The effects of the dropout crisis are widespread, affecting every state and corner of the country to some extent. Its most dire consequences are heavily concentrated in a relatively small number of places.

Building on a special study conducted by the National Education Policy Center, the first Research Center at the University of Colorado Boulder, the Education Week Diplomas Count 2010 report identifies the nation’s dropout epicenters. By this measure, the greatest numbers of nongraduates, and graduates, are found in just 25 school districts. Together, they account for roughly half of the nation’s total nongraduates, and one-third of the nation’s total graduates.

By the same token, real gains in graduation rates during the past two years have been attributed to a number of specific strategies at the school district level. The report estimates that if those 25 districts had maintained their two-year improvement rates, the nation’s overall graduation rate would increase by three percent, to 84.1 percent. As a result, the nation would graduate 97,000 more students. That would translate into an estimated $12 billion in increased earnings in the labor market and a 0.1 percent increase in the nation’s gross domestic product.

The report’s research also suggests that an additional seven districts could achieve similar gains, bringing their numbers to 32. Furthermore, five other districts would graduate an additional 20,000 students, if they could match the success of the 32 districts. Together, 32 districts would account for 9 percent of the nation’s high school nongraduates, and an additional 2.1 percent of the nation’s graduates, in 2008-2009.

The report also notes that there are a number of factors that can contribute to a district’s ability to improve its graduation rate. These factors include, but are not limited to, community engagement, the implementation of new, evidence-based interventions, and the ability to work with community partners to improve graduation rates.

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For example, the report notes that schools in the District of Columbia, Public Charter School, have been able to improve their graduation rates by implementing new, evidence-based interventions, such as early intervention programs for at-risk students, and working with community partners to improve graduation rates.

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