

Philadelphia Public School
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Published on *Philadelphia Public School Notebook* (<http://www.thenotebook.org>)

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by Dale Mezzacappa

Just one out of 10 students who entered a Philadelphia public high school in 1999 had earned a two-or four-year college degree 10 years later, according to recently released data compiled by School District researchers.

“The city’s never before had a pipeline and known how many kids make it through each phase of their education,” said Lori Shorr, the head of Mayor Nutter’s education office, who publicly presented the degree attainment data for the first time earlier this month. “The significance [of this number] is we all know where we’re starting. Unfortunately, we’re not starting at a great place.”

As low as the degree completion rate is, it tracks studies done in other big cities where most public school students are Black, Latino, and low-income.

“Ten percent is certainly low, but it’s not out of line with what we’re seeing in Chicago,” said Jennie Nagaoka, a researcher with the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago. She said that a series of ongoing studies have shown about eight percent of Chicago students attained a bachelor’s degree within a decade of starting high school. The figure for Philadelphia also counts students who earned associate’s degrees.

While the Consortium’s research method relied on statistical estimates based on a sampling, Philadelphia did a 10-year examination of a cohort of actual students – 12,230 who were first-time ninth graders in District schools in 1999.

Using data from the National Student Clearinghouse, the District’s accountability office determined that 1,258, or 10.3 percent, had graduated from college by the summer of 2009. The Clearinghouse is an enrollment and degree verification service that keeps track of students in high school and college and has 100 million records.

The numbers show that 48 percent of the cohort graduated high school in four years, another 10 percent attained diplomas in five or six years. But only 24 percent of the total cohort – fewer than half of those who had completed high school – enrolled in college within a year after graduation. And then fewer than half of those who matriculated actually earned a degree by 2009. The figures don’t include students in charter, private, or parochial schools.

Philadelphia’s degree attainment rate lags far behind statewide averages, though no directly comparable data are available. Published data for Pennsylvania show that 28 percent of 9th graders meet a higher standard: they graduate high school on time, go directly to college, and earn a bachelor’s degree within six years or an associate’s degree within three years.

Shorr pushed the District’s Office of Accountability to compile the Philadelphia data – providing a real indicator of what happens to the products of the school system.

“To me it’s about having an agreed-upon sense of the reality,” she said. “Depending on where you sit inside any place in the city you have a different opinion. This gives you a big picture of what the number looks like.”

Kati Haycock of [Education Trust](#), a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group that focuses on achievement gaps between White and Asian and Black and Latino students, praised the District for collecting the data.

Haycock said that it is not easy for districts to do this, and there is no federal requirement that they do. Getting data from the Clearinghouse costs money.

“The good news here is that more and more school districts around the country are deciding literally to hold themselves accountable,” Haycock said. “That they are collecting data to the best of their abilities and reporting it as honestly as they can is good news.”

That said, she added, “these numbers are pretty terrifying, if you assume that young people who don’t complete a postsecondary credential will find it hard not just initially but for the rest of their lives to find a job that can support a family.”

Still, it is not fair to “lay these numbers entirely at the feet of the School District and say that they’re not doing the job and not preparing students. ... That’s not even close to true,” she said.

Colleges are equally culpable, she said. Some do a far better job than others in graduating students of color and others who may be less well prepared. EdTrust maintains a searchable web site called [College Results Online](#) that gives graduation rates, broken down by gender and ethnicity, for hundreds of institutions of higher learning.

“There are some who consistently take in African American students who enter with lower preparation levels and get them to graduate at least at the same rate as other students,” she said. “So this low number is not inevitable, and it is not about poor preparation. Fixing this number demands action from both schools and colleges.”

The experience of Sheena Crenshaw of Philadelphia, who was a member of the cohort studied, illustrates that inadequate preparation is not the whole story. A 2003 graduate of [Girls High](#), she was admitted to Fordham University and earned a 3.5 grade point average in her first year. But her financial aid didn’t cover all the costs, and when neither she nor her family could qualify for additional loans, she had to leave Fordham. And since she had not paid all her bills, the college wouldn’t release a transcript.

Crenshaw, 24, started over at Community College and finally finished her degree in social studies education at Temple just in time to be counted for this study – in 2009.

“I wasn’t as informed about financial aid,” she said. “I went to a school that was way too expensive. I had to come back. I didn’t know what an obstacle it can be to finish your college career.”

While tripped up by financial issues, Crenshaw was at least steered towards a more selective college with a higher graduation rate. But most urban students are not, Haycock said.

High school counselors need to do a better job of matching students with colleges from which they are more likely to graduate, she said, but most tend to steer students to “where they’ll be more comfortable,” not taking into account dismal chances of finishing.

The data “puts in perspective the [Obama administration] setting a new goal that every student graduates college-ready,” said [U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah](#). “These numbers tell the story that a lot more

work needs to be done.”

This cohort of students started high school the same year that the Fattah-inspired GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) was enacted into law. Since then, it has spent \$3 billion to increase college awareness and support for college-going in middle and high schools across the country, including in Philadelphia, that serve primarily low-income children of color.

Fattah, who celebrated GEAR UP with Education Secretary Arne Duncan on Sept. 29, said that Pennsylvania ranks 49th among the states in the percentage of high school graduates who go to college, ranking ahead of only Mississippi.

Like Haycock, he said that that colleges need to step up as well.

“Sixty percent of students in all Pennsylvania colleges don’t graduate within six years,” he said.

Philadelphia has many programs focused on helping students get into college, including Philadelphia Futures and the College Access program run by the Philadelphia Education Fund.

“We’ve known for many years that we had to work on helping students access college,” said PEF director Carol Fixman. “We also know we have to pay more attention to helping students complete college.”

She said that Mayor Nutter and educational advocacy groups have many partnerships with local colleges and universities to address the issue, including the Citi Postsecondary Success Program. The Public Education Network is working with three cities, Philadelphia, Miami, and San Francisco, funded through the Citi Foundation.

“It’s aimed creating systems to help generations of high-needs children access college and succeed in college,” she said.

After years of focus on college access, national groups and foundations are also looking at the college completion issue.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on September 27 gave \$3 million each to four cities working on college access and completion. The condition for receiving the grant was to do a cohort study like Philadelphia’s.

Two of these cities appear to have higher college attainment rates than Philadelphia’s, but data is based on a sampling of students. In San Francisco, 27 percent of students earned either an associate’s degree or bachelor’s degree. In Riverside, CA, the number was 17.5 percent.

In Mesa, AZ, just 8 percent of students earned a post-secondary degree. No comparable figures were available for New York City.

“Most people are so busy looking at the performance of individual institutions that we forget students take journeys through those sectors,” said Mark Milliron, the deputy director of postsecondary improvement at Gates. “The best way to keep our eye on this is to take a hard look at the number that starts in 9th grade and how many finish in 10 years.”

Looking at it this way “makes for a tougher conversation,” he said. “You can begin to ask the hard questions about whether there is the right kind of environment to allow students to get through the system and where are the barriers.”

The students tracked in Philadelphia, the graduating class of 2003, was the last class to finish high school before Philadelphia's scores on the PSSA began a string of eight straight annual increases. Watching the degree attainment rate over the next several years will provide a window into whether greater numbers of students reaching proficiency on these standardized tests translates to better postsecondary outcomes.

Spokesman Fernando Gallard said the District "has received college-going rates for a few years - we don't actually track the data, but receive the data each year from the National Student Clearinghouse. We have broken down the data by school and provide the data and training to the high school principals. We have also included the data in several presentations to District folks and the city and community members – we have shared it widely."

Shorr, of the Mayor's office, once worked on college access and college completion efforts while in the provost's office at Temple University. She heads the effort to implement Nutter's education policy goals, including an increase in the percentage of residents with college degrees – now one of the lowest big-city rates in the nation at around 20 percent.

Now that the benchmark is public and the reality is clear, she said, "we've got to work together ... and push for improvement."

About the Author

Dale Mezzacappa is the *Notebook's* contributing editor.

Source URL: <http://www.thenotebook.org/october-2010/102930/new-data-only-10-philly-students-earn-degree>