

New Jersey remains tops in the nation in high school graduation rate - pressofAtlanticCity.com: Education

New Jersey remains tops in the nation in high school graduation rate

By **DIANE D'AMICO Education Writer** | Posted: Tuesday, June 7, 2011 12:00 am

New Jersey's high school graduation rate — 87 percent — remains the highest in the nation, a new Diplomas Count report released today shows.

That rate is almost five points below the 93 percent graduation rate listed in the New Jersey School Report Card for the 2007-08 academic year, the year on which this year's Diplomas Count was based. But state officials said a new, more rigorous state reporting system is likely to bring future graduation rates closer to the Diplomas Count number.

The new state Department of Education system will require school districts to track the progress of individual students rather than use enrollment numbers to calculate the rate. Currently, the rate is the percentage of students overall who stayed in high school for four years. The new system will track individual students by an identification number.

The state also is preparing a new system of graduation tests designed to address concerns that graduates are not prepared for jobs or college.

"New Jersey's graduation rate is a source of pride, indicating that we have excellent school programs and teachers who are doing a great job in helping our students graduate," acting Education Commissioner Chris Cerf said in a statement. "However, it is important that we know if our students are truly college ready by generating more comprehensive and transparent data."

Even with the changes, New Jersey is likely to remain at or near the top of the nation. Vermont had the second-highest graduation rate at 83 percent.

New Jersey Education Association spokesman Steve Baker said the report shows the majority of schools in the state are doing a good job.

"We don't need to blow up a successful system because of a political agenda that has nothing to do with education," he said, adding that the state should focus on using successful models to help schools that are struggling.

"Other states want to do what we're doing," he said. "We're the only state trying to figure out how to undo what we're doing."

The Diplomas Count 2011 report, published by the Editorial Projects and Education Research Center in Maryland, also says more attention should be paid to the value of the diploma in preparing students for jobs or college.

Cerf said the state's most important goal must be to see that graduates are college- and career-ready. He cited the large number of students who need remedial courses at some community colleges. Statewide about two-thirds of community college students must take at least one remedial course.

"We're very proud of our graduation rate, but other studies show that we still have much work to do," Cerf said.

Local school officials say they are taking steps to keep more at-risk students in high school, but many face larger societal problems.

"Immigrant students come in underschooled for their age," said Donna Haye, assistant superintendent for curriculum in Atlantic City schools. "Urban students start having attendance problems, fall behind in class and don't have a family structure to support them. A big problem at the high school is students who just don't come to school and have no parental oversight."

The report shows an estimated 14,000 New Jersey high school seniors did not graduate in 2008.

The national high school graduation rate in 2008 was almost 72 percent, an almost 3 percent increase from the year before. The report showed improvement among all groups, although minority students still lag. The graduate rates for Hispanic and black students in New Jersey are almost 20 points lower than that of white and Asian students. But all student groups in New Jersey graduate at a higher rate than students in other states.

Stan Karp, director of secondary education reform for the Education Law Center, said there has been steady improvement in graduation rates statewide. But, he said, most of the problems remain in the poorest urban districts, and it will be interesting to see the impact of the new tracking and testing systems.

"The question becomes how do you sustain the improvement while also increasing academic preparation for all students?" he said. "How do you raise the bar without pushing some kids out? The old tracking system was pretty shaky in how schools accounted for students who just sort of disappeared."

Early intervention and personal contact have made a difference in some districts.

Haye said mentors have been successful in Atlantic City, as have new early intervention programs that target students before they get to the high school. She said 13 of the Top 20 students in the Class of 2011 are from Atlantic City. In previous years, most came from the sending districts of Brigantine, Margate and Ventnor.

"If they come into the high school better equipped, we can get them into the Advanced Placement classes and into college" she said.

The Champions of Youth program at the Atlantic City Boys & Girls Club has sought to pair 20 freshmen a year with personal mentors. This year the club will produce its third graduating class, all of whom have plans to continue their education.

"Most are the first in their families to even graduate from high school," Director of External Affairs David Messier said. "We do everything and anything we can to convince them education is important because that is not a message they are getting at home."

At Wildwood High School, teams that include teachers, counselors and parents plan academic interventions with students at risk of dropping out.

The district developed a new bilingual program that has helped students learn English and keep up with academic work. A school-to-work program allows some students to work part of the school day. The technology department has offered a hands-on program in basic home repairs and maintenance.

"They like it, and it keeps them motivated to stay in school," said Susan Rohrman, supervisor of curriculum and instruction. "They're building furniture and learning to do basic plumbing and wiring, skills they can use."

The next step is where they go after they graduate. Community colleges are growing because they are affordable and can offer a variety of training programs, from a short-term certificate to a two-year associate degree. But students still need the basic skills.

Jean McAlister, associate dean of continuing education at Atlantic Cape Community College, said the college's goal is to forge education pathways for students so that any program can lead to a more advanced degree.

"They can start with a credential that is also worth college credits," McAlister said. She said most programs require students to take the Test of Adult Basic Education, and if they need to work on academics, they can get help at the One-Stop Career Centers for free. But they must have a high school diploma.

She said different jobs require different skill levels. Learning to deal table games requires basic math. But a solar technology program requires more advanced math concepts to calculate how to properly install solar panels.

Art Wexler, vice president of academic affairs at Atlantic Cape, said degree programs also are set up so students can choose from a career or academic path. But students must take a placement test, and state data show about two-thirds of community college students must take at least one remedial course, which has led to a call for more rigorous high school requirements.

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