



November 27, 2012

HUFF POST EDUCATION

College Completion Data Becomes The New Focus Of K-12 Education, With Help From Harvard

Posted: 04/18/2012 8:49 am Updated: 04/18/2012 9:42 am



From the federal government to school boards, policymakers and administrators are increasingly setting their sights on "college and career readiness" as the goal of K-12 education. Now, school districts are grappling with methods that turn this seemingly abstract bar into something tangible.

On Tuesday, Harvard University's [Strategic Data Project](#) will release "Strategic Performance Indicators" that aim to help administrators track their graduates and use that information to drive instruction and advising in present-day classrooms. SDP, a five-year project funded by \$23 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, worked with five school districts -- Boston, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Fort Worth and Georgia's Gwinnett and Fulton Counties -- to gather student-level data that fuels these indicators, which the group says are akin to "the price-to-earnings ratio that show the financial health of a firm."

"The goal is to establish a set of indicators that districts and states will track over time," says Sarah Glover, the project's director. "Underneath that data is the question of why we aren't doing better."

That is the question Robert Avossa, Fulton County's schools superintendent, is now trying to answer. "Public school systems don't have the technical sophistication to do these deep dives on their own," says Avossa. "We used to take the old exit surveys and we'd report out to the public that 75 percent of our students were accepted to college. We never really knew if they finished."

Recently, conversation around the goals of K-12 education has focused on college attainment -- and not just high school graduation -- since 60 percent of future jobs are expected to require postsecondary credentials. Many students take remedial courses once they get to college -- a Manhattan Institute [report](#) found that only 32 percent of students graduate high school prepared for college. The Obama administration has encouraged states to adopt the [Common Core](#), a set of uniform educational standards that aligns with college preparation. Meanwhile, public elementary and secondary schools are struggling to connect the disparate institutional dots -- and to figure out to what extent they're responsible for life outcomes.

Through the Harvard project, Avossa filled in the blanks about his students. He learned that while 72 percent of students attended college immediately after graduation in 2011, only 51 percent of Fulton County kids who attended college starting in 2004 have graduated. He found that 10 percent of students eligible for selective colleges weren't attending at all. Avossa also learned through a national memo the project is releasing, titled "the High School Effect," that academic performance in elementary school is not an accurate predictor of college enrollment.

This knowledge, predicts Avossa, a former principal, will shift more responsibility toward school administrators. "Our top priority used to be, let's get them into college," he says. "The question of whether they finished or not, we would say, that's up to the university system, that's up to the parents. But it's clear that we have to play a role in that, that preparation in K-12 makes a difference."

The five districts involved in the Harvard project provide a preview of the shifting landscape of national education policy. The U.S. Education Department required all states accepting stimulus money to report their students' college enrollment rates and the number of credits they accumulated in their first year in university. But states weren't prepared, and the Education Department ultimately postponed the reporting deadline to the end of this year.

Additionally, a few states, such as Georgia and New Jersey, pledged to develop school rating systems that factor students' college progress into the state's requests for [waivers](#) from No Child Left Behind. "Prior to No Child Left Behind, states weren't even collecting K-12 education data at the student level," says Anne Hyslop, an analyst at nonpartisan think tank Education Sector. "Then higher education systems developed their own systems, and the two never talked to each other."

Fulton County reacted to the data by implementing a Personalized Assistance for College Enrollment program, which tracks and counsels students accepted to college but who aren't ready to attend. Schools now begin advising students about college as early as sixth grade, and administrators train all teachers in a college-focused programming.

Avossa says his district uses high school graduation rates as one piece of the school accountability puzzle, and that he's considering eventually adding college completion information into the mix. "It would be one of many measures," he says.

An SDP memo on demographics asserts that the gap between white and black students in college enrollment disappears -- and often times reverses -- when socioeconomic status and student performance are taken into account. School preparation and poverty levels

had the two highest effects on college attendance.

"It emphasizes the importance of preparation for college in K-12 because we don't see a gap when we're looking at similarly performing kids," says Glover. "There's not a lot else left to explain the gap except for achievement. If we could make progress on the achievement gap in lower graders, we think we would see progress in the college gap."

HUFF
POST HIGHLIGHTS ×

people have highlighted this!

Huzzah! This text has been highlighted.

Highlights is a new way to discover the most interesting text on Huffington Post!

[See All Highlights](#)

[+Highlight this!](#)