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## Iowa has one of nation's lowest dropout rates, but East has one of Iowa's highest

*By The Associated Press and Courier Staff*

WASHINGTON -- Iowa has one of the lowest high school dropout rates in the country, but Waterloo's East High School has one of the highest in Iowa, according to an analysis of U.S. Department of Education data.

Eight of the state's 347 high schools --- or about 2.3 percent --- have the dubious distinction of being a "dropout factory" --- a high school where no more than 60 percent of the students who start as freshmen make it to their senior year.

That distinction applies to more than one in 10 high schools across America, according to an analysis of Education Department data conducted by Johns Hopkins for The Associated Press.

Iowa's dropout factories include Abraham Lincoln High School (Council Bluffs), Thomas Jefferson High School (Council Bluffs), Des Moines East High School, Lincoln High School (Des Moines), North High School (Des Moines), Mason City High School, Southeast Webster High School and Waterloo East High School.

The data tracked senior classes for three years in a row --- 2004, 2005 and 2006 --- to make sure local events like plant closures weren't to blame for the low retention rates.

Waterloo school officials said they were surprised by the information.

Sharon Miller, spokeswoman for the Waterloo Community School District, said the graduation rate has risen steadily for all schools over the last four years.

In 2001, the rate was 69 percent; however, 79 percent of students graduated in 2006, according to the Iowa Department of Education.

"We're seeing a good, strong trend line here of more students graduating," Miller said.

Part of that includes alternative ways to tackle drop-outs like the Grad Connect program, ran in conjunction with Hawkeye Community College.

Willie Barney, East High principal, said the program allows students to graduate with a high school diploma, though it may not be within a four-year time frame. Previous school programs seemed to be focuses primarily on keeping at-risk students busy until graduation, which often did little to discourage them from dropping out, he said.

Barney said the Grad Connect program allows students to remain engaged in the learning process while also working at their own pace.

"The goal is to get them in a direction to graduate," Barney said.

The drawback is that if a student leaves school for more than a year and later enrolls in a program like Grad

Connect, he or she may caught in a technicality. They can still be considered a drop out under state or federal criteria, but the district also counts them on the graduation rolls for the year they finish the program, Miller said.

Miller said those numbers could skew the data.

House and Senate proposals to renew the five-year-old No Child law would give high schools more federal money and put more pressure on them to improve, and the Bush administration supports the idea.

The legislative proposals would:

--- Make sure schools report their graduation rates by racial, ethnic and other subgroups and are judged on those. That's to ensure schools aren't just graduating white students in high numbers, but also are working to ensure minority students get diplomas.

--- Get states to build data systems to keep track of students throughout their school years and more accurately measure graduation and dropout rates.

--- Ensure states count graduation rates in a uniform way. States have used a variety of formulas, including counting the percentage of entering seniors who get a diploma. That measurement ignores the fact that kids who drop out typically do so before their senior year.

--- Create strong progress goals for graduation rates and impose sanctions on schools that miss them. Most states currently lack meaningful goals, according to The Education Trust, a nonprofit that advocates for poor and minority children.

The current law requires testing in reading and math once in high school, and those tests take on added importance because of serious consequences for a school that fails. Critics say that creates a perverse incentive for schools to encourage kids to drop out before they bring down a school's scores.

"We're at the end of the process," says Mel Riddile, principal of T.C. Williams High School, a large public school in Alexandria, Va., which is not on the dropout factory list. "People don't walk into ninth grade and suddenly have a reading problem."

*Courier Staff Writer Josh Nelson contributed to this report.*

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