims. In December the Education Trust, a national nonprofit group working to close the achievement gap, reported Michigan's graduation rate at 73 percent.

Michigan is one of 39 states that do not break out graduation by race, the report found, allowing lower minority graduation rates to be masked by the overall rates.

Martin Ackley, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Education, said Michigan doesn't yet have the database to track graduation rates by race. He contends that Michigan's own count of an 87.8 percent graduation rate in 2000-2001 is more accurate than the method used in the report because student transfers out of local school districts are taken into account.

Still Ackley agreed that there is a gap in test scores and graduation rates between white and minority students.

"We're concerned about that. We're trying to create strategies for school districts to use to close the achievement gap," he said.

Michigan is not alone in overestimating its graduation rates, researchers contend.

"The dropout data in use today misleads the public into thinking that most students are earning diplomas," said Christopher Swanson, research associate for the Urban Institute.

The report calls on the U.S. Department of Education to address that by requiring states to break out minority graduation rates. Otherwise there's a "perverse incentive" to push students not testing well out the door because accountability is measured by test scores.

According to the report, the nine other states with the worst Hispanic and African-American graduation rates are: New York, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Ohio, Illinois and Connecticut.

In Michigan, the report found that the graduation rate in majority-white districts, making up 93 percent of the public school districts, was 77.4 percent. But in the 7 percent of districts where minorities are the majority, the graduation rate was 44.4 percent. Michigan had the 17th highest graduation rate for all students among the states.

Among the 10 largest Michigan districts profiled, Grand Rapids had the lowest graduation rates with 19.3 percent for Hispanic students, 20.4 percent for African-American students and 26.6 percent overall.

In Flint, 56.5 percent of Hispanics graduated compared with 38 percent for African-American students and 38.8 percent overall.

Ann Arbor schools had a 53.2 percent graduation rate among African-American students and 79.5 percent overall.

Ruth Zweifler of the Student Advocacy Center in Ann Arbor, a group that advocates for suspended and expelled students, said the report confirms her long-held suspicions.

"There are a lot of children out of school. We don't know who they are. There are way more than we're willing to acknowledge," she said.

The report can be found at www.ResultsForAmerica.com.

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