



12/16/05

District seeks better data on college preparedness

News from a study released by the Florida Department of Education last week showed that half the students who go on to attend a Florida community college are not ready for college-level work.

But that's only half the story, say school officials. The report fails to audit postsecondary activities for students who went out-of-state or who attended private schools.

The omission, say officials, paints an incomplete picture of area high schools by overreporting underachievement at the community college level and underreporting success rates for others.

To get a better idea of how area high schools are preparing students for college or university studies, the Sarasota County School Board is putting the final touches on an agreement this week with a national clearinghouse to provide better data, said Carlene Judge, executive director of research, assessment and evaluation.

"We haven't had extensive data on out-of-state students," Judge said. "We're joining the National Student Clearinghouse so next year we have good data."

Judge said some of the county's high schools have counseling departments that track the information, but most are unable to obtain the necessary data.

Unknowns

Venice High, for example, tracks students' post-high school activity by the location to which their transcripts are sent. But that doesn't tell VHS whether the students stayed at the school or left, what they studied or if they went on to graduate.

"It has been difficult to get that feedback, especially on scholarships," said Kim Kindell, of Venice High's Rotary Futures Program. "The current process is not a really precise tracking system."

Rotary Futures, located in a portable classroom on the Venice campus, provides technical assistance so students can learn about postsecondary opportunities and assists students seeking scholarships.

"In the past there were confidentiality problems that prohibited the school from knowing if students actually attended the college to which their transcripts were sent. We'd like to know where they really did end up going. After a year or two, are they pursuing the same plan?" Kindell said.

Clearinghouse

The National Student Clearinghouse is the largest enrollment and degree verification service in the United States. A nonprofit organization established by the higher education community in 1993, the clearinghouse serves as a central repository and single point of contact for the collection and timely exchange of accurate, comprehensive enrollment, degree and certificate records on behalf of participating institutions.

More than 2,800 colleges, enrolling 91 percent of U.S. college students, participate.

The clearinghouse will help the district track Florida graduates who attend postsecondary institutions anywhere in the United States.

The clearinghouse's "StudentTracker program for High Schools" is uniquely designed to help high schools more accurately gauge the college success of their graduates, according to its Web site. It does so by answering key questions such as: Where do high school graduates enroll in college? How long do their educational efforts persist? Do they transfer between colleges? Do they graduate from college? What degrees do they earn? What courses of study do they pursue?

Feedback report

Education Commissioner John L. Winn unveiled the Florida High School Feedback Report last week. It provides Florida's public high schools with information about the performance of their 2004 graduates, but only for those who went on to attend Florida colleges and universities.

Some of the data on those attending Florida community colleges, say officials, show the district has much room for improvement.

College assessment scores, in particular, paint a bleak picture of college readiness.

A high percent of graduates statewide were able to pass individual subject assessment tests in reading, writing and math by the

colleges, but far fewer were able to pass all three.

Statewide, only 44.8 percent of 2004 graduates who attended a community college in Florida passed all three core subjects. Sarasota County's figure was 52.1 percent. The assessments are designed to test a student's ability to handle college-level course work.

Judge points out the College Placement Tests are typically taken only by students who didn't have acceptable ACT and SAT scores. Many of those with higher SATs and ACTs went on to higher education, many out-of-state.

On the bright side, the report shows almost 80 percent of Sarasota County graduates enrolled at a postsecondary institution in Florida (college or university) earned a grade point average above 2.0.

Sixty percent earned better than a "C" on Freshman Composition I or II; 84.2 percent did as well on other college-level English courses. Another 58 percent of Sarasota County students enrolled in Intermediate Algebra and 49.4 percent enrolled in Advanced math courses earned a "C" or better.

Individualized for each school, the DOE report is intended to present a comprehensive profile of college readiness based on graduates' performance while still in high school compared to their enrollment in and first semester performance at a postsecondary institution. Administrators can use the analyses contained in the report to effectively evaluate and plan school improvement strategies.

"These reports will provide high school administrators and teachers with a valuable tool for improving student learning and achievement," said Winn.

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