

The Birmingham News

OUR VIEW:

THE ISSUE Alabama spends too much money teaching college freshmen things they should have learned in high school.

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By **Birmingham News editorial board**

One-third of Alabama high school students who go to college must take remedial courses -- things they should have learned in high school, but didn't -- their freshman year because they're not ready for college work.

According to an analysis by The Birmingham News that appeared last Sunday, 34.4 percent of 2010 high school graduates who wound up in Alabama's public two- and four-year colleges had to take at least one remedial course in either math or English.



Fewer students will need remedial help as college freshmen if they truly learn the basics as elementary students. (The Birmingham News file/Bernard Troncale)

The percentage is the same for schools in the Birmingham-Hoover Metropolitan Statistical Area.

It should surprise no one that the numbers are all over the maps for individual schools and school systems, but the percentage of students at some high schools who aren't ready for college work is stunning.

At six of the seven high schools in the Birmingham city school district, more than 50 percent of the students who attended in-state public colleges and universities had to take at least one remedial course last year.

At Mountain Brook High School, just 4 percent of students had to take remedial courses; at Vestavia Hills, 12 percent did.

The temptation is to trash the state's high schools for doing an awful job getting students ready for college. But Gregory Fitch, the executive director of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, knows the problem begins long before high school.

"You do not create an engineer or a researcher in their senior year of high school or their freshman year of college," he said. "You start them in second, third or fourth grade."

Nor do you create a student who can't pass freshman English or math in his first year in college. It happens in second, third or fourth grade, or even earlier. Teachers need to identify students who don't perform well and keep them reading and doing math on grade level, or hold them back, Fitch said.

The cost of not doing so is prohibitive.

An May analysis by the Alliance for Excellent Education of college students enrolled in the 2007-08 school year estimated the need for remediation during their time in college costs Alabama's economy \$80 million. The state would save \$51 million if public two- and four-year schools didn't have to remediate, and students who take remedial courses lose earnings of \$29 million in lifetime wages, since they are more likely to drop out of college and earn less without a college degree. Nationally, people who attend some college but never finish earn an average of \$17,000 a year less than those who do.

Businesses also pay the price having to remediate their work forces. One recent estimate of the cost to businesses in Alabama that have to teach employees basic skills is more than half a billion dollars a year.

What to do?

The hope is that even though Alabama's percentage is far too high, that we're headed in the right direction.

Alabama K-12 schools have made progress in recent years, especially in earlier grades. Education officials credit the Alabama Reading Initiative, which is used in all K-3 schools, with leading to the state posting the largest gains in the nation in fourth-grade reading in 2008 on the National Assessment of Education Progress, commonly called the Nation's Report Card. The similar Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative has shown positive results, and there has been a spike the past few years in the number of high school students taking Advanced Placement courses and passing the AP test to earn college credit.

Those fourth-graders who made such strides on the NAEP reading test three years ago are now in middle school. Let's hope elementary-school successes translate into more high-school students in coming years being ready for college.

There is some promising news, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education: Alabama is among many states moving toward new English and math standards that will better prepare students for success in college and their careers. Alabama also is working toward having a clearer measure through state assessments of student achievement and college and career readiness.

State education officials need to examine others states' best practices (the Alliance touts programs in Illinois and California that have shown promise) to find ways to improve Alabama students' chances of success in college -- without them having to take courses in things they should have learned in high school.