

## The Nation's Long and Winding Path to Graduation

Historical data can be used to trace the nation's graduation rate well over a century into the past. In 1870, the earliest date on record, only 2 percent of 17-year-olds in the nation had a secondary-level education. The turn of the 20th century brought rapid social and economic changes, which ushered in a new age for education. In 1940, for the first time, half of all students finished high school, although graduation did not become an established norm until the 1950s. The U.S. graduation rate reached its historical high point at the end of the 1960s, with the graduation rate peaking at 77 percent in 1969.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE  
BY YEAR (PERCENTAGE)

2.0

6.4

50.8

77.1

69.9

**Class of 2007**

80.7 Asian

76.6 White

**68.8** All students

55.5 Hispanic

53.7 Black

50.7 American Indian

## Recent History Shows Setback

When contemporary data on the nation's public schools became available in the late 1980s, the rate of graduation had gradually declined from its historic highs to around 70 percent. The graduation rate fell precipitously during the early 1990s, eventually stabilizing around 66 percent by the latter part of that decade. The period since then has generally been characterized by gradual but steady improvements. The class of 2005 was once again earning diplomas at a pace last seen in the early 1990s. However, two consecutive annual declines since then have eroded the nation's graduation rate, which stood at slightly less than 69 percent for the class of 2007.

SOURCES: EPE Research Center, 2010;  
U.S. Department of Education

1870

1880

1890

1900

1910

1920

1930

1940

1950

1960

1970

1980

1990

2000

2010