

The Birmingham News

Some high-school grads lack basic college skills

One-third must take remedial classes

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More than a third of Alabama high school graduates who attend college in-state must take remedial courses in their freshman year because they cannot do college-level work, an analysis of new data from the Alabama Commission on Higher Education shows.

According to The Birmingham News analysis, 34.4 percent of 2010 high school graduates who went on to Alabama's public two- and four-year colleges had to take at least one remedial course to bring their English or math skills up.

And for 223 of Alabama's 357 high schools -- including 40 of the 66 high schools in the Birmingham metro area -- the percentages of graduates needing remedial help in college are even higher than that. The number swells to more than 50 percent in many of Alabama's urban and rural areas, and exceeds 70 percent in some schools, data shows.

By that measure, the Birmingham city school district is among the worst-performing systems in the state. More than 50 percent of in-state college freshmen from six of the district's seven high schools had to take at least one remedial course in 2010.

For example, Carver High School had 217 graduates last year, with 76 of them going on to a public two- or four-year college in Alabama. Of those who went to college, 70 percent had to take at least one remedial course.

HIGHEST RATES OF REMEDIATION

Percent of class of 2010 graduates attending an Alabama public college in fall 2010 who had to take a remedial class in math and/or English:

HIGH SCHOOL	SCHOOL SYSTEM	
Loachapoka	Lee County	74%
Autaugaville	Autauga County	73%
Calhoun	Lowndes County	72%
Hubbertville	Fayette County	71%
Bessemer City	Bessemer City	70%
Edward Bell	Tallapoosa County	70%
George Washington Carver	Birmingham City	70%
Notasulga	Macon County	69%
Parker	Birmingham City	68%
Ashford	Houston County	68%

Birmingham metro area schools in bold

Source: Birmingham News analysis of data from the Alabama Commission on Higher Education.

Ramsay High -- a magnet school that students must test to get into -- was the exception, with 18.2 percent of students attending Alabama public colleges having to take at least one remedial course.

Also ranked poorly are Bessemer City and Tarrant high schools, where 70 percent and 65 percent, respectively, had to take at least one remedial course.

Mountain Brook High School -- consistently among the top-performing schools in the state on standardized tests -- had the smallest percentage of students taking remedial courses in Alabama colleges, 4 percent.

The problems are hardly unique to Alabama. Although no national remedial average is available for last year, the 2010 Alabama average is similar to the most recent national figures available.

Gregory Fitch, the executive director of ACHE, said the numbers show that too many of the state's students aren't prepared for college. That means it's costing the state and students extra money and makes students less likely to finish college and become productive in the job market, he said.

[Click here to download a PDF of this chart.](#)

"This is costing us double. It is impacting our work force, our competitiveness, our economic development and our future," he said.

Students don't earn credits for remedial courses and may not qualify for tuition aid, and many of those who take such courses don't complete college.

Economy, colleges

Alabama's economy would see an \$80 million bump if it weren't for remedial students, according to a May report from the nonprofit Alliance for Excellent Education. That's \$51 million in direct costs of remediation and \$29 million in additional earnings the state is missing out on.

What's more, Fitch said, a weak foundation in math, reading and learning skills makes it more likely that students will drop out of college. Even those motivated to stick it out may hit financial obstacles. While students pay for remedial courses, they don't earn credit for them and may not be able to use scholarship money for them.

Students who need extra course work weigh down colleges and universities, which may have to shift state-appropriated money away from other programs or research to offer basic math and reading.

Fitch said that what's defined as remedial education varies from college to college, as do the requirements that determine who needs it.

For example, the University of Alabama at Birmingham uses a combination of ACT math scores and high school grade-point averages to determine whether freshmen need remedial math; ACT English scores below 20, or similar scores on a placement test, funnel students into remedial English, according to spokeswoman Dale Turnbough.

This fall, the university offered nine remedial English classes and 16 sections of remedial math. And those numbers are down from a few years ago because of tighter admissions standards.

Instead of admitting low-performing high school students, many of the state's bigger schools instead encourage them to attend local community colleges first, where they may need to take their remedial classes. Prospective UAB students can attend Jefferson State and Lawson State but get special counseling through the UAB Connections program.

Fitch said Auburn University, which reports no remedial students, and the University of Alabama have similar set-ups. That can push much of the burden to the two-year schools, which estimate up to 60 percent of their students require remedial work.

College and career ready

The Obama administration's proposal for rewriting the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act calls for doing away with the goal of 100 percent proficiency in reading and math by 2014 in favor of getting students "college and career ready" by the time they graduate from high school.

Loosely, that means making sure that students are prepared for college-level, credit-bearing courses in college, or for a job that can support a family.

But according to national data from the U.S. Department of Education from the 2007-08 school year -- the most recent national data available -- 36 percent of students who attended a four-year college and 42 percent who attended a two-year college took at least one remedial course their freshman year.

Clearly, there is work to be done, said Sharon Lee Miller, director of academic and technical education for the U.S. Department of Education.

"Right now, the stats cited show we are not doing a good job preparing our students for college," Miller said. "One of the problems is that the two levels -- secondary and post-secondary -- aren't communicating with each other."

Miller said secondary and post-secondary officials need to align their standards so high school students can seamlessly transition into college without being held back by remedial courses.

"Some of these students are surprised when they take a placement test and are told they have to be in a remedial course," Miller said. "They think they've taken everything in high school that they were supposed to take, but then go into college and aren't ready for the work."

Jerome Cook, principal of Bessemer City High School, said that's happened to many of his students who went into college.

After hearing how many students have to enroll in remedial courses in college, Cook decided this year to begin a remediation, enrichment and intervention program at the high school that will use scores from the Alabama High School Graduation Exam to target students who need extra attention.

"I don't think it's fair that some of these kids are leaving with A's and B's and then go into college and have to take remedial courses," he said. "I think they've dumbed down the curriculum trying to make sure students have good GPAs and test scores, and it's hurting these kids in the long run."

Birmingham school Superintendent Craig Witherspoon was startled by the data he saw for all seven Birmingham high schools, including Ramsay. While Ramsay had 18 percent of graduates who had to take remedial courses in Alabama public colleges, a much lower percentage than other Birmingham schools, Witherspoon said that is still too high.

"It's obvious by these numbers that there is work to be done," he said. "Part of what we've been doing the last year is evaluating the curriculum -- kindergarten through 12th grade -- to see where we need to work.

"Problems like these manifest themselves in high school, obviously, but we know nationally that these things start at the elementary level."

Progress

State school Superintendent Joe Morton said that while work is needed at the high school level, Alabama has shown progress over the years.

"We're not doing as good of a job as we should be doing at preparing students for college," he said. "But if you look at the states that have shown improvement in the last five to 10 years, I think Alabama would be one of those states."

For example, Alabama made the highest gains in the nation in fourth-grade reading in 2008 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the Nation's Report Card.

Morton said the state is establishing a Career and Technical Education Commission, which will review high school career-tech programs and offerings, research employers' work force needs and study ways to create a seamless transition between K-12 and post-secondary preparation for careers.

"With this commission, I am very optimistic we will do better than we have," he said.

Fitch said ACHE started collecting remediation data in 2007 to call attention to the problem. He argues that higher education administrators need to talk to K-12 educators so they know what

students will need to succeed. And, he says, teachers need to catch underperforming students as early as kindergarten and keep them reading and doing math on grade level, even if that means holding them back.

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

Birmingham News staff writers Hannah Wolfson and Jeff Hansen contributed to this report.

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