

## Graduation Rates in Small Towns Exceed the Statewide Rate, While those in Medium-Sized Towns Catch Up

Oregon students attend schools in a variety of geographic locations across the state and the sizes of the schools range from more than 3,000 students to fewer than five. This brief highlights schools in small and medium-sized towns, with a median 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment size of 92 for a school in a small town and 385 for a school in medium-sized town.<sup>1</sup> These settings offer unique opportunities and challenges for students and staff.

Figure 1 compares the graduation rates of students from small and medium-sized towns to statewide rates during the 2015-16 school year. Students in small towns comprised about 10 percent of the overall graduating cohort. The small town school graduation rate exceeded the statewide rate by about 5 percentage points, reaching 80 percent. Students attending school in medium-sized towns comprised about 25 percent of the overall graduating cohort. Their graduation rate was 74 percent, about one percentage point lower than the statewide rate.

### Examining the Trends

The statewide graduation rate reached 75 percent in the 2015-16 school year. This marks a seven percentage point increase from 2008-09. Figure 2 shows that trends for schools in small towns and medium-sized towns follow different trajectories. The graduation rate grew faster in small towns, increasing ten percentage points over the same period. The graduation rate in medium-sized towns fell from 69 to 67 percent from 2008-09 to 2012-13 but then grew considerably over the next three years, reaching 74% in 2015-16.

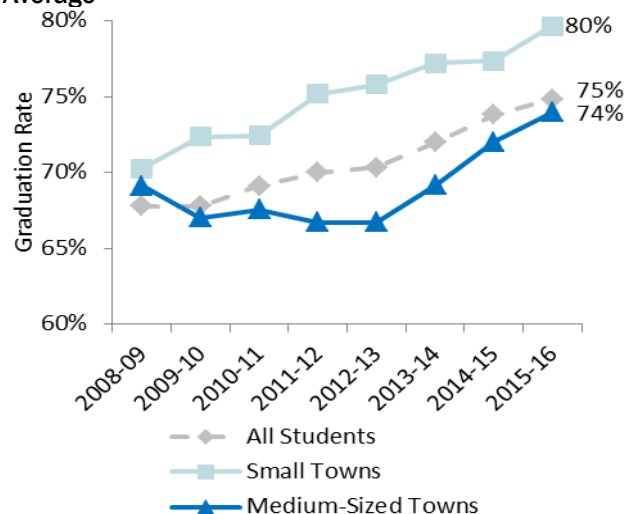
<sup>1</sup> We use the National Center for Education Statistics definitions for “rural” and “town” to define “small towns” and “medium-sized towns” respectively. See [https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/rural\\_locales.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/rural_locales.asp) for more information on these definitions.

**Figure 1: Graduation Rates by Student Group, 2015-16**

	All Students	Small Towns	Medium-Sized Towns
Overall Graduation Rate	75%	80%	74%
Male	71%	77%	78%
Female	78%	82%	70%
Am. Indian/ Alaska Native	56%	74%	58%
Asian	88%	77%	88%
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Is.	70%	100%	76%
African American/ Black	66%	63%	59%
Hispanic	69%	77%	73%
White	77%	80%	75%
Multi-Ethnic	74%	78%	75%
Economically Disadvantaged	68%	76%	70%
Not Econ. Disadvantaged	84%	85%	80%
Current English Learner	53%	57%	53%
Ever English Learner	71%	75%	73%
Not an English Learner	76%	80%	75%
Students w/ Disabilities	56%	65%	56%
Students w/o Disabilities	78%	82%	77%
Talented and Gifted	93%	94%	93%
Not Talented and Gifted	73%	79%	73%
CTE Participators	85%	87%	90%
CTE Concentrators	91%	91%	85%
Number of Students	46,343	4,777	11,673

\*The number of graduates for small towns are as small as 16. This can lead to large shifts in graduation rates from one year to the next.

**Figure 2: Graduation Rates of Students from Small Towns and Medium-Sized Towns Differ from the State Average**

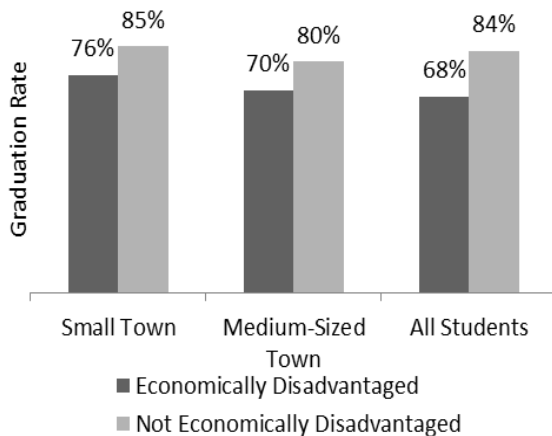


## Students Living in Poverty

In 2015-16 the statewide graduation rate for economically disadvantaged students was 68 percent. Both the small town and medium-sized town graduation rates exceeded that average, reaching 76 percent in small towns and 70 percent in medium-sized towns.

The gap in graduation rates between students who were economically disadvantaged and those who were not was about 9 percentage points in small towns and 10 percentage points in medium-sized towns. The statewide gap was 16 percentage points (Figure 3). While the gaps in graduation rates between students who are economically disadvantaged and those who are not have fluctuated since 2008-09, the gaps were consistently narrower in small and medium-sized towns than for all schools statewide.

**Figure 3: Gap between economically and not economically disadvantaged students is narrower in Small and Medium-Sized Towns than statewide gap**

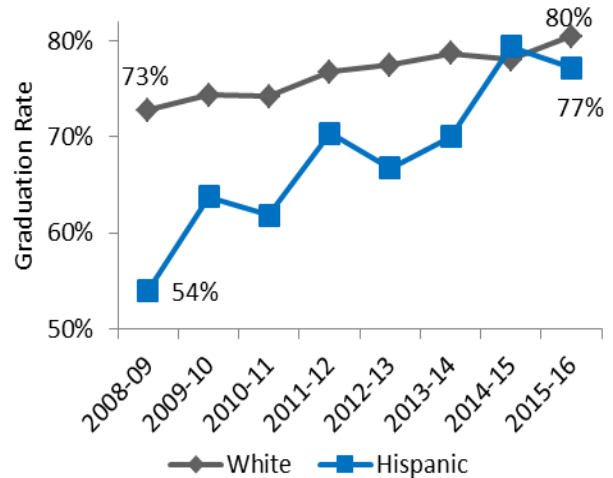


## The Achievement Gap between Hispanic and White Students has Declined

White students comprise about 71 percent of students in small and medium-sized towns, while Hispanic students make up about 20 percent. Figures 4 and 5 show that graduation rates for White students in both small and medium-sized towns have increased slightly since 2008-09, reaching 80 percent and 75 percent, respectively in 2015-16. Graduation rates for Hispanic

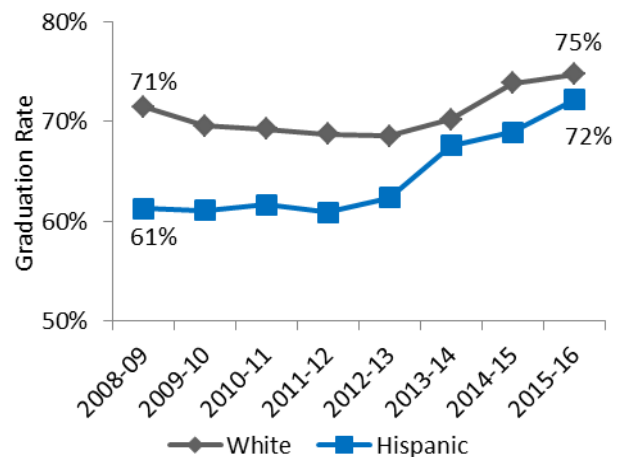
students climbed considerably faster. In small towns (Figure 4), the graduation rate for Hispanics increased 23 percentage points, from 54 percent to a peak of 79 percent in 2014-15.

**Figure 4: Achievement Gap between Hispanic and White students converges in Small Towns**



In medium-sized towns (Figure 5), the graduation rate for Hispanics increased 11 percentage points, growing from 61 percent to 72 percent.

**Figure 5: Achievement Gap between Hispanic and White students converges in Medium-Sized Towns**



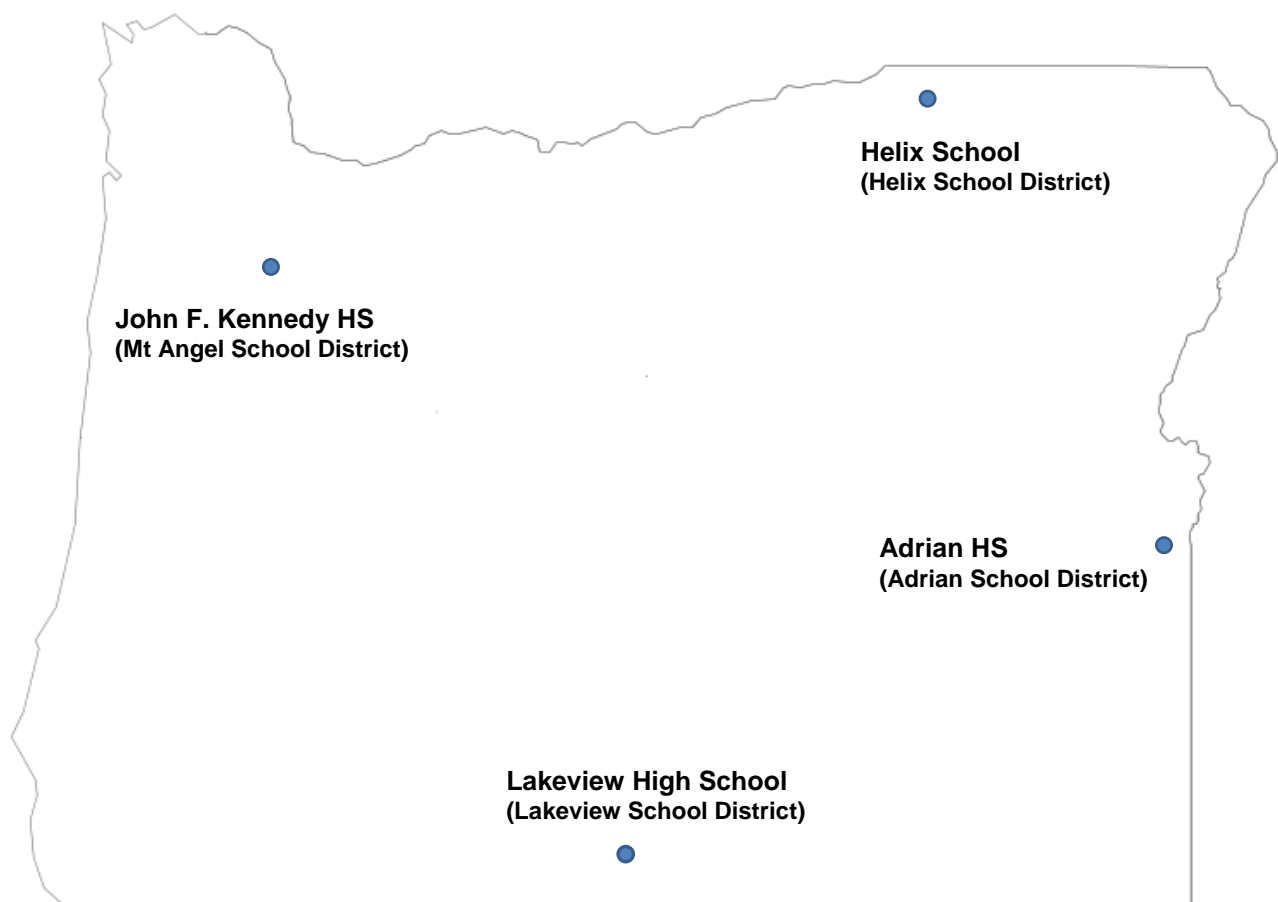
While the graduation rate gaps between White and Hispanic students have been nearly eliminated in schools in small and medium-sized towns, considerable gaps remain between students who are economically disadvantaged and those who are not. More focus on closing these gaps is needed.

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## Examples of Success from Oregon High Schools

ODE staff spoke with principals from four high schools that have significantly improved their graduation rates or consistently maintained high graduation rates. Two of the schools are located in small towns: **Helix School** in Helix and **Adrian High School** in Adrian. Two of the schools are located in medium-sized towns: **Kennedy High School** in Mt Angel and **Lakeview High School** in Lakeview (see map below). The following summaries share highlights from those interviews. While different strategies and methods were used in each school, some common themes that emerged include:

- Student engagement tied to school and community-wide events
- College-and career-ready focus
- Strong relationships between students and staff



## Griswold High School (Helix School), Helix School District

Helix is a town located in northeastern Oregon with a population of less than 200 people. Griswold High School, part of Helix School, had an enrollment of just over 60 students in the 2015-16 school year. The school's graduation rate was 100 percent for five of the past eight years and it has never dropped below 80 percent in any year since 2008-09.

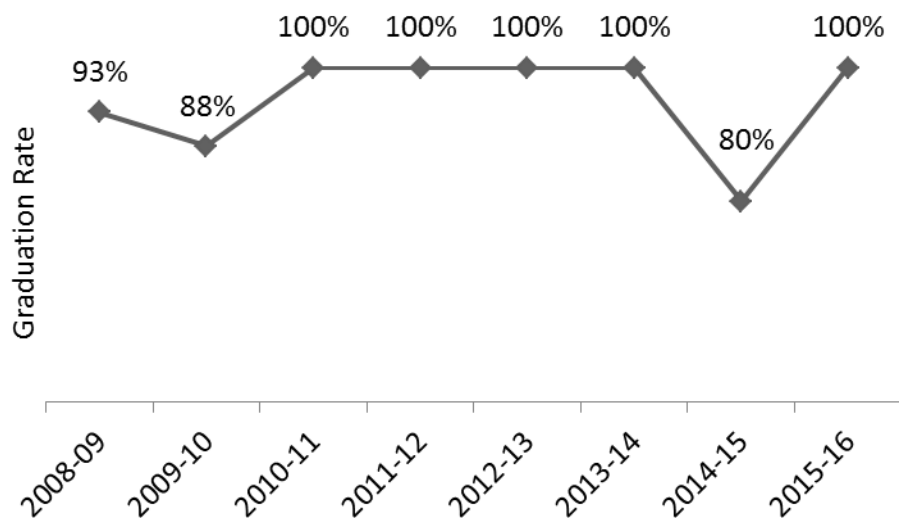
Darrick Cope, both Superintendent of Helix School District and Principal of Griswold High School, cites high expectations as a key component of the school's success in helping students graduate on-time. Students are required to earn 26 credits to graduate from Griswold, two more credits than the State requirement.

One of the advantages of Helix's small size is that staff is aware of the needs of the progress of every student on a detailed level. They hold students accountable by using a "grade check system." Every 2 to 3 weeks, grades are pulled. Students with poor grades must participate in lunchtime tutorials and are temporarily suspended from sports, including practice. With many students participating in sports, this system is highly motivating to keep students on-track.

In addition to high standards and accountability, student engagement is critical to the success of students. Griswold offers a variety of activities and clubs including art club, robotics, knowledge bowl, and sports. Griswold staff believe it's important to help students find something that interests them and allows them to feel included. Parental involvement is also an important input to student success. Principal Cope has most parents' phone numbers stored in his cell phone and he, and teachers, are in regular contact with many of them. He encourages regular two-way communication.

Griswold is the heart of the town and is supported in many ways by the community. The community has passed two bonds since 2008 for over \$7 million. These resources allowed the school to totally remodel the high school building and build a new gym. In addition, the school has applied for and received grants from the Umatilla County and the Wildhorse Foundation which have helped pay for capital projects and technology. All of these investments help students stay engaged, find connection points with their school and help motivate them to succeed academically.

Figure 6: Helix School Graduation Rates



## Adrian High School, Adrian School District

Adrian High School is located in the City of Adrian in Malheur County. The city has a population of 172, but the Adrian School District has an enrollment of 285, drawing students from a wide area extending well beyond the city boundaries. Adrian High School serves 79 students in grades 9 through 12. In 2015-16, the high school had 17 seniors, 16 of whom graduated on time for a graduation rate of 94 percent. Since 2008-09, when Oregon’s current method of calculating graduation rates began, Adrian High has maintained a rate above 94 percent in all years except 2013-14 when it fell to 85 percent.

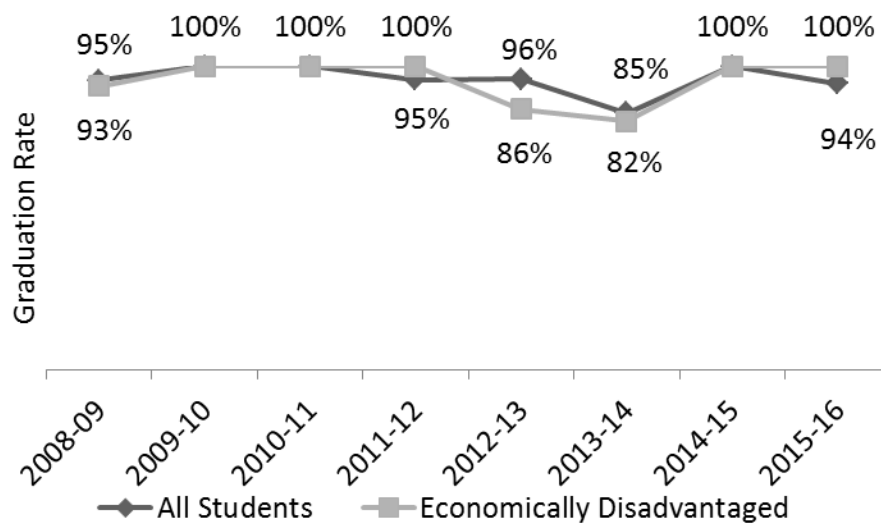
Principal Kevin Purnell, who also is a counselor and geometry teacher at the school, describes Adrian High as a small, rural school in a tight-knit community. The high school is on the same campus as the K-8 elementary school, and that, along with the smallness of the two schools, is a real advantage in getting

to know students. Teachers have students for multiple years, and small class sizes allow for more individualized instruction. Adrian High also has had low staff turnover, which provides continuity for students.

The opportunity to work closely with students has been a key contributor to achieving high graduation rates at Adrian High, according to Principal Purnell. Staff know the students well when they arrive in 9th grade, allowing for more individualized attention and the ability to catch problems early. The result has been a positive school culture leading to high achievement.

Principal Purnell identified poor attendance among a subset of students as the school’s key challenge. He says a focus on making all new students feel welcome, and maintaining personal contact with students outside of school are among Adrian’s key strategies for improving student engagement.

**Figure 7: Adrian High School Graduation Rates**



## Lakeview High School, Lakeview School District

Lakeview, Oregon is a town of about 2,300 people located in south central Oregon. About 250 students are enrolled in Lakeview High School in grades 9 through 12. Principal Jesse Hamilton describes the high school as a hub of activity in a small, tight-knit community.

Lakeview has maintained a graduation rate between 80 and 90 percent for the past seven years. While fluctuating slightly, the graduation rate for economically disadvantaged students has followed the same trajectory and remained above 75 percent since the 2010-11 school year.

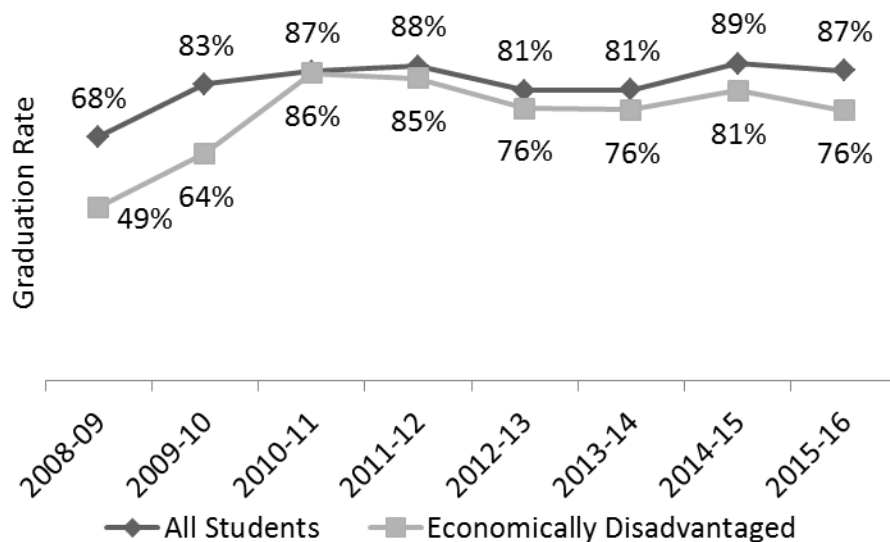
When asked about the key strategies the school uses to help students succeed, Principal Hamilton simply states, “We love them up!” Staff start by focusing on developing relationships with students. The school also has a strong counseling department that works closely with students to keep them on-track for graduation. Every student has an adult advocate in the building. Many of the staff members grew up in Lakeview. They know the

community well, which is one of the reasons they are able to connect with students on a deeper level.

Hamilton believes that another part of Lakeview’s success can be attributed to its college-going culture. The school’s college scholarship funds provide a foundation for this culture. The Daly fund and the Collins-McDonald Fund are two scholarship opportunities available to students who attend all four years of high school at Lakeview and meet several other criteria. Staff begin talking about the importance of graduating, going to college, and the resources available to help students attend college in elementary school.

Lakeview continues to look for additional ways to put students on a pathway to college readiness. The high school started an AVID program about three years ago, which has offered field trips to at least five different colleges over the past two years. The school is also an SAT testing site, which makes taking the test an easier choice for many students.

**Figure 8: Lakeview High School Graduation Rates**



## Kennedy High School, Mt Angel School District

Mt Angel, Oregon is a town of about 3,300 people located in the mid-western portion of the state. Nearly 190 students were enrolled at Mt Angel’s Kennedy High School in the 2015-16 school year.

Kennedy’s graduation rate has steadily improved over the past eight years, increasing from 66 percent in 2008-09 to 91 percent in 2015-16. The improvement in graduation rates is evident across nearly all student groups, with little if any difference among the overall rates of Hispanic, White and economically disadvantaged students.

Principal Sean Aker says that his goal is to have 100 percent of his students “tracking towards a high wage career.” An emphasis on Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs and job skills are two ways Aker and his staff are helping students achieve this goal and keeping students engaged.

Kennedy’s CTE program currently includes three focus areas: business and finance,

agricultural science, and public service. A visual, performing, and media arts focus will be added soon. In 2016-17, 122 students are participating in CTE courses. The school aims to continue to grow the CTE program by adding more options. Aker notices that students involved in CTE tend to have higher attendance rates and be more engaged in school.

Kennedy is also focusing on how to better support students with disabilities. In 2013-14, no students with disabilities graduated from Kennedy. Over the past two years, things have improved dramatically. Eight of nine students with a disability graduated in 2014-15 and three of four graduated in 2015-16. Aker credits District Student Services Coordinator Erica Gordon and Community Transitions Program Coordinator Rachel Ayers with leading this effort. In particular, Aker believes the ability for students to participate in meaningful and supported work experiences has helped motivate them to complete their degree. He hopes to use this work experience approach as a program model for all students.

**Figure 9: Kennedy High School Graduation Rates, Mt Angel School District**

