

Statement on Release of Mishel/Roy Book of High School Graduation Rates
By Paul E. Barton
April 20, 2006

Paul Barton is a senior associate and former director of the Policy Information Center at Educational Testing Service in Princeton, NJ, and an independent education consultant and writer. His many previous education positions include president of the National Institute for Work and Learning and associate director of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). His recent publications include *Parsing the Achievement Gap: Baselines for Measuring Progress*, and *One Third of a Nation: Rising Dropout Rates and Declining Opportunities*.

Mishel and Roy, in their book on high school graduation rates, have taken the recent discussions of graduation rates to a new level, and it is the most comprehensive and analytical examination ever done.

They have taken on some key criticisms of the rates produced regularly that are derived from household interviews, such as in the Census Bureau's Current Population Surveys. These include the effects of immigration, the non inclusion of the prison and military populations, the inclusion in these estimates of GEDs, and known census undercount problems in the household surveys. After taking these all into account they still find substantially higher graduation rates than those found by researchers who have made their estimates using administrative data on school enrollments and diplomas issued, particularly for Black students

And by comparing student longitudinal data available in Florida and New York City, they find higher graduation rates than those that have been made based on the enrollment and diploma data (although a similar analysis in Chicago did not find a difference). I think there is good reason to do much more by way of quality controls of this administrative data if it is to be used as an important means of estimating high school graduation. It is regularly available, and could be a source for such estimates if it is validated. It is clear that in terms of the use of the data for this purpose, 9th grade enrollment, as is used in Swanson's estimates, is not a good place to start from, since there has developed a bulge at the 9th grade as more students are being held back in recent years, and its use will distort the estimates. However, other estimates have been made using the administrative data that avoid this problem, using the the 8th grade for example, as Haney did, and these are dependent on the quality of the underlying data.

While Mishel and Roy have made adjustments in the household type data that cover many of the criticisms of graduation rates that come from this source, I believe the use of a single question as in what is reported by the Census Bureau, one that lumps regular diplomas, GEDs, and other things the respondent considers "equivalent" to a diploma, is not good enough. Further, I think it is critical that the Census Bureau conduct studies of the validity and reliability of the answers to the education attainment questions.

My take on the situation is that we must look behind the administrative data, put more investment in the Census Bureau interview approach, and also make a serious start in what will be an expensive program of getting regular state longitudinal data – using "student identifiers" and following students from entering high school (or earlier) for a number of years after regular graduation age. Until we have this we are not likely to see contradictions resolved among current ways of estimating graduation rates.