

Many Mass. graduates unprepared in college Thousands need remedial classes, are dropout risks

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Thousands of Massachusetts public high school graduates arrive at college unprepared for even the most basic math and English classes, forcing them to take remedial courses that discourage many from staying in school, according to a statewide study released yesterday.

The problem is particularly acute in urban districts and vocational schools, according to the first-of-its kind study. At three high schools in Boston and two in Worcester, at least 70 percent of students were forced to take at least one remedial class because they scored poorly on a college placement test.

The study raises concern that the state's public schools are not doing enough to prepare all of their students for college, despite years of overhauls and large infusions of money.

The findings are also worrisome because students who take remedial courses, which do not count toward a degree, are far more likely to drop out of college, often without the skills needed to land a good job. That has broad implications for the state's workforce, economy, and social mobility.

The report, conducted jointly by the state Departments of Elementary and Secondary Education and Higher Education, found that the problem crossed socioeconomic lines. One third of high school graduates in suburban Hanover took remedial classes, as did 27 percent of graduates in Lynnfield and Needham.

"This is a statewide problem," said Linda M. Noonan, managing director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, a nonprofit group that supports tougher educational standards to create a better workforce. "There's something systemic that we're not doing to get these kids ready to do college-level work."

High school administrators said they welcomed the new information, and pledged to use it to make the high school diploma a true sign of readiness for college.

"If you're a good district, this is information you want," said Paul Schlichtman, who coordinates research, testing, and assessment for the Lowell schools, where about half of graduates who went on to a state college or university in Massachusetts took remedial classes. "Your high school diploma needs to be a credential for a two- and four-year school, and it's something that we take very seriously."

The study tracked more than 19,000 students who graduated from public high schools in 2005 and attended an institution within the state's higher education system. Overall, it found that 37 percent of the graduates enrolled in at least one remedial course in their first semester in college.

In many urban districts, a majority of the graduates studied took at least one remedial class their first year.

Among the roughly 8,500 students in the study who attended community colleges, nearly two-thirds took a remedial course. Many college administrators blame remedial courses for the high dropout rate at the state's two-year schools.

The results also cast doubt on the MCAS exams as a predictor of college readiness at a time when state education leaders are urging high schools to require a more rigorous course load to boost MCAS scores, as required under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

High school students who received special education instruction in high school, low-income and limited-English speaking students, and Hispanic and African-American students, were more likely to enroll in remedial classes, the study found.

The report marks the first time education researchers have detailed how public high school graduates from individual school districts perform in Massachusetts public colleges. State education officials distributed the reports last week to nearly 300 high schools across the state, and hope the information will spur improvements.

"We're hopeful high schools will regard this very seriously," said Paul Reville, chairman of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, who will take over as the state's education secretary in July. "This tells us that higher standards are necessary. We're not fully preparing students for non-remediated college work."

The report showed that students who barely pass the MCAS tests are far more likely to take college remedial classes. For example, half of students who scored a "needs improvement" on the 10th-grade MCAS math test were forced to take developmental math classes, as opposed to 20 percent who received the score "proficient."

In November, state education officials unanimously approved a recommended core high school curriculum in response to growing concerns about the number of students taking remedial classes. The recommended program includes four years of English, four years of math, three years of science, and three years of history.

Beginning this fall, students who do not reach the proficiency level on the English and math MCAS exams will be required to take more core classes and periodic tests to gauge their progress. Reville also said administrators have discussed giving high school seniors college placement tests.

Patricia F. Plummer, commissioner of the Department of Higher Education, said research has shown that students who take math and English in all four years of high school are far more likely to succeed in college.

"It's tremendously discouraging for them to be in college and not taking college-level work," she said. "And in terms of economic development, we can't afford to lose them."

More than ever, students need college education and training to compete for entry-level positions and launch a good career, Plummer said.

Education officials said they were encouraged by one finding: 80 percent of first-time, full-time students enrolled for a second year of college in 2006.

At Bunker Hill Community College, educators said the MCAS had not improved performance on college placement tests, and that some high school graduates show up woefully unprepared for basic college work.

"I haven't seen any significant change," said Deborah Barrett, the college's coordinator of student assessment. "It's very frustrating for students. They think that they've graduated from high school, they passed the MCAS, so they're ready for college."

Almost 90 percent of Bunker Hill students end up taking remedial math, and 63 percent take remedial English. Some graduates are writing at such a poor level that they must take the most introductory remedial class, she said. Only 20 percent of students complete their remedial work within two years, she said.

Educators and researchers said the study suggested that students who merely pass are not necessarily ready for college.

"The dirty little secret is that MCAS doesn't test 10th grade skills, much less college skills," said Robert Gaudet, an education researcher at the University of Massachusetts' Donahue Institute. "Passing is not that hard, it's getting to proficient that's tougher."

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