

Are Your Graduates Succeeding in College?

Using graduate data to assess achievement in K12.

By Ed Finkel

April 2011

When Education Secretary Arne Duncan announced the Race to the Top program in 2009, he added two success factors to the plate of school districts, which are traditionally measured by students' high school success in math, reading and science: college enrollment rates and credit accumulation. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which launched Race to the Top, asks states to set up a longitudinal data system to report back on students' progress after they receive their diplomas.

While K12 administrators no doubt largely agree about the importance of preparing students for postsecondary experiences, relatively few have built systems to systematically follow their alumni. "There is an unprecedented focus on postsecondary outcomes," says J.B. Schramm, founder and CEO of College Summit, a national nonprofit that partners with schools and districts to strengthen their college-going culture and boost enrollment rates. "We believe district leaders ... should set college enrollment and persistence as the 'North Star' and reward principals." He adds, "The second step is the bully pulpit—for district leaders to declare that the purpose of public education [is] college success."

Schramm recalls talking to Linda Calvo, principal of Arleta High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District, about how a chance conversation with a graduate about how she was struggling with writing in college prompted Arleta to change its writing curriculum. College Summit works closely with the Data Quality Campaign, a Washington, D.C.-based group funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that's working to help states implement and use longitudinal data systems. "States are making real progress toward the system that Linda was asking for, so the principals aren't flying blind and depending on ad-hoc conversations over Christmas break with [college] kids," Schramm says.

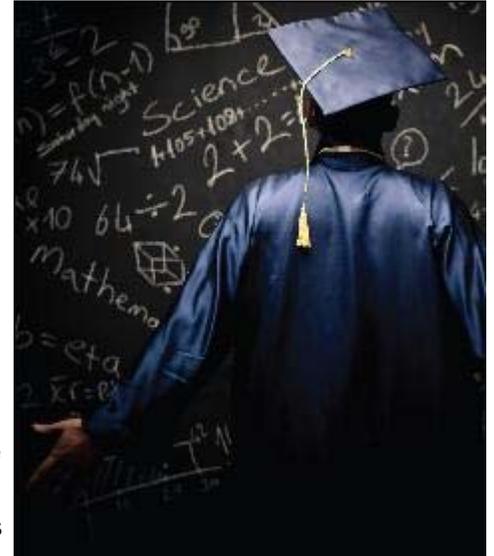
Indeed, the data quality campaign's 2010 analysis shows that all states can track the percentage of students who graduate high school, 41 states know what percentage of students require remediation in postsecondary education and 34 states can track which teachers consistently achieve the most student growth in their classrooms.

Survey Results

The 2010 Education Survey by Deloitte found that 92 percent of teachers say they lack the necessary data to understand students' college preparation needs; only 13 percent receive official information on how they perform after high school, and reflecting Calvo's experience, the vast majority receive that information from either former students (87 percent) or their parents (69 percent). If they had such data, 78 percent would plan coursework based on it, and 83 percent would use it to improve subject matter, the Deloitte survey states.

The survey also revealed that 28 percent of students took at least one remedial course in college; 79 percent of those who did so took math. Deloitte's 2009 survey found that 70 percent of students planned to attend college, but only 22 percent said high school had done an "excellent" job of preparing them. And while low-income students and parents rank college preparation as the most important purpose of high school—42 percent and 48 percent, respectively—only 9 percent of teachers said so, with higher numbers choosing "help students master the subject you teach" (38 percent) or "teach students basic life skills" (30 percent).

The College Board builds on this survey data from Deloitte with national statistics on students matriculating to college, through agreements with about



Eric Sparks, on left, the director of counseling services at the Wake County (N.C.) Public School System, works with

200 colleges to share their student performance data. Using this data, they track about 200,000 freshmen as they enter college, complete their freshman year, and continue onward to find out how they're performing and how many of them are continuing toward a degree.

The board's recent research shows that of the 43 percent that scored at least 1,550 out of a perfect score of 2,400 on the reading, writing and math portions of the SAT, 65 percent have achieved a college degree or certification—and that group typically has at least a “moderately successful” GPA of 2.7 or higher, says Wayne Camara, vice president for research and development at the College Board.

But the College Board cannot break down data by individual high schools. “Districts really need to have a deeper understanding of how students who have different types of preparation, different educational experiences, actually make out when they go to college,” Camara says. “What are their grades? Do they persist beyond freshman year? Are they taking remedial courses? Those are the kinds of questions that can only be answered if districts are getting data in a more systematic way. “Right now, it's a crapshoot,” he adds. “They know an awful lot about their students until they leave their doors. Then they lose track of them.”

National Student Clearinghouse

But many districts are keeping track thanks to the National Student Clearinghouse, a nonprofit organization. The Clearinghouse follows students' performance at 3,300 colleges, representing 92 percent of students nationwide, as well as employment information through the IRS. K12 districts can pay the Clearinghouse \$425 per high school per year to produce StudentTracker reports, which provide information on how many students enroll in college within two years of high school graduation, how many obtain a college degree, which colleges they most often attend, and how long it takes to graduate.

All colleges participating in the student loan program provide such enrollment and persistence data for all students, regardless of whether they take out loans. For example, districts like Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools have forged agreements with the Clearinghouse. For the past three years, the school district has been able to match most of its students to all students in the Clearinghouse database, according to Jerry Weast, superintendent of the Montgomery County schools. “It enabled us to actually keep track of our own kids,” he says, adding that it boosts confidence among community members. “They want to know if the juice is worth the squeeze,” he says.

Results: High College Attendance

Elsewhere in Maryland, the Baltimore County Public Schools has verified that 62 percent of students enrolled in college immediately after high school graduation in 2010; 87 percent of those enrolling within a year of graduating high school in 2008 returned for a second year of college; and 34 percent of those who have been out of high school since 2003 have earned a college degree.



At the Baltimore County (Md.) Public Schools, Superintendent Joe A. Hairston, middle wearing red tie, meets with assistant superintendents and administrators to discuss a new college readiness curriculum.

District administrators meet weekly to discuss not only graduation status for juniors and seniors in high school but also what the Clearinghouse's reports are showing about those who have matriculated in college and what the data from the IRS shows as far as the graduates' jobs obtained and income earned. “It's the largest and most up-to-date and accurate and real-time way to know where students have gone after school,” says Tamela Hawley, director of research for Baltimore County Public Schools. “Because we get the raw data, we are able to disaggregate it for all our student groups”—by race and ethnicity, by gender, and by other breakdowns.

“The guidance department is extremely interested in this data, as well as each and every high school principal,” she adds.

In particular, the guidance department uses the information to give current students a sense of which courses they'll need to take to succeed in college, Hawley says. The “rich data” can be broken down to show outcomes for those

If They Can Make it There...

With its graduation rate at an all-time high of 63 percent, New York City's Department of Education has taken several steps to track graduates beyond their diplomas.

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who have taken AP courses versus those who haven't, for example, which helps to get students more interested in challenging themselves.

The system relies more on SAT and PSAT test scores to determine how to improve its curriculum, however, because those tests provide more granular information on which subtopics—for example, algebra or geometry—students most need. Knowing how many graduates continue to a second year of college or how many graduate does not provide the same course-by-course snapshot.

Chicago Consortium

The Chicago Consortium on School Research, an independent agency based at the University of Chicago that focuses on Chicago Public Schools (CPS), has attempted to track Chicago students for the past several years at the district's request. And CPS set up its own Office of College and Career Preparation in 2003 to complement those efforts with a joint grant from the Gates Foundation, says Jenny Nagaoka, associate director for postsecondary studies at the consortium.

In a series of reports published as *From High School to the Future*, the Consortium performed in-depth interviews with 105 students between their junior year of high school and sophomore year of college. It also analyzed National Student Clearinghouse data on the roughly 14,000 graduates that come out of Chicago's 125 high schools each year, Nagaoka says.

The interviews of students in three neighborhood high schools found that slightly more than half continued to college and that most of those stayed into their sophomore year—although there was a greater drop-off among those who enrolled at two-year schools.

Chicago was the first large district to start using the Clearinghouse data, and CPS and the Consortium help the Clearinghouse think through what the Student-Tracker reports should cover, says Nagaoka, who is unaware of any similar source of data. "It's not perfect," she admits, noting that the Clearinghouse does not track proprietary schools as closely as others. But overall, she concludes, "it's transformed how people think about what high school students are doing after college."

Chicago schools have attempted to encourage postsecondary matriculation among high school students by adding college and career coaches to supplement the work of counselors and focus on the broader population of students, not just those who wander into counselors' offices.

Northwestern University researcher James Rosenbaum has studied the impact of those coaches and says he's impressed. The district has seen growth overall in college knowledge and attendance, and even more so at schools with coaches, he says. "They've had measurable and significant impacts on students applying to more than one college and taking all the right actions," Rosenbaum says, with regard to steps like completing applications and applying for financial aid. Students at coached schools "are more likely to attend college, and more likely to attend a four-year college."

And Nagaoka adds: "They are building something that our research has really pushed, which is the idea of building a college-going culture. Schools see their students as being more likely to take every step in the [college-going] process. It's a really important piece of seeing things actually change."

A more nuts-and-bolts change in CPS—the need for which was highlighted in the Consortium's report "Potholes on the Road to College"—is a focus on completing federal student financial aid forms that schools previously asked students to make sure they filled out but did not follow up on regularly. The district now sends out weekly updates of completion rates by school and shows a 90 percent success rate overall, Nagaoka says. This weekly report shows which schools made the most significant gains in the past week and which had the highest completion rates, she says. "They've made enormous gains around FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) completion," she adds.

Companies, Data Track Students

St. Louis (Mo.) Public Schools has undertaken an aggressive effort in partnership with College Summit and a local agency called



St. Louis Public Schools' high school students prepare for an upcoming biology end-of-course exam. The district has partnered with College Summit and a local agency to find where students are going to college and how they perform.

College Bound to find out where students are continuing to college and how they perform once they arrive, says St. Louis Public Schools Superintendent Kelvin Adams. The district contracts with a private company that tracks graduates using the last four digits of their Social Security number; when that doesn't reveal where they've gone, the district calls upon an internal team that contacts "aunts and uncles and grandparents to find out where they are— phone calls, e-mails, we even knock on doors in some cases," Adams says.

St. Louis schools surveyed about a dozen freshmen, sophomores and juniors at the University of Missouri last school year to ask which aspects of high school had prepared them well for college and which had not. But Adams says students' own attitudes in high school were often the difference-maker in college success.

"It came down to the kid's efforts—was he intentional about being prepared? Was he ready to study hard? Many said, 'I'm going to do what I have to do to get out of high school.' And then [upon reaching college] they said, 'Wow, that [concept or theme] was important. I should have listened to how to do my papers, and those kinds of things.'"

In another example, the School District of Palm Beach County receives data from the state of Florida on how well students have performed in both state universities and community colleges. But Christy Ragsdale, high school guidance program planner, says that data is typically two years old by the time the state finishes compiling it. "We have talked for many years about the need to be able to do a postgraduate survey among the students," she says. "While this report is very helpful, it doesn't give us the full picture."

Ragsdale adds that the Palm County district plans to roll out a pilot project to survey students in its career academy program before they graduate and then follow up a year later to chart how well they've fared after high school. "Ideally, we'd love to be able to do our own [survey] on all our students," she says.

The Wake County (N.C.) Public School District used to mass-mail surveys four years after graduation to the addresses of graduates' parents, but administrators didn't have regular contact in between and decided SATs and state exams provided a better gauge of how well the curriculum was preparing students, says Eric Sparks, director of school counseling.

"Surveys—we get some back and we don't get others," he says. "Test score data is something we get back on all our students, and it gives us a good picture of where to focus. It would be nice to have the first-year success [rates] on our students as they go into university systems. That would be really helpful for us."

Critical Importance

In the end, school districts are only scratching the surface in tracking their high school graduates into higher education, but it may be something more districts will start to pursue, in part considering the competition for jobs. "You need a way to bridge and communicate between K12 and higher ed," Camara concludes. "You need to be getting data back to educators so math, English, science faculty can reevaluate how well their curriculum is preparing students."

"Few states involve higher ed faculty in making K12 standards," he adds. "Yet that's critically important if you want to make sure students have the knowledge and skills when they matriculate."

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