

From Resilience to Record Highs: The Story of Graduation in Fulton County Schools

1. Introduction

In 2012, fewer than 8 in 10 Fulton County Schools (FCS) students graduated on time. Today, more than 9 in 10 do. The Class of 2025 achieved a graduation rate of 91.9 percent, **the highest in FCS history** and well above the state average. This milestone represents not only **five consecutive years of record-breaking performance** but also a **16.4-point climb over the past decade**, transforming graduation **from a goal into an expectation** for nearly every student.

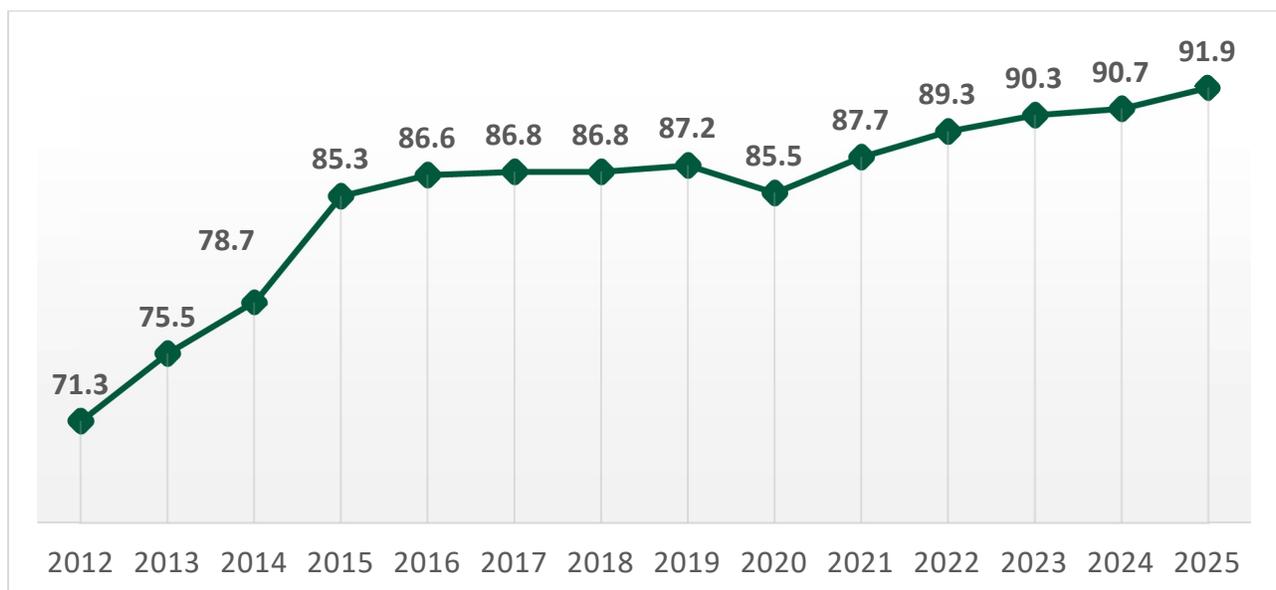
Graduation rates are more than numbers. They represent opportunities unlocked, lives changed, and communities strengthened. For the Class of 2025, the data tells a story of long-term progress, recovery from crisis, and the collective belief that each student can succeed.

2. District Progress Since 2012

Exhibit 1 illustrates the substantial progress the district has made over the past 13 years.

- In **2012**, the graduation rate was only **71.3 percent**.
- By **2014**, it had climbed to **78.7 percent**, a steady rise but still below state expectations.
- The **breakthrough** came in **2015**, when the district jumped to **85.3 percent**, followed by consistent performance in the **mid-80s through 2019**.
- In **2020**, the pandemic brought the **first dip** in nearly a **decade**. The graduation rate fell to **85.5 percent**.
- What could have been a **prolonged setback** became a **pivotal point**. By **2021**, the district had rebounded to 87.7 percent, and in each of the next four years, new records were set, culminating in a 91.9 percent rate in **2025**.

Exhibit 1. Historic FCS Graduation Rates, 2012–2025



3. District Story Since 2020

While the long-term view shows transformation, the last five years tell a story of rapid acceleration. From the 2020 **low point of 85.5 percent**, the district rebounded quickly: 89.1 percent in 2021, 90.3 percent in 2022, 90.7 percent in 2023, and **91.9 percent in 2025**. Every year over the past four years has **surpassed the previous all-time high**.

This acceleration reflects both resilience and leadership. When Superintendent Dr. Mike Looney joined the district in 2019, he made reducing high school dropouts one of his central missions, a goal shaped by his own experience as a former high school dropout. Dr. Looney has often shared that students rarely want to leave school. Instead, they struggle with how to finish when life circumstances put them behind. His perspective underscored the need for supports that help students see a clear path to the finish line.

In response, FCS invested in targeted academic supports, expanded access to advanced coursework, grew its Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) pathways, and developed new monitoring tools such as the Cohort Tracker to track progress in real time. FCS students who completed two or more CTAE courses posted a 99 percent graduation rate, a clear signal of the power of aligned pathways to keep students engaged and on track.

This recovery is even more remarkable in the broader national context. The GRAD Partnership's *Educating America* report highlights that fewer than half of U.S. school districts had fully recovered their graduation rates to pre-pandemic trajectories. Many districts across the country continue to struggle with pandemic-era disruptions, including chronic absenteeism, uneven academic recovery, and the expiration of emergency funding, all of which are impacting graduation rates.

Against that backdrop, **Fulton's climb to 91.9 percent is a national outlier**. The district's ability to sustain upward momentum suggests that it has strong systems and supports that have outperformed many of its peers.

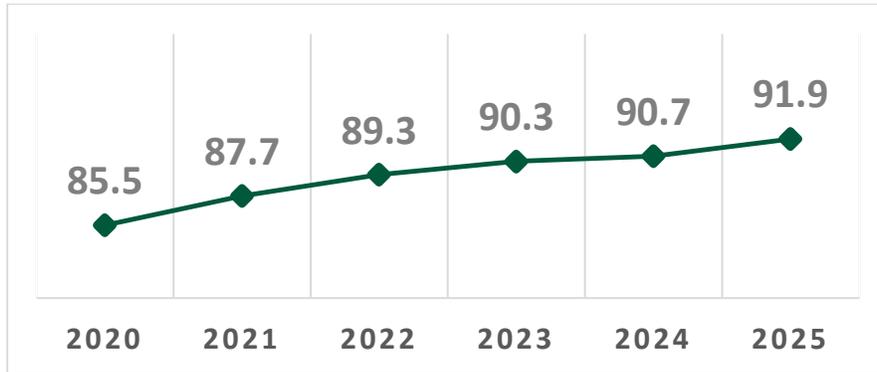
At the same time, lessons from national recovery trends such as the importance of sustained funding, attention to attendance, and early intervention remain essential guideposts. Like others across the country, FCS must remain alert, as resource pressures and student engagement challenges could slow or stall progress if not proactively addressed.

Exhibit 2 focuses on the most recent five years, beginning with the pandemic dip.

- 2020: 85.5 percent, the **lowest in six years**.
- 2021: 87.7 percent, a **rapid recovery**.
- 2022: 89.3 percent, **nearing 90**.
- 2023: 90.3 percent, **breaking through the 90 percent** milestone.
- 2024: 90.7 percent, **another record**.
- 2025: 91.9 percent, the **highest in district history**. Again.

From 2020 to 2025, the district **gained 6.4 points**, demonstrating that resilience, innovation, and support for students can transform a **crisis into a period of acceleration**.

Exhibit 2. District Graduation Rate, 2020–2025



4. School-Level Data Stories Since 2020

The districtwide climb to 91.9 percent is powerful, and the story becomes even more compelling when viewed at the school level. Each campus has its own trajectory, shaped by the students it serves, the strategies it embraces, and the challenges it faces.

Exhibit 3: School-Level Graduation Rates, 2020–2025

This exhibit presents five years of graduation rate data for every FCS high school, highlighting the remarkable overall progress since 2020 and the diversity of outcomes across campuses. Some demonstrate dramatic transformation, while others sustain excellence, and a few reveal areas where renewed focus is needed.

These school-level journeys form the foundation for the narratives that follow, clearly illustrating the gains, plateaus, and challenges that shape the district’s graduation story.

Exhibit 3: School-Level Graduation Rates, 2020–2025

School	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2025 vs. 2024
Alpharetta High School	96.5	93.2	96.9	96.3	97.9	98.4	0.5
Banneker High School	76.9	82.4	82.8	82.8	81.4	84.6	3.2
Cambridge High School	98.2	97.5	98.1	97.1	96.7	97.4	0.7
Centennial High School	88.6	91.0	93.5	93.4	93.8	95.3	1.5

School	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2025 vs. 2024
Chattahoochee High School	96.2	98.2	96.6	95.9	97.3	97.0	-0.3
Creekside High School	80.5	84.4	88.5	90.4	89.2	92.2	3.0
FAVE	N/A	N/A	N/A	64.0	74.4	67.8	-6.6
Global Impact Academy	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	100.0	100.0	0.0
Hapeville Charter Career	94.0	94.2	91.9	93.1	94.9	97.5	2.6
Independence High School	30.3	26.1	17.0	28.8	53.5	67.9	14.4
Innovation Academy	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	98.2	99.8	1.6
Johns Creek High School	97.3	97.3	96.6	97.9	96.9	97.1	0.2
Langston Hughes High School	85.3	86.7	85.3	90.1	92.5	94.3	2.8
Milton High School	96.9	96.1	97.1	95.9	95.9	96.1	0.3
North Springs High School	91.9	94.5	92.1	90.9	92.1	94.9	2.8
Northview High School	96.1	98.3	97.2	99.6	98.5	98.0	-0.5
Riverwood International High	89.9	93.5	97.5	96.9	98.8	97.1	-1.7
Roswell High School	88.3	91.7	93.6	92.2	92.3	93.5	1.2
Skyview High School	9.7	2.9	8.5	24.3	23.8	32.2	8.5
Tri-Cities High School	84.3	89.1	89.2	87.0	86.7	86.1	-0.6

School	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2025 vs. 2024
Westlake High School	94.8	95.5	92.8	91.4	93.2	91.9	-1.3
District	85.5	87.7	89.3	90.3	90.7	91.9	1.2

a. Stories of Transformation

The first set of stories comes from schools that have redefined what is possible. These campuses have made significant gains in a short period, demonstrating how persistence, targeted support, and strong leadership can alter the trajectory for students.

- **Independence High School:** From 30.3 percent in 2020 to 67.9 percent in 2025, a 37.6-point climb and the most dramatic turnaround in the district. The 14.4-point gain in just the last year is especially remarkable.

Independence High School Coordinator **Tabatha Taylor** reflected on what this milestone means for her non-traditional school and its mission:

“As a non-traditional high school, this milestone reflects our deep commitment to meeting students where they are and guiding them toward their full potential.”

Zone 4 Superintendent **Alexandra Bates** placed the accomplishment in historical context and praised the relentless work of the staff and students:

“Since the DOE began tracking graduation rates in the portal, this is the highest rate the school has ever achieved. The previous high was 59 percent. This is such a huge win for the programming at Independence and, most importantly, for the kids and staff. They have been relentless in making sure every student gets exactly what they need to succeed. Truly, well done.”

- **Skyview High School:** From 9.7 percent in 2020 to 32.2 percent in 2025, a 22.5-point gain that represents a tripling of its graduation rate. The 8.4-point rise in 2025 alone underscores momentum.

Director of Charter Schools **Andrea Cooper Gatewood** reflected on Skyview’s accomplishment:

“Behind these numbers are young people overcoming challenges like economic hardship, language barriers, family responsibilities, and learning gaps. Their success is a testament to what’s possible when opportunity meets perseverance.”

- **Creekside High School:** From 80.5 percent in 2020 to 92.2 percent in 2025, a double-digit increase that pushed the school firmly into the 90s.

Principal **Dr. Terrell Ann Green Awak** connected Creekside’s achievement to its culture of high expectations, community strength, and strategic support systems:

“At Creekside High School, we do not just graduate students, we ignite futures. Our 92.2 percent graduation rate, surpassing the state average of 84 percent, is a powerful reflection of our unwavering commitment to unlocking the full potential of every student. As an AVID National Demonstration School, we model a system of excellence through high expectations and

intentional support, ensuring every scholar is prepared for success in college, career, and life. Our guiding mantra, Your Path. Your Pursuit. Your Tribe., embodies our belief in personalized learning journeys, shared responsibility, and a culture where no student walks alone.

This level of growth is a testament to the drive of our scholars, the dedication of our educators, and the strength of our community. It is sustained through intentional collaboration, data-driven decision-making, and a relentless focus on student achievement. Tools like the Cohort Tracker, provided by the Strategy and Data Team, empower us to monitor student progress in real time, identify trends, and make informed decisions that drive continuous improvement. Innovative initiatives such as Fulton County Schools' In-School Academies serve as strategic dropout prevention models, offering smaller, supportive environments where students in need of additional support receive the personalized interventions they need to stay on track and succeed.

Creekside's success is no accident. It is the result of strategic alignment, empowered leadership, and an unyielding commitment to improving student outcomes."

- **North Springs High School:** From 90.9 percent in 2020 to 94.9 percent in 2025, a 4.0-point gain in the past two years that quietly reflects focused improvement. Principal **Scott Hanson** tied this progress directly to the daily work of his staff and students:

"I am excited about our grad rate this year. When your goal is to get every student across this first of many finish lines, our grad rate is an acknowledgment of all of the work that happens each day by our students and staff."

- **Langston Hughes High School:** From 85.3 percent in 2020 to 94.3 percent in 2025, a steady 9.0-point rise that reflects consistent improvement.
- **Banneker High School:** From 76.9 percent in 2020 to 84.6 percent in 2025, a 7.7-point increase that shows steady upward momentum in a high-needs context.
- **Roswell High School:** From 88.3 percent in 2020 to 93.5 percent in 2025, a 5.2-point rise that steadily pushed the school deeper into the 90s.

b. Stories of Sustained Excellence

Some schools are not just keeping pace, they are **setting the pace**. These campuses exemplify what it means to cultivate a culture of excellence that can be sustained year after year, achieving graduation rates among the highest levels in the district.

- **Global Impact Academy:** A perfect 100 percent for the second year in a row, one of only a handful of schools in Georgia to achieve this milestone. Principal **Johnathan L. Hall** emphasized both the achievement and the people who made it possible:
"Global Impact Academy is proud to celebrate a sustained graduation rate above 90 percent, achieving a 100 percent graduation rate for the second consecutive year. A resounding thank you to our dedicated faculty and staff for their tireless efforts to ensure our continued success."
- **Innovation Academy:** 99.8 percent in 2025, building on last year's 98.2 percent.

- **Alpharetta High School:** 98.4 percent in 2025, continuing its climb from 96.3 percent in 2023.
- **Northview High School:** 98.0 percent in 2025, still among the very top despite a slight recent dip.
- **Hapeville Charter Career:** 97.5 percent in 2025, up 4.4 points in two years.
- **Centennial High School:** From 88.6 percent in 2020 to 95.3 percent in 2025, a 6.7-point gain that reflects both growth and sustained strength.
- **Riverwood International High School:** From 89.9 percent in 2020 to 97.1 percent in 2025, a 7.2-point climb over five years despite a recent one-year dip.
- **Johns Creek, Cambridge, Chattahoochee, and Milton:** All remain in the mid-to-upper 90s, proving that once excellence is embedded, it can be counted on year after year.

c. Stories of Renewal

A smaller group of schools shows that progress is not always linear. Their recent results call for reflection and recalibration. These stories highlight opportunities for renewal, moments to steady the course, diagnose what has shifted, and restore upward momentum.

i. Schools showing softening

These schools remain strong overall but are slipping slightly. Small declines at this level matter, as they impact the district average.

- **Westlake High School:** Down 2.9 points since 2020, now at 91.9 percent, including a 1.3-point decline in the past year.
- **Milton High School:** Essentially flat since 2020, with only a 0.2-point gain in five years.
- **Cambridge High School:** Down 0.8 points from 2020 despite still being a top performer at 97.4 percent.
- **Northview High School:** Down 1.6 points over the past two years, though still at or above 98 percent.
- **Tri-Cities High School:** Down 0.9 points since 2023, remaining in the mid-80s at 86.1 percent.

ii. Schools experiencing volatility

These schools show large year-over-year swings that threaten stability and require immediate attention.

- **FAVE:** Dropped **6.6 points in 2025** after surging the prior year, now at 67.8 percent.
- **Riverwood International High School:** Lost **1.7 points** year over year, despite its longer-term climb.
- **Westlake High School:** Declined by **1.3 points** this year, compounding its five-year drop.
- **Chattahoochee High School:** A small but notable **0.3-point slip** after **two years of gains**.

5. Closing Reflection

Graduation rates are more than numbers. They represent lives changed, opportunities unlocked, and communities strengthened. For the Class of 2025, the data tells a story of steady progress, recovery from crisis, and a collective belief that every student can succeed.

Fulton County Schools has shown what is possible when resilience, strategy, and leadership align. Superintendent Dr. Mike Looney's mission to reduce high school dropouts has become a shared mission across the system, one that now defines expectations for students and staff alike. His story, that students do not want to drop out, they just need help finding the way to finish, has become the guiding ethos of the district's work.

In a national landscape where many districts still have not fully recovered from the pandemic, Fulton's record-setting **91.9 percent graduation rate** stands as both a beacon and a challenge. It is a beacon of what is possible when schools, families, and communities work together, and a challenge to keep pushing higher, ensuring that every student not only reaches the finish line but is prepared for the opportunities beyond it.

Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR)

A federally required calculation that measures the percentage of students who graduate within four years of starting ninth grade, adjusted for transfers in and out, emigration, or death.

Advanced Coursework

Challenging academic classes such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or Dual Enrollment are designed to prepare students for college-level work.

AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination)

A college-readiness program that helps students develop skills needed for success in higher education, often emphasizing study skills, organization, and goal-setting.

Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE)

Programs that offer students hands-on, career-focused pathways in fields such as health sciences, engineering, information technology, and agriculture.

Cohort

A group of students who enter ninth grade in the same academic year and are tracked together through graduation.

Cohort Tracker

A monitoring tool used by Fulton County Schools (FCS) to track student progress toward graduation in real-time, enabling early interventions when students fall behind.

District Average

The overall graduation rate (or other performance measure) for all schools within a district, calculated by combining school-level results.

Emergency Funding (Pandemic-Era)

Temporary federal or state funds provided to schools during the COVID-19 pandemic to support learning recovery, technology, and student needs.

Engagement (Student Engagement)

The level of a student's participation, involvement, and interest in school, often linked to higher graduation rates.

Graduation Rate

The percentage of students in a defined cohort who graduate with a regular high school diploma within four years.

GRAD Partnership

A national initiative focused on improving graduation outcomes by promoting effective early warning and on-track systems in U.S. schools.

On-Time Graduation

Graduating from high school within four years of starting ninth grade.

Pathways (Academic/CTAE Pathways)

Structured sequences of courses designed to guide students toward college readiness or career entry, such as engineering, health sciences, or information technology.

Plateau (Performance Plateau)

A leveling off in performance after a period of growth indicates stalled progress that may need renewed strategies.

Record High

The highest-ever graduation rate or performance level achieved by a district or school.

Resilience (Educational Context)

The ability of students, schools, and districts to recover from setbacks, such as the pandemic, and return to or exceed their previous performance levels.

Sustained Excellence

Maintaining very high graduation rates or achievement levels consistently over multiple years.

Targeted Academic Supports

Interventions and resources targeted at specific student groups or needs to enhance learning outcomes and improve graduation rates.

Trajectories (Graduation Trajectories)

The direction and trend of a school or district's graduation rates over time, showing improvement, decline, or stability.

Turnaround School

A school that has significantly improved its graduation rate or academic performance after previously struggling.

Volatility (Graduation Rate Volatility)

Large year-to-year swings in graduation rates indicate instability in student outcomes that may require closer monitoring.

Zone Superintendent

An FCS district leader who is responsible for overseeing a group of schools within a geographic or organizational zone.

Appendix B: Georgia's Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate Explanation

In compliance with federal law, Georgia calculates a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate. The cohort is a starting group of ninth-grade students that is tracked over four years, with adjustments made by adding new students who transfer in and subtracting those who transfer out, emigrate, or pass away.

This rate represents the percentage of students who graduate within four years with a regular high school diploma. It is calculated by dividing the number of graduates by the number of students in the adjusted cohort for that graduating class. This method ensures a more accurate reflection of graduation outcomes by accounting for changes in student enrollment over time.