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EDUCATION COMMENTARIES

We Must Set A Goal To Improve Arizona's High School Graduation Rate
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Arizona's high school graduation rate
is among the lowest in the nation. While it
is impossible to determine exact rankings
among states, given differences in methodology and limited data, we do know that more than 26,000 students were reported by the Arizona Department of Education as having dropped out of school in the 2001- 2002 school year.
That same year we graduated only about 73 per cent of students who entered high school. The impact on the economy and on social services of losing so many students is significant. Of even greater concern is the impact on our economic competitiveness as a state.
The Center for the Future of Arizona believes we should set an ambitious but achiev-
able goal
to improve
Arizona's gradu-
ation rate, even if

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don't yet have all the answers about how to achieve it. A well reasoned, ambitious and achievable goal can help us focus on an outcome and galvanize action.
What is the size and magnitude of the challenge we face and what are some of the issues as we set out to determine an ambi-tious but achievable goal for improving Arizona's high school graduation rate?

Enrollment growth:
Arizona schools are accommodating staggering growth in the student popula-tion, just second to that of Nevada (although Arizona's sheer numbers are larger), making significant demands on an already stressed system. By 2012, pro-jected student enrollment will rise to such an extent that in order to maintain our cur-rent graduation rate of approximately 73 per cent we will need to graduate about 13,000 more students than we did in 2002.

Changing demographics:
These numbers will alter the mix of students in the student population. Our analysis shows that if we do nothing to alter projected graduation rates, Arizona's overall graduation rate will decline even further by the. year 2012. This is due in part to the growing Hispanic student pop-ulation,"which-wiH represent a larger pro;' portion of the overall student population than it does today. By 2012, these histori-cally lower rates of graduation will weigh more heavily in the state's overall gradua- - tion rate. At the same time, students from all ethnic groups in Arizona are per-forming below national averages in com-pleting high school, including white stu-dents, who complete at a rate of 73 per cent in Arizona compared' to 84 per cent nationally. To improve graduation
rates overall we must improve theperfonnance of stu-
dents across all
ethnic groups.

The unknown

impact of AIMS:
;"Even if Schools Superinten-dent Tom Home is correct that as many as 90 per cent of students -taking the ATMS test will graduate, this would "still involve a 10 per cent decline in our graduation rate. In fact, our analysis reveals that states with demographics similar to those
of Arizona have experienced up to a seven-year decline in graduation
rates following implementation of
such high stakes tests before resuming historic levels.
The challenge posed by the combined factors of student enrollment growth and changing demographics means that to increase Arizona's graduation rate by 10 per cent by 2012, a figure, our Center is currently exploring, we will need to grad- . uate nearly one-third more students overall. Because of changing demo-graphics, in the Hispanic population alone this translates into a more than doubling of the number of Hispanic students needed to graduate. Is this the right goal with the. right milestone? The Center for the Future of Arizona is inviting interested organiza-tions to join us in working through these issues and in setting ambitious and achiev-able goals for improving Arizona's gradua-tion rate, with the ultimate goal of gradu-ating every Arizona student. We hope this will be useful input for policymakers in determining their own course of action.

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