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Class Struggle

by Jay Mathews

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Jay Mathews is an education columnist for The Washington Post. You can contact him at mathewsj@washpost.com.

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SUBSCRIBE**Judging high schools by students' college success***[This is my Local Living section column for March 25, 2010.]*

Montgomery County School Superintendent [Jerry D. Weast](#) loves numbers like most human beings love steak, and he shares what he loves. He dumps on me stacks of graphs and flow charts. They follow a familiar theme, the rise of student achievement in his district. But sometimes he surprises me.

Among the pieces of paper he unloaded during a recent visit was a blue, green, orange and yellow bar graph titled "MCPS Graduates Who Earned a 4-Year College Degree, 2001-2004."

Huh? High schools usually don't have that information. They can only guess how their students do in college. "Where'd you get that, Jerry?" I asked.

"National Student Clearinghouse," he said.

I knew what that was. I knew what the clearinghouse was trying to do. But I didn't know it had gotten that far.

The [National Student Clearinghouse](#) began to build its database of more than 93 million students in more than 3,300 colleges and universities to verify enrollment of students for loan companies. Now it is focused on informing high schools how their graduates are doing.

The clearinghouse gave me a sample report. By the 2008-09 school year, 23.8 percent of the Class of 2004 at a sample school had graduated from college, 15 percent were still in college, 28.5 percent were no longer enrolled and 29.4 percent were not in the database, and so had probably never attended college. About 3 percent had returned to college after dropping out.

These are vital data for someone such as Weast, the energetic, media-savvy leader of one of the largest and most successful school districts in the country. What he is doing with this information, others will soon do. Using the clearinghouse's data could change the way we assess and run high schools — public and private — in significant ways.

Weast used the chart to justify his efforts to get more students to take Advanced Placement courses and tests. More than 76 percent of those in the classes of 2001 to 2004 who had gotten a score of 3 or higher on an AP exam had graduated from college, the chart showed. Even among students who got a failing grade on an AP test, the college graduation rate was pretty good, 59.4 percent, compared with 24.7 percent of those who did not take AP.

Similar data are being used in different ways by the [D.C. College](#)

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[Success Foundation](#). With funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates

Foundation, D.C. College Success has begun a startlingly ambitious, \$116.million program to ensure a college education for about a third of the graduates of six public high schools in wards 7 and 8 in the next decade. Up to 250 students a year are getting four-year scholarships valued at up to \$50,000, plus mentoring while they adjust to the demands of higher education.

Members of the D.C. College Success staff, led by Executive Director Herbert R. Tillery, work to raise their students to the level of successful college students revealed in the clearinghouse data. Louis Josey, a student at Maya Angelou Public Charter School, is taking the AP courses that the numbers indicate are helpful. The foundation helps Louis find tutors to help him over academic rough spots, mentors to guide his college application process and a four-week summer program at a college campus to boost his language and math skills and acquaint him with undergraduate culture.

Two other public charters, Friendship Collegiate and Thurgood Marshall, and three traditional high schools, Anacostia, Ballou and H.D. Woodson, also participate. The Gates foundation also supports improvements in state data collection and the work of the clearinghouse. (Bias alert: Washington Post Co. Chairman Donald E. Graham is on the D.C. College Success board.)

It will be intriguing to see whether the clearinghouse data inspire more high schools to focus more intently on what leads to college success. Even private school leaders, who rarely share student data, say they might release their college success rates.

If that happens, Weast will be calculating how his public schools compare and telling me all about it.

Read Jay's blog every day at <http://washingtonpost.com/class-struggle>.

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By Jay Mathews | March 24, 2010; 10:00 PM ET

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Comments

Isn't it a bit early to judge schools based on the class of '04? That would seem to be biased in favor of wealthier schools where more students can afford to go directly on to college rather than spending time working or serving in the military first.

My alma mater would presumably rank very highly but I would say that's less due to the school itself than the demographics of its students.

Posted by: [CrimsonWife](#) | March 24, 2010 10:54 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Yes, these longitudinal data should be useful. But, you should be careful to distinguish among failures. There's a difference between students who get a "1" for showing up for the AP exam, signing in and staying, as required by the HS to get

course credit; and those who earn a "2", which most AP teachers would agree indicates high-school course level learning of the material (or the smarts to study the material and the practice tests well, without bothering to do the classwork.) That difference between a 1 and 2 is one we should care very much about before making further claims for the value of AP experience.

You elsewhere blogged recently about cheating. Many HS's are doing just that, mandating and subsidizing AP courses and exam-taking. (The universities can and do discriminate among the passing grades, many schools giving no credit for any "3"s, and requiring a "4" or "5"; they don't matter to your Challenge Index)

Posted by: incredulous | March 25, 2010 2:23 AM | [Report abuse](#)

Crimsonwife, you've got to start somewhere and Jay's reaction to the idea is illustrative of the degree to which accountability is still a somewhat exotic notion in the public education arena.

I mean, my gosh, tracking students to see how they do after they graduate? What a concept! That implies that how students do later in life is related to the quality of the education they receive or at least introduces the idea follow-up is worthwhile. It's certainly worthwhile to imply that relationship but to the extent of measuring it?

Next thing you know people will want to see if there's a correlation between funding levels and education quality and while those of us who are wonky enough to comment on blogs like this know there isn't it's not the sort of correlation, or lack thereof, that ought to be more widely appreciated.

Posted by: allenm1 | March 25, 2010 6:52 AM | [Report abuse](#)

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