

## Fewer Students, More Diversity: The Shifting Demographics of High School Graduates

WICHE's ninth edition of *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*, published in December 2016, quantified how the demographic changes that are underway with America's youth population will be evidenced in the next 15 years of high school graduates. The purpose of this *Data Insights* (the first in a series) is to present universal trends and the variation within, with a focus on the WICHE West states. Across the nation, graduating classes are projected to gradually become smaller at the same time that they become even more diverse. While the national projections describe universal trends, there is variation among the four geographical regions and states. In some states, primarily in the South and West, robust increases are projected for the number of graduates overall and the overwhelming majority of these will be non-White and primarily Hispanic. Where increases are projected, they will peak around 2025. And then, even in states with projected growth, the number of high school graduates is expected to decrease by as much as 8 percent into the early 2030s. The West is projected to have modest growth in the number of high school graduates through 2024, and then the number will rapidly contract, driven by declines in Hispanic high school graduates.

### *The Knocking at the College Door Series*

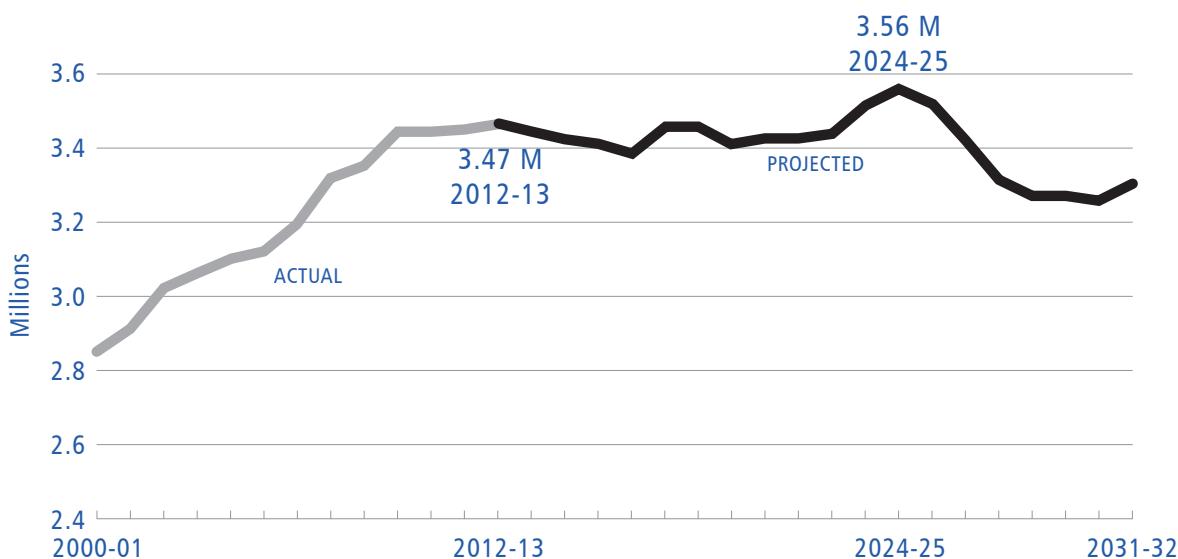
For nearly 40 years, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) has produced projections of high school graduates. The *Knocking at the College Door* projections cover the nation, four geographical regions, and the states, and equip a broad range of stakeholders with data about how the numbers of high school graduates are likely to change in the years ahead. In recognition of the wide and varied uses of these projections, WICHE takes extensive efforts to ensure that the projections are reliable and contemporary. Using a methodology called "cohort survival ratio," WICHE computes future high school graduate numbers for the next 15 to 18 years based on the sheer numbers of recently born youth, in total and by race/ethnicity, and on how

many of each population are predicted to proceed through school and onto graduation according to recent school enrollment and graduation patterns. Updated every four to five years, the *Knocking at the College Door* projections have proven to be robustly accurate when measured against subsequent actual reported counts of graduates and other sources of information, reinforcing the relevance of their use in planning for the next five, 10, and even 15 years.<sup>1</sup>

### Nationally, High School Graduating Classes Will Be Smaller and More Diverse

After steady increases in the overall number of high school graduates over the last 15 years, the U.S. is headed into a period of stagnation. WICHE's projections indicate that the number of graduates

Figure 1. Total Number of U.S. Public and Private High School Graduates to Gradually Become Smaller



Source: William J. Hussar and Tabitha M. Bailey. *Projections of Education Statistics to 2024: Forty-Third Edition*, Table 9 (1979 to 2012). And, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, *Knocking at the College Door*, 2016 (2013 to 2032).

per year will average around 3.44 million through 2023, before peaking at 3.56 million prior to 2026 (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Then, the total number of high school graduates will decrease 8 percent in the early 2030s, as predicted by the dramatic declines in the numbers of babies born each year since 2007.<sup>3</sup>

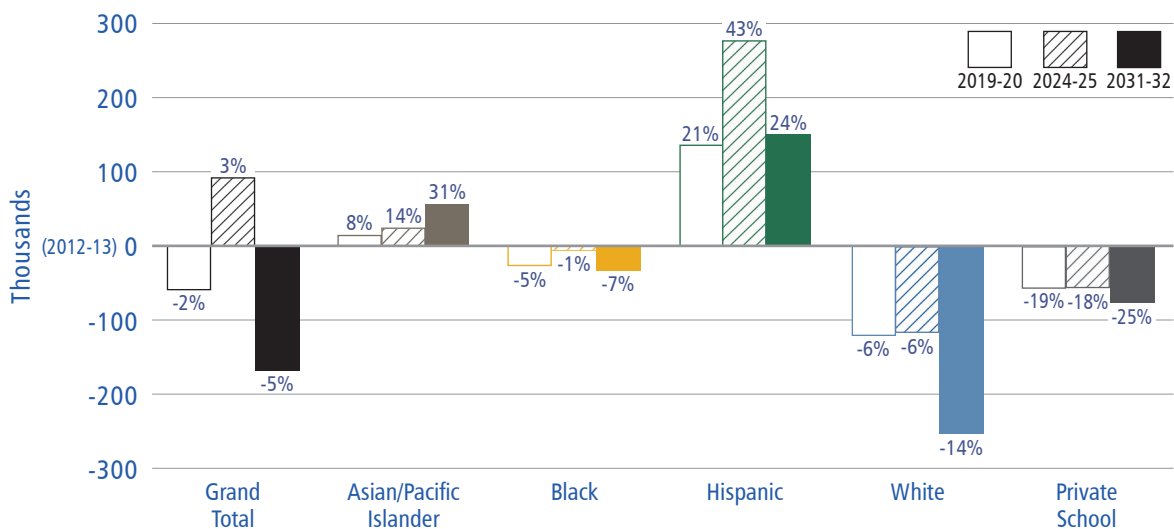
The current flattening and subsequent decline in the number of high school graduates is largely fueled by consistent declines in the majority White public school student population, which is projected to decrease by 17 percent, down a quarter of a million high school graduates from 1.84 million in 2013 to 1.59 million in 2032. In addition, the number of high school graduates from private religious and nonsectarian schools is projected to decline at an even greater rate than the overall trend (26 percent).<sup>4</sup> Figure 2 presents the trends for White public school graduates compared to the trends for non-White public high school graduates, which includes Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Native high school graduates.

The decreasing number of White high school graduates will be counterbalanced over the next decade by swift growth in the number of Hispanic graduates, in particular, and Asian/Pacific Islanders.

Hispanic public school students are the second largest student population, and their contribution to high school graduate numbers will increase by almost 50 percent by their high point around 2025, up to 920,000. But Hispanic graduates will diminish in number rapidly after 2025, down to 790,000 by 2032, due to steep declines in births since 2007. Asian/Pacific Islander public high school graduates are projected to increase in number consistently throughout the projections, increasing 30 percent to around 58,000 by 2032. Black public high school students are projected to be relatively more stable in number throughout the projected years, but there will be about 6 percent fewer by 2032, around 440,000.

Taken together, these converging demographic trends indicate that while White high school graduates will remain the majority of total high school graduates nationally through the early 2030s, their majority position will contract rapidly to about 53 percent<sup>5</sup> and could approach a bare simple majority within the span of these projections, if graduation rates for non-White public school students continue to increase.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2. Rapid Increase of U.S. Public High School Graduates of Color (Compared to 2012-13)



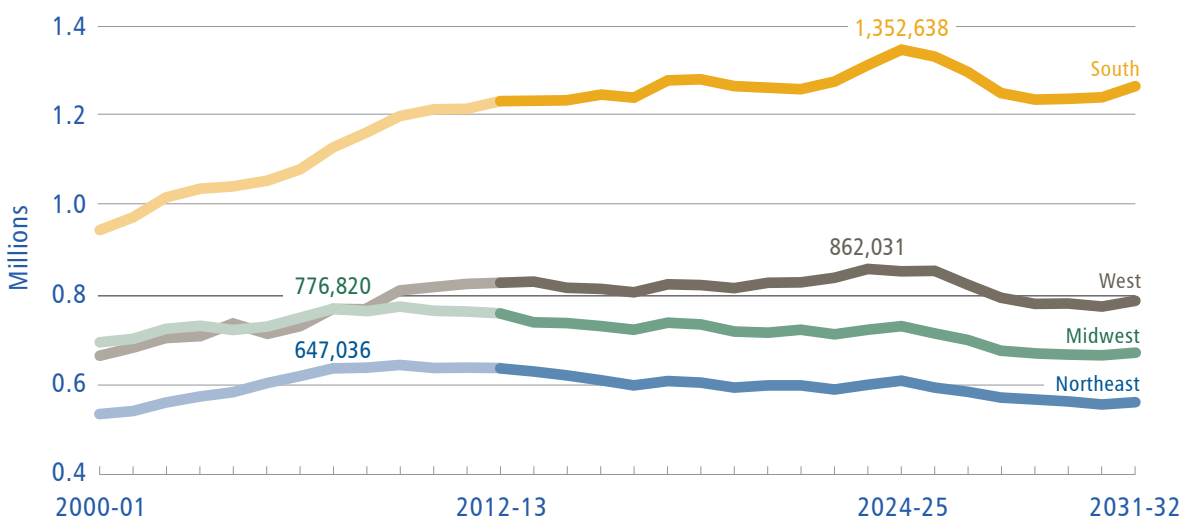
### Substantial Variation by Region

The national trends mask substantial variation by region and state. The projections by region are shown in Figure 3, indicating each region’s recent past high number of high school graduates or coming projected high number.<sup>7</sup> The regional story line is growth in the South and West and decline in the Midwest and Northeast. In all regions, the overwhelming majority of projected increases in the number of high school graduates will be attributable to Hispanic students. Decreases in the number of high school graduates in the Midwest and Northeast

will be driven by fewer White graduates, while the declines after 2025 in the South and West will be driven by a rapid decrease in the number of Hispanic graduates.

Decreases in high school graduates in the Midwest and Northeast are driven by fewer White graduates. Declines after 2025 in the South and West are driven by fewer Hispanic graduates.

Figure 3. Substantial Variation in Total Public and Private High School Graduates by Region



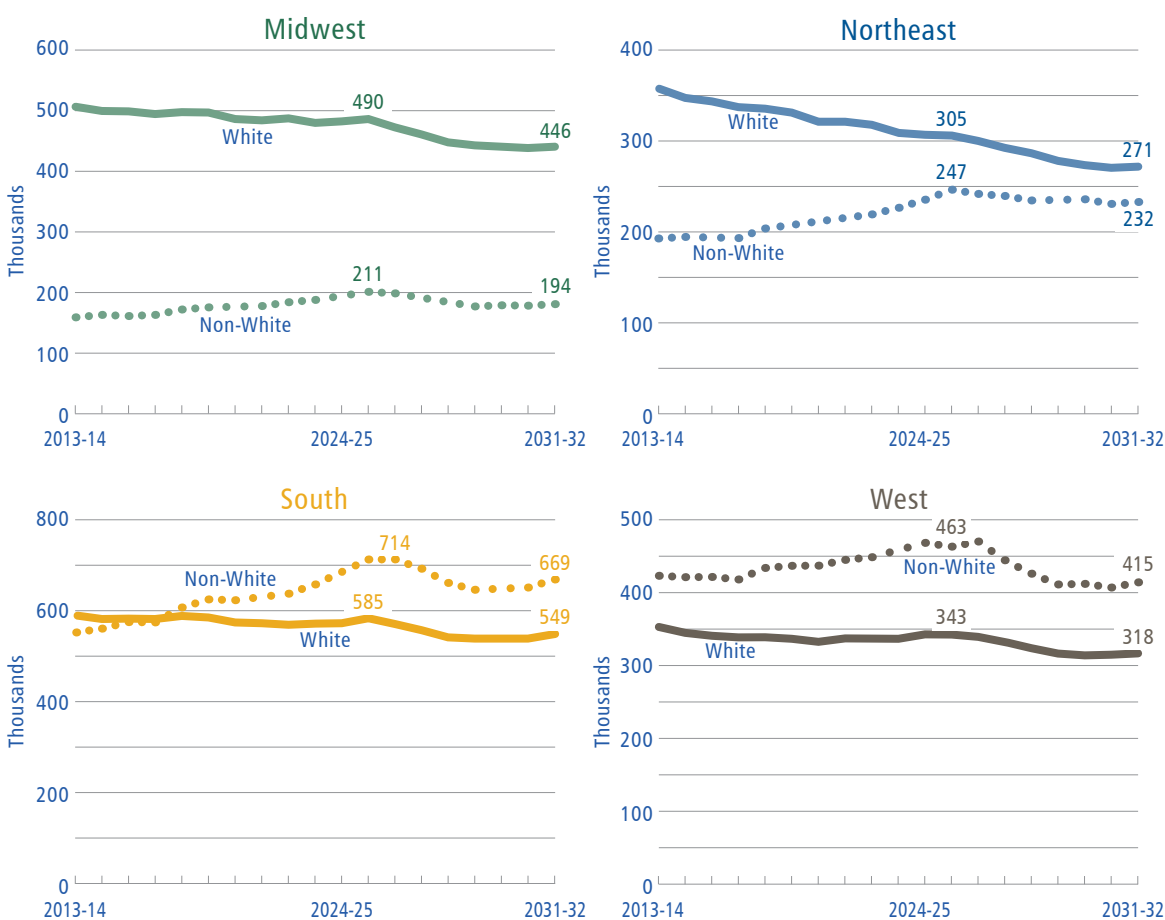
Note: Reported actual counts in lighter shade, projections in darker shade. See endnote 7 about the regional definitions.

The Midwest and Northeast reached their high points for high school graduate production in 2010. The number of graduates from these regions has already begun decreasing and is projected to decline throughout the projected years. In the Midwest, White public high school graduates are projected to decrease by 20,000 graduates (4 percent) from 2014 to 2025, while non-White graduates are projected to increase by 42,000 (24 percent). The Northeast is substantially more diverse than the Midwest, but projections for more dramatic declines of White student populations drive an overall downward trend. White public high school graduates are projected to decrease by 51,000 (14 percent) from 2014 to 2025, replaced almost one-to-one by 55,000 more non-White graduates over those same years (29 percent increase). This phenomenon is apparent in Figure 4.

Hispanic graduates will account for 70 percent or more of all numeric increases in these regions, assisted by strong increases of Asian/Pacific Islander graduates, although in smaller numbers. There is little to no growth projected for the number of Black and American Indian public high school graduates over this period. White graduates will continue to decrease in number rapidly after 2025 (9 percent fewer in the Midwest and 11 percent fewer in the Northeast), compounded by reduction in the number of graduates from all populations except Asian/Pacific Islanders – resulting in an overall decline of 8 percent in both regions from 2025 to 2032.

The Southern region is the engine of growth for high school graduates. By 2025, the South will generate about 10 percent more graduates than in 2013 and will be primarily responsible for the growth predicted

Figure 4. Varying Regional Patterns Projected for Public High School Graduates



Note: Asian/Pacific Islander graduates range from 7 percent to 11 percent of the non-White total in any year in the South; are 20 percent in the West; range from 13 percent to 18 percent in the Midwest; and are about 22 percent of the non-White total in the Northeast. See endnote 7 about the regional definitions.

for the nation around 2025. About 45 percent of the nation’s graduates will be from the Southern region by 2030. The South includes a number of states with robust youth populations, but is strongly influenced by Texas and Florida, which account for 27 percent and 14 percent of the South’s total graduates, respectively. As shown in Figure 4, non-White public high school graduates in the South are projected to overtake the number of White graduates in the near future and to rapidly outpace them in number. Increases in the numbers of Hispanic public high school graduates account for 81 percent of the non-White increases. By 2023, there will be more Hispanic public high school graduates from the South than from the West.

*Perhaps the most surprising for the Western region is the projected rapid contraction in high school graduates after 2025, driven by declines in the number of Hispanic graduates.*

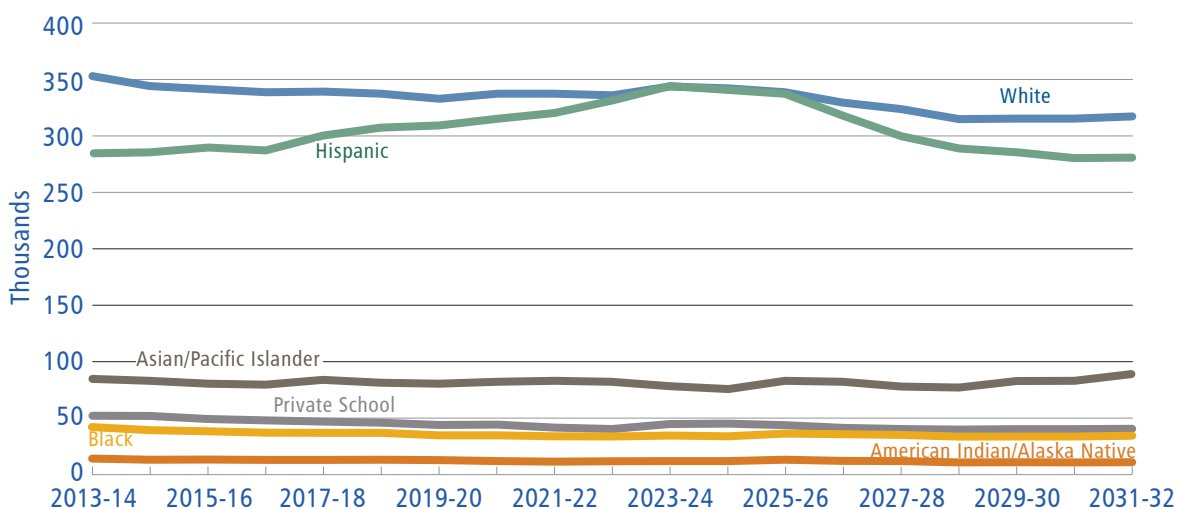
### The West: A Decade of Rapid Increase of Hispanic Graduates Before a Sudden Reversal

By 2010, the Western region (the 15 WICHE states, excluding the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and Guam) had overtaken the Midwest in terms of numbers of high school graduates produced; the Western region now produces about 30 percent of the nation’s high

school graduates.<sup>8</sup> Producing about 43 percent of the nation’s Hispanic and 47 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander public high school graduates, the West has long been the most diverse region. While the West will be impacted by reductions in White student populations, it will be much more influenced by dramatic increases in the number of Hispanic graduates, and then subsequent decreases, over the projected years.

The West is projected to have modest growth (4 percent) in the total number of high school graduates through 2024, the Western region’s projected new high point (see Figure 3). Hispanic public high school graduates will account for virtually all of that increase (60,000 more in 2024 than in 2014), replacing decreases in the number of Black, American Indian, White and even Asian/Pacific Islander graduates over this period (Figure 5). By 2024, there will be an equal number of Hispanic and White public high school graduates (343,000 each). After 2024, the tide will turn, and the number of Hispanic public high school graduates will decrease rapidly (63,000 fewer by 2032) and drive a downturn in the total number of high school graduates. Despite the rapid increases up to 2024, there are projected to be virtually the same number

Figure 5. Rapid Increase of Hispanic Graduates, Then Decreases, Projected for the West



Note: Race/ethnicity groups represent public high school graduates only.

of Hispanic public high school graduates in the West in 2032 as in 2014. Asian/Pacific Islander graduates in the West are projected to decrease about 6 percent by 2024, but then they will re-emerge as a strong contributor to growth between 2025 and 2032.

Considering the simultaneous changes among the student populations in the West, the number of non-White public high school graduates is projected to exceed the number of White graduates by 126,000 in 2024. Then, as the number of Hispanic graduates rapidly decreases after 2025, the difference in number between White and non-White graduates will narrow to 97,000.

There is variation in the Western states' high school graduate trends over the 18 years covered by the projections. In Table 1, the states are ordered by their contribution to the region's total number of high school graduates, and several indicators demonstrate the varying patterns of change. California alone contributes 52 percent of the West's total. In recent

years, California boosted the region's production of high school graduates. But, over the next decade, the number of high school graduates from California is projected to decrease 5 percent, counterbalancing the stronger growth projected for other Western states.<sup>9</sup> If California is excluded, high school graduates in the West are projected to increase 13 percent from 2013 to 2025, and several states will exceed that average rate of increase.

After 2025, many of the Western states are projected to see similar rapid decreases in the numbers of high school graduates as those projected for California and much of the nation. Therefore, there is a projected decrease of 6 percent to 8 percent in the number of high school graduates in the West between 2025 and 2032 (including and excluding California, respectively). And states with substantial Hispanic populations such as Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico are projected to have even greater declines. Only Alaska and North Dakota are projected to have any growth in the number of high school

**Table 1. Considerable Variation Projected for High School Graduates in the Western States**

States	Percent of Region	2000-01 to 2011-12, Percent Change	2012-13 to 2024-25		2024-25 to 2031-32	
			Percent Change	Range (000s)	Percent Change	Range (000s)
California	52%	31%	-5%	456K to 426K	-9%	387K to 432K
Washington	9	18	7	69 to 75	0	73 to 77
Arizona	8	35	12	65 to 72	-14	61 to 72
Colorado	7	27	17	54 to 63	-8	57 to 63
Oregon	4	15	4	36 to 38	-7	35 to 38
Utah	5	2	27	34 to 44	-6	41 to 45
Nevada	3	45	14	24 to 27	-12	23 to 27
New Mexico	2	9	5	20 to 21	-14	18 to 21
Idaho	2	11	32	18 to 23	-8	21 to 24
Hawai'i	2	5	15	13 to 16	-4	15 to 16
Montana	1	-9	9	9 to 11	0	10 to 11
South Dakota	1	-6	12	8 to 10	0	10 to 10
North Dakota	1	-16	36	7 to 10	24	10 to 12
Alaska	1	16	-1	8 to 7	3	8 to 8
Wyoming	1	-8	21	6 to 7	-2	6 to 7
WEST w/ California		31%	3%	809K to 862K	-8%	778K to 857K
WEST w/out California		17%	13%	383K to 406K	-6%	390K to 425K

Note: 2025 is used as a reference point, because it is the average year at which the result of sudden birth declines begin (the actual high point varies by state between 2024 and 2026). See also Chapter 3, Figure 3.4 of the *Knocking* report for a detailed display of state-by-state year-over-year change.

graduates after 2025; rapid in-migration for the energy industry for North Dakota, at least, is likely a contributing factor.<sup>10</sup>

The diverging state trends and strong influence of California in the West are further apparent when looking at whether the Western states will have more or fewer high school graduates in 15 years or so. There will be 6 percent fewer high school graduates in the West as a region in 2032, compared with 2013; California alone will have 14 percent fewer

**Table 2. Slowing Diversification of Public High School Graduates in the Western States**

States	Non-White Graduates as a Percent of Public Total		
	2000-01	2012-13	2031-32
California	56%	69%	74%
Washington	21	31	41
Arizona	40	52	55
Colorado	22	36	38
Oregon	13	27	30
Utah	9	18	21
Nevada	32	52	60
New Mexico	58	71	77
Idaho	9	18	26
Hawai'i	81	86	89
Montana	9	13	18
South Dakota	6	14	26
North Dakota	6	12	32
Alaska	31	40	45
Wyoming	8	14	19
WEST w/ California	41	54	57
WEST w/out California	25	35	41

Note: Amounts of 50 percent or greater are highlighted.

graduates. But when California is excluded, about 6 percent more high school graduates are projected from the Western states in 2032. Table 2 provides a view of the variation among the Western states in terms of the diversity – and rates of diversification – among high school graduates.

The rapid rates of diversification between 2000 and 2013 have challenged both the K-12 and higher education systems. Most states should expect

continued strong increases in diversification through 2025, when all student populations are expected to peak, including minorities. Then, the downturn in the number of Hispanic students after 2025 portends a relative flattening of the rate of diversification into the early 2030s. Thus, diversification is taking on a new meaning – non-White public school students will become a greater part of the total not so much due to an increase in numbers, but rather in relation to the decreasing number of White youth. And, the additive effect that non-White populations have had on the overall number of high school graduates in recent years – particularly from Hispanic students – will all but disappear for the foreseeable future in many states, and has slowed in others.

## Conclusion

This *Data Insights* outlined what is expected for the nation and regions' high school graduating classes over the next 15 years, as projected in WICHE's recently published *Knocking at the College Door* – a relative slackening of high school graduate production through 2025, and then successively fewer graduates annually through the early 2030s. And with rare exception, where increased numbers of high school graduates are projected, they will be non-White high school graduates – primarily Hispanic graduates. At the same time, White high school graduates will generally decrease in number. By and large, these same general trends are projected for the states in the West, although there is substantial variation in how they are likely to play out. Perhaps the most surprising for the Western region is the projected rapid contraction in high school graduates, that is driven by declines in the number of Hispanic graduates.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Peace Bransberger and Demarée K. Michelau, *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*, 9th Edition (Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2016), page 117 (Appendix C: Technical Information and Methodology).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, years refer to the graduating class (the spring term of full school year notation).

<sup>3</sup> Immigration also has some effect on the number of high school graduates. WICHE is not able to quantify this effect, but data indicate that immigration decreased in the years influencing these projections. See *Knocking* (ibid). Appendix C; Technical Information and Methodology.

<sup>4</sup> See *Knocking* (ibid), for more information about the private high school graduate projections, page 13. WICHE will report more detail about private school trends in a report forthcoming Summer 2017.

<sup>5</sup> WICHE was not able to produce separate projections for Hawai'ian/Pacific Islander high school graduates, but from 2011 to 2013 about 6 percent of the combined Asian/PI total, nationally, were reported as Hawai'ian/Pacific Islanders.

<sup>6</sup> Fifty-two percent of public high school graduates, an estimated 53 percent when adding primarily White U.S. private high school graduates.

<sup>7</sup> WICHE's four regions are shown on page 19 of the *Knocking at the College Door* publication (ibid). They align with the U.S. Census regional definitions, except that North and South Dakota are counted in the West region, because they are members of both WICHE and the Midwest Higher Education Compact.

<sup>8</sup> Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands are also WICHE members. For this edition, WICHE was only able to produce projections for Guam total public high school students. These projections indicate that the number of Guam public high school graduates will be relatively stable at around 1,500 to 1,600 graduates through 2022. Then there will be a brief, rapid increase to almost 2,000 public school graduates around 2025 before settling back to between 1,700 and 1,800 between 2026 and 2032.

<sup>9</sup> California's high school student numbers have been somewhat more unpredictable in recent years, as discussed in the sidebar on page 15 of *Knocking at the College Door* (ibid).

<sup>10</sup> The increases in North Dakota are related to sudden increases of youth in recent years, which predict high school graduates in later years. Births increased 27 percent between 2007 and 2014, and elementary enrollments increased 17 percent over roughly the same period. To the extent these increases result from migration to the state for the energy industry, the number of future high school graduates may depend on what occurs going forward with that industry and the related families.

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**Publication Number 2A5000A**

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