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Our opinion

Keep pushing to reach peak school performance

It's helpful to think of the push to improve student achievement in Indiana as a long climb up a mountain. Every step forward helps, but there's still far to go to reach the summit.

With that noted, however, Indiana achieved a significant milestone last week. The graduation rate for the state's Class of 2009 climbed 4 percentage points from the previous year, pushing past the 80 percent marker. The rate now stands at 81.5 percent.

And, unlike as recently as four years ago, there's good reason to view the new number as reasonably accurate. Under an old, discredited formula, the state Department of Education once boasted of a 90 percent graduation rate year after year. In reality, the figure was closer to 70 percent. Indiana's new formula, which tracks individual students, should give Hoosiers confidence that the graduation statistics now are solid.

The trend also is promising in Marion County, where the graduation rate for 2009 came in at 73.8 percent, a leap of about 5 percentage points from the year before. Concentrated efforts in the community, including the Chamber of Commerce's Common Goal initiative, have no doubt helped push the graduation rate higher at several Indianapolis high schools.

At Northwest High, for example, the rate has climbed from 40.3 percent in 2007 to 49.6 percent last year. Ben Davis High School's graduation rate rose from 67 percent in 2007 to 75.8 percent last school year.

The progress is encouraging. But the necessity of pushing higher, faster should not be lost along the way.

After all, despite the school's gains, fewer than half of Northwest's Class of 2009 managed to graduate on time.

The numbers are even worse on the Southside; at Manual High School, only 44.4 percent of the 2009 class graduated. And while that number is up from the 39 percent figure recorded in 2008, it's a bit below the 45 percent rate of 2007.

Decatur Central's rate also is down -- from 75.4 percent in 2007 to 73.1 percent last year.

Clearly, there are miles to go before this community and this state can rest.

The state superintendent of public instruction, Tony Bennett, has held out a challenging but realistic goal of seeing 90 percent of Indiana students graduate from high school. Getting there will require smart use of resources. Indiana needs fewer multimillion-dollar high school football stadiums and more well-qualified reading teachers in elementary schools.

The state took a welcome step toward that goal last week. The Professional Standards Advisory Board unanimously approved a set of reforms that will require teachers to have a more in-depth knowledge of their subject matter. A high school math teacher, for instance, will now have to major in math and minor in education. And all teachers will have to pass subject tests rather than merely an assessment of their basic skills.

Indiana already has adopted higher academic standards for students; now it's raised expectations for

educators. It's a critical move as the state strives to improve student achievement and raise the overall work force's low educational attainment.

Welcome progress? Absolutely. A long climb still ahead? Without doubt. But at least Indiana is once again moving forward with a momentum that must be maintained.
