

## “A First Look at WICHE’s Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates” (10<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Every four years, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) publishes *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*. This highly-anticipated publication provides a window into the projected pipeline of future high school graduates and therefore prospective college students. The 10<sup>th</sup> edition, released in December 2020, projects high school graduates through 2037.

Nationally, high school graduates are projected to increase each year for the next five years before peaking at 3.9 million graduates in 2025. (The 9<sup>th</sup> edition of *Knocking at the College Door*, published in 2016, projected a more modest peak of 3.6 million high school graduates.) Between 2025 and 2037, there will be successively fewer graduates in each high school graduating class, dropping by almost 11 percent to 3.5 million -- a cumulative loss of 400,000 students. The graduating class in 2037 is projected to be about the same size as the graduating class in 2014. The decline is a direct outcome of fewer births following the Great Recession, although it is tempered by a welcome uptick in high school graduation rates.

Projections vary significantly by state and region. For example, the states anticipated to experience the most significant percentage declines in high school graduates are West Virginia (-24%), Illinois (-24%), and New Mexico (-22%). In contrast, the significant numerical declines will be experienced by California (-73,770), Illinois (-36,800), and New York (-30,360). Drawing upon the WICHE data, Rickes Associates developed a simplified interactive map.

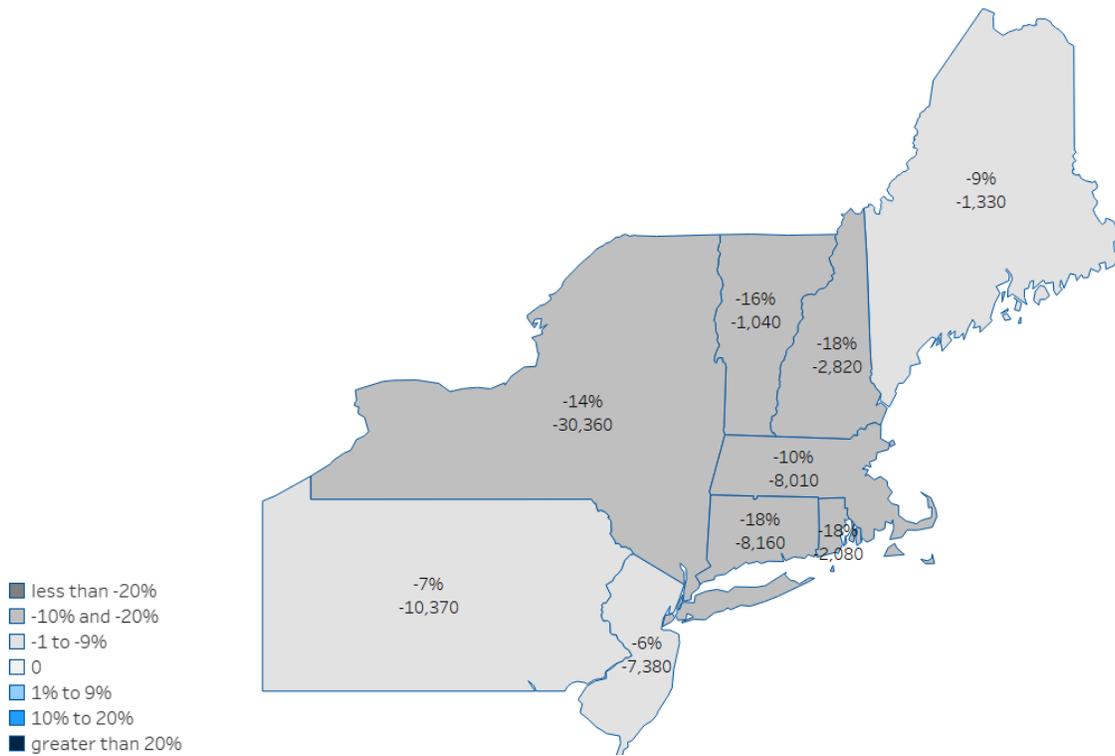
WICHE clusters states into four regions – Northeastern, Southern, Midwestern, and Western – as shown below. Significant differences between the Commission’s 2016 (9<sup>th</sup> edition) and 2020 (10<sup>th</sup> edition) reports are also called out, highlighting changes between the two publications.

### Northeastern Region

All of the states in the Northeastern Region are projected to have varying decreases in the number of high school graduates through the 2037 cohort. States with the largest percentage declines include New Hampshire (-18%), Connecticut (-18%), and Rhode Island (-18%). Those states with the largest numerical declines include New York (-30,360), Pennsylvania (-10,370), Connecticut (-8,160) and Massachusetts (-8,010).

*Notable changes from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> edition:*

- New York, previously projected to have a stable number of high school graduates through 2032, is now projected to exhibit a *decrease* of 14% through 2037.
- Maine will experience less of a decline; previously it showed a projected decrease of high school graduates from 16% through 2032, while it is now 9% through 2037.
- In contrast, Rhode Island is showing a more pronounced decline; initially, a 7% decline of high school graduates through 2032 was anticipated and now that decline is 18% through 2037.

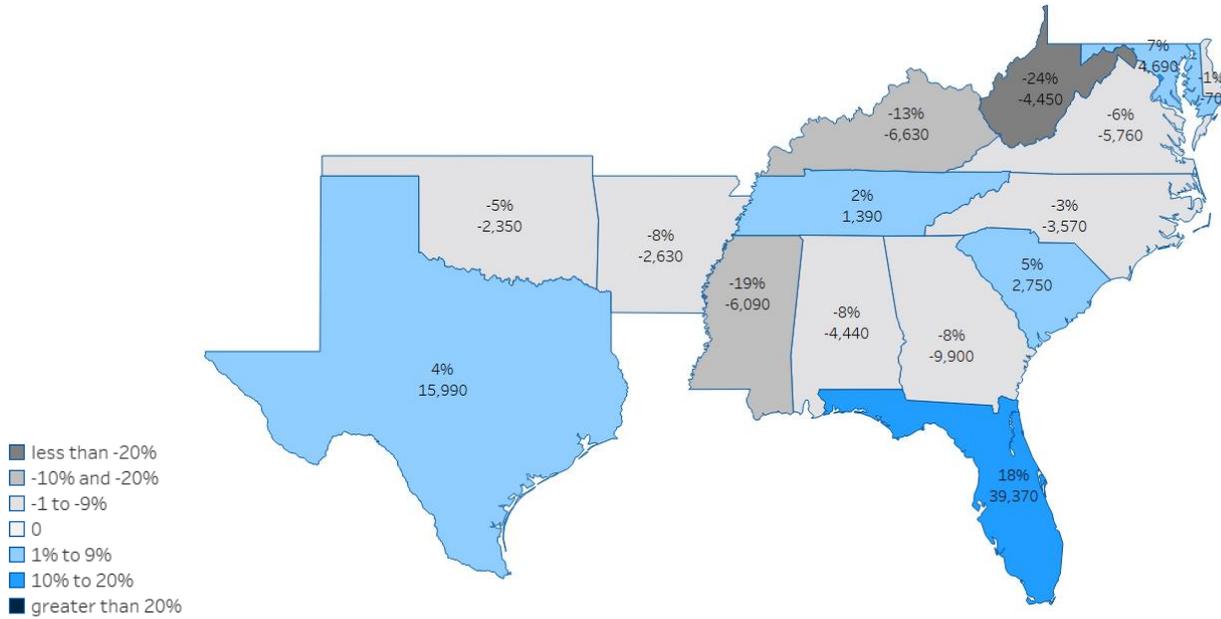


### Southern Region

The Southern Region, as whole, is projected to show stagnant to moderate growth. The state with the highest percentage as well as numerical increase is Florida (18% or 39,370). Those states with the largest numerical declines include Georgia (-9,900), Kentucky (-6,630), and Mississippi (-6,090).

Notable changes from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> edition:

- Florida is now projected to experience an *increase* in high school graduates by 18% through 2037; previously, it was slated to remain steady through 2032,
- Louisiana has shifted from no growth through 2032 to a projected *decrease* of 10% through 2037.

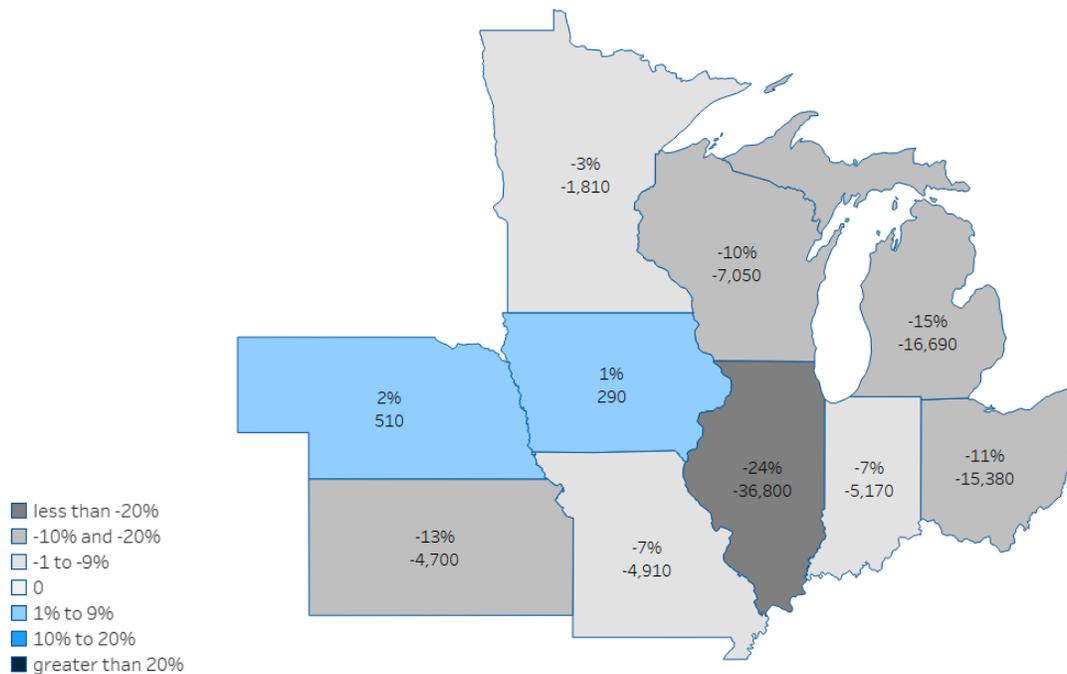


## Midwestern Region

Most Midwestern states are projected to undergo a decrease in the number of high school graduates through 2037, including Illinois (-24%), Michigan (-15%) and Kansas (-13%). Only two states in the Midwestern Region anticipate growth: Nebraska (2%) and Iowa (1%). Those states with the largest numerical declines include Illinois (-36,800), Michigan (-16,690), and Ohio (-15,380).

*Notable changes from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> edition:*

- Kansas was previously projected to experience a 4% increase in high school graduates through 2032; it is now projected to *decrease* 13% by 2037.

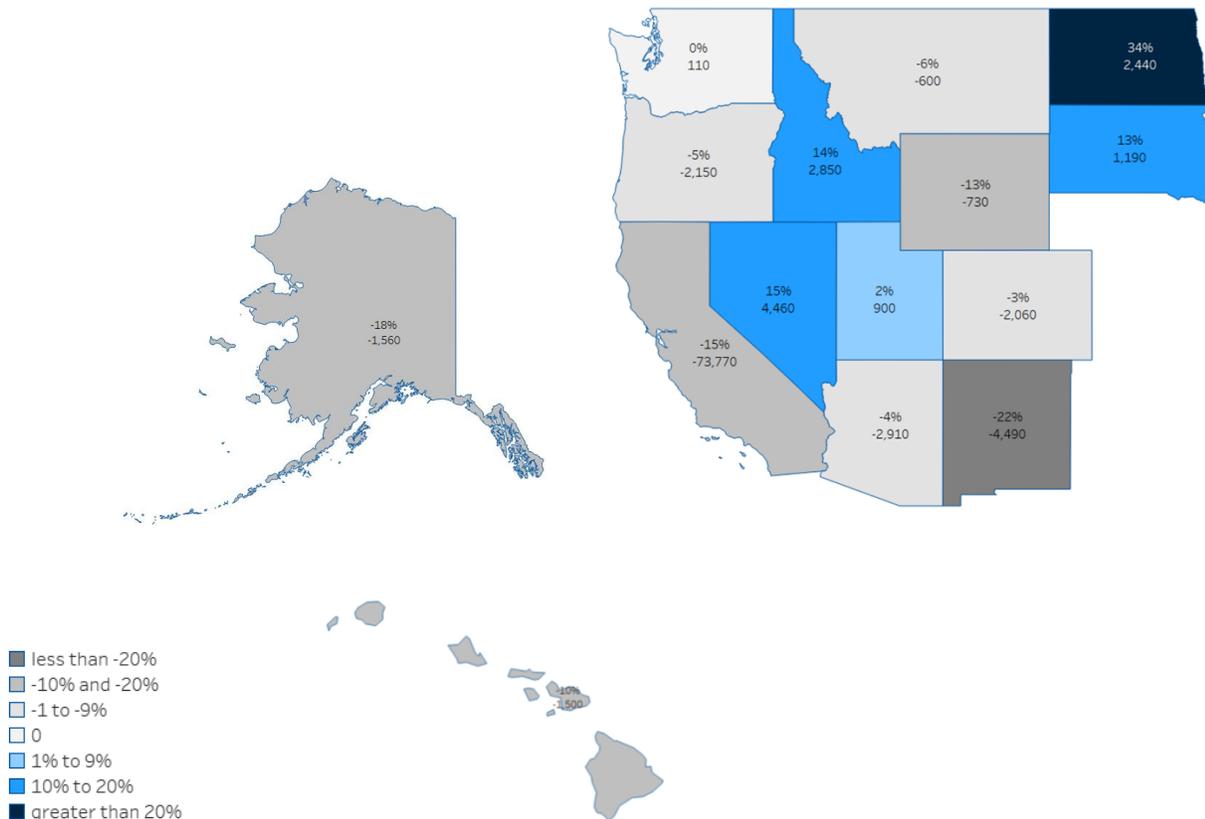


## Western Region

The Western Region is projected to experience an overall decline by 2037. Growth states include the Dakotas, Nevada, Idaho, and Utah. Washington state is projected to remain constant through 2037 while the rest of the region is anticipating a decline. The state with the largest numerical decline is California (-73,770), followed by New Mexico (-4,490) and Colorado (-2,060).

*Notable changes from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> edition:*

- Four states in the Western Region flipped from a projected increase in the 9<sup>th</sup> edition through 2032 to a projected decrease in the 10<sup>th</sup> edition through 2037:
  - Alaska, previously calculated to have an increase of 6% high school graduates through 2032, is now projected to have a *decrease* of 18% through 2037.
  - Hawaii shifted from a 13% probable increase in high school graduates through 2032 to a projected 10% *decrease* through 2037.
  - Montana is now projecting a 6% *decrease* in graduating high schoolers through 2037, in contrast to a 6% increase through 2032, as estimated in the 9<sup>th</sup> edition.
  - Wyoming is currently slated to have a 13% *decrease* in high school graduates through 2037, contrasting with the previously projected 6% increase of graduates through 2032.
- The anticipated increase in North Dakota high school graduates has been scaled back from 63% through 2032 to 34% through 2037.



## In Sum

The quadrennial WICHE publication, *Knocking at the College Door*, provides invaluable insights into the numbers and composition of prospective college students. In particular, unexpectedly robust increases in high school graduation rates in recent years have helped bolster the number of high school graduates, nationally. Despite that, a cumulative loss of 400,000 high school graduates is anticipated between the peak in 2025 and 2037, the outer year of WICHE’s projections. It remains to be seen how the COVID-19 pandemic will skew the projections going forward, not only in terms of birth rates and high school completion rates, but also future college-going and completion rates.

*Sources:*

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, *Knocking at the College Door*, 10th edition, 2020.  
 Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, *Knocking at the College Door*, 9th edition, 20216.

Rickes Associates infuses all of its planning work with deep knowledge of the underlying forces shaping higher education. Let’s have a conversation about how we can inform and enhance your data-driven decision-making.