

## **Richmond Times Dispatch (VA)**

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### **61% of local 2011 graduates are now in college**

BY Zachary Reid | Richmond Times Dispatch

When high school seniors don't become college freshman, there's usually a simple reason, said Zeno Hines, an assistant principal at Richmond's Armstrong High School.

"What students don't see, they don't aspire to be," said Hines, in his first year at Armstrong after six years as a guidance counselor at the city's John Marshall High School. "Not many of our students here say they want to be doctors or lawyers."

And not many from the Class of 2011 will be, if college enrollment statistics are an indicator: Of Armstrong's 165 seniors who graduated in June, just 61 — or 37 percent — are now enrolled in a two- or four-year college.

The Richmond school isn't alone in struggling to keep its graduates on an academic track.

Of the 12,947 seniors who graduated last June from the 48 public high schools in central Virginia, 7,876 — 61 percent — are now in college. That puts the region 1 percentage point below the state average.

Richmond Community came in first on the list, with 92 percent of its seniors going on to college. Richmond and the counties of Chesterfield, Hanover and Henrico all placed schools in the top 10. Chesterfield Community High was last, at 17 percent. Richmond had three of the bottom 10 in terms of the percentage of seniors who go to college, and seven other localities had one school.

Three area public high schools didn't factor into the report. Glen Allen High School in Henrico opened last year but didn't have a senior class. Also, student information from the two governor's schools, Appomattox Regional in Petersburg and Maggie L. Walker in Richmond, reverts to the home schools of the students.

The rankings are part of the federally mandated reporting requirements to which Virginia agreed when it accepted federal stimulus funding in 2009.

The state hasn't tracked college enrollment in the past, so the report is based on information from the National Student Clearinghouse, a nonprofit group that verifies enrollment and degree information for schools across the country. Its database includes 3,300 colleges and universities, which enroll 93 percent of college students in the United States.

It's supposed to be based on a 16-month enrollment period, but the reporting deadline came eight months before the report period ended. The information will be updated later.

While the data aren't perfect, state researchers say the enrollment report captures at least 88 percent of Virginia high school graduates.

The local chart has some extremes. In Richmond and Chesterfield, there are wide gaps between the top (Richmond Community and Midlothian, at 92 and 81 percent, respectively) and the bottom

(George Wythe, at 28 percent, and Chesterfield Community, at 17 percent). In Henrico, the difference is 43 points, from Deep Run (87 percent) to Highland Spring (44 percent).

"It doesn't surprise me, but it does break my heart," said Henrico School Board member Lamont Bagby. "I think we have a lot of work to do on the achievement gap."

He said the state rankings are a relevant way of measuring the system's ability to educate its students, but he also cautioned that the list wasn't all-inclusive.

"I think it is a good indicator, but it needs to be complemented with two things," he said. "First, we need to know the interests of the students. Do they want to go to college? Second, how many (graduates) went into the military or right into careers?"

Bagby wasn't alone in wishing the data could tell a bigger story.

Chesterfield School Board Chairwoman Patty Carpenter echoed Bagby's concern about needing to know student aspirations.

"We're very, very proud of our high schools that have achieved, but these are just numbers," she said. "It's really important to remember that so many of our students are moving toward technical careers."

The goal, she said, was readiness no matter the students' desires.

"We want to provide opportunities for every student," she said.

Joe Tylus, the director of high schools in Chesterfield, said the rankings were an inevitable part of life in a society focused on data.

"As long as it helps folks engage in dialogue, it's good," he said. "But like any other data, it just tells a piece of a story."

He said the successes in Chesterfield — Midlothian and Cosby rank third and fifth locally for the percentage of students who go to college — are part of a big picture that includes schools but that is also dependent on parental involvement and other out-of-school factors. And the seeming failures, he said, might need more time to come into focus.

"Not going to college is not always a negative," he said, noting that career- and technical-education programs have steered many students onto post-graduate paths that don't involve college.

At Armstrong, sophomore David Crutchfield is a studious, goal-oriented young man, nattily attired each day in a suit. He participates in a 4-year-old mentoring program aimed at improving post-graduate opportunities for Armstrong students, but he's not sold on college.

"I'm thinking about apprenticing," said Crutchfield, whose three older siblings are in college. He laid out a hopeful career plan as a power company lineman. "I can get ahead, and I think college would just set that back."

He did concede that he might pursue a business degree at some point, but he's still unlikely to fall into the category of students who quickly go off to college.

"And by any measure, he's going to be a success," said Hines, the assistant principal.

Still, at Armstrong, college is the goal, and Hines and others are trying to institute a culture where that aspiration is the norm, not the exception.

"I think 65, 70 percent of these students are college ready," he said. "We just have to sell them on it first, then sell their parents. It's not always easy. But we're working to give them reasons for success."

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