

Wednesday, June 1, 2011

School system tracks class of 2003's college achievement

Less than half got bachelor's degree or higher in six years

by Andrew Ujifusa | Staff Writer

Students receiving their high school diplomas this month are in the spotlight, but Montgomery County graduates from eight years ago are under the microscope.

The members of Montgomery County Public Schools' class of 2003 — specifically those who went straight from high school to college — were nearly twice as likely to receive a bachelor's degree within six years as the average American student. They also were much more likely to stay in college from freshman to sophomore years than their national counterparts.

But out of all the 8,805 graduates from that year, fewer than half — 4,079, or 46.3 percent — received a bachelor's degree or higher within those six years, according to a national database of college students.

Minorities and those on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder lagged behind their wealthier white and Asian counterparts on the school system's measures of college readiness, ranging from SAT scores to getting at least a "C" in Algebra 2 by junior year.

"African American and Hispanic students were less ready for college, less likely to enroll in college immediately after high school and less likely to persist in college from freshman to sophomore standing, compared to their Asian American and White counterparts," the report states.

Among 2003 graduates, 41.7 percent of all students received an SAT score of at least 1100 (at the time, the maximum score was 1600 instead of 2400) or an ACT score of 24, compared with 13.2 percent of Hispanics, 13.7 percent of blacks and 14.5 percent of students who had ever received free or reduced-price meals based on low family income.

The report is the first time the school system has tracked the correlation between its college readiness programs and students' success in college. The report uses data from the National Student Clearinghouse, which tracks students for school systems after they graduate.

It also establishes a standard for future graduating classes, as the school system has put increasing emphasis on closing achievement gaps between racial and socioeconomic groups during Superintendent of Schools Jerry D. Weast's 12-year tenure, which will end June 30 when he retires.

Since 2003, the school system has stepped up its policy of encouraging more academic rigor for students, and established seven academic benchmarks for students to achieve college readiness, said Donald H. Kress, the acting associate superintendent for the Office of Shared Accountability.

"I can't imagine that the class of 2011 won't do better, even though it has gotten more diverse," he said, referring to the higher rate of low-income and non-English speaking students in 2011 than in 2003.

Kress said the 46.3 percent of all 2003 graduates who received college degrees within six years almost certainly was lower than the actual percentage, because some of the smaller colleges and historically black colleges did not report data to the National Student Clearinghouse.

Among the Montgomery County public school graduates from 2003 who enrolled in college within a year, 59.8 percent received a bachelor's degree within six years, beating the national average of 30.7 percent for such students.

"Even though we're doing better than the national numbers, we've still got to strive for improvement," said Kristin

Tribble, president of the Montgomery County Council of Parent-Teacher Associations. "You need a two- to four-year degree, no matter what you get into."

Nearly three-quarters of the class, 71.5 percent, enrolled in college the fall after graduating, somewhat higher than the national average of 63.9 percent.

Among those graduates who enrolled in four-year colleges, 98.6 percent persisted from freshman to sophomore year, compared with 76.5 percent nationwide. Among those in two-year colleges, 91.2 percent persisted from their first to second years, compared with 53.2 percent nationwide.

The National Student Clearinghouse reported that 7,396 students from the class attended college at some point during the six years after they graduated — 84 percent of all 2003 graduates.

But only half of Hispanic graduates enrolled in a two- or four-year college the fall after graduating, compared with 58 percent of blacks and 79 percent of whites.

In addition, only 31 percent of Hispanics and 44 percent of blacks who enrolled in college from the 2003 graduating class right after high school received a bachelor's degree or higher after six years, compared with 63 percent of Asians and 68 percent of whites.

While the gap persists, Kress noted that all those percentages are better than the national average.

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MCPS grads by the numbers

For the first time, Montgomery County Public Schools has released a study tracking a graduating class — students from 2003 — over a six-year period to measure college attendance, persistence and completion rates:

Graduates from the Montgomery County Public Schools Class of 2003: 8,805

Percentage enrolling in two- or four-year colleges within six years: 84

Percentage receiving a bachelor's degree or higher within six years: 46.3

Percentage going directly to college:

--MCPS: 71.5

--U.S.: 63.9

Percentage going directly to college receiving a bachelor's degree in six years:

--MCPS: 59.8

--U.S.: 30.7

Percentage going directly to college receiving a bachelor's degree in six years, by race:

--White: 67.6

--Asian: 63.4

--Black: 44.2

--Hispanic: 31.3

Percentage who continued at four-year colleges from freshman to sophomore year:

--MCPS: 98.6

--U.S.: 76.5

Upcounty graduation speakers

Wednesday, June 1

Quince Orchard, 10 a.m., DAR Constitution Hall. Speaker: U.S. Rep. Christopher Van Hollen (D-Dist. 8).

Thursday, June 2

Seneca Valley, 10 a.m., DAR Constitution Hall. Speaker: Gregory E. Bell, supervisor of Diversity Initiatives.

Friday, June 3

Gaithersburg, 10 a.m., DAR Constitution Hall. Speaker: Manuel Scott, original Freedom Writer.

Monday, June 6

Poolesville, 11 a.m., Mount St. Mary's College. Speaker: Sharon Moore, mathematics teacher, Marian Greenblatt Teaching Award winner.

Tuesday, June 7

Clarksburg, 1 p.m., Mount St. Mary's College. Speaker: Jeremiah C. Spoales, social studies teacher, varsity soccer coach.

Northwest, 2:30 p.m., DAR Constitution Hall. Speaker: John Harwood, chief CNBC Washington correspondent; political writer, New York Times.

Monday, June 13

Watkins Mill, 7 p.m., DAR Constitution Hall. Speaker: Michelle H. Joy, social studies teacher.