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Graduation Rates Rise

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THE NATION'S high school graduation rate rose from 72 percent to 75.5 percent between 2002 and 2009. The progress reflects intensive efforts by a number of states to develop and implement strategies to keep students from dropping out. And one key factor in prodding states to act was federal pressure — most notably, the oft-maligned No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

The uptick in graduation was detailed in a report released by the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University in conjunction with several nonprofits, including one headed by former secretary of state Colin L. Powell. It also chronicled the decline of “dropout factories,” high schools where at least 60 percent of students don't graduate on time, from 2,007 in 2002 to 1,550 in 2010.

The number of students who leave school without a diploma is still far too high; that's all the more reason to spotlight the success of a dozen states — led by New York and Tennessee — in making dramatic gains in graduation rates by implementing such programs as early identification of struggling students. The District was not included in the study; Maryland and Virginia saw only slight increases, which should spur them to evaluate what else they can do. Maryland, for example, needs to change its archaic law that ends compulsory school attendance at age 16. We hope bills in the current General Assembly, supported by state school officials and Gov. Martin O'Malley (D), will get favorable treatment.

Key to the success in raising the national graduation rate was the decision by the Education Department to make changes in NCLB regulations so that states had to use the same methodology in computing graduation rates, instead of concocting their own definitions of a dropout. Also important were millions of extra dollars in school improvement grants the government set aside to help districts turn around dropout factories.

With the next iteration of No Child Left Behind still to be determined by Congress and the administration, it's important that the federal government not abdicate its critical role in holding states accountable. As this new report makes depressingly clear, just as some states will take appropriate actions, there are others that, left to their own devices, will fall behind.