

N.J. ranks 2nd in graduation rate

Report also raises questions about the value of diplomas

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With high school graduation season approaching, the good news is New Jersey's public schools remain at the top nationally in the number of students earning their diplomas each year, according to a new report.

As good as the numbers look, however, the report comes at a time when questions are being raised nationwide about the value of diplomas and what schools require of their graduates.

The trade publication Education Week's annual "Diploma Counts" report found that more than 82 percent of New Jersey's high school students graduated with their class in 2003-04, the second highest rate in the country behind Utah. That rate falls to 62.5 percent for black students and 67 percent for Hispanic children.

The national average was about 70 percent overall and dipped as low as 53 percent for black students. The 2003-04 data is the latest available for every state, but the report estimates more than 1.2 million students nationwide will not graduate with their class this year.

Yet behind the numbers, the report reflected the debate in many states about the relation of that diploma to the skills needed in the modern work force.

In New Jersey, more than half of jobs require some post-secondary education or training, according to the report, and on average those jobs demand at least four years of such schooling.

"At both national and state levels, our research shows that a high school diploma alone is not sufficient for students to access the jobs that will provide a real future and to thrive in our economy," said Christopher Swanson, the researcher conducting the analysis.

Preparing students for workforce demands on all levels have been very much part of New Jersey's debate in the last year over how to improve its high schools.

State officials say they are proceeding with more rigorous requirements under what is called the American Diploma Project, a program adopted in more than 20 states.

Starting next year, the state will begin asking high school students to take specific state exams in subjects such as biology and algebra. Beyond that, a coalition of business and education leaders is pressing a whole set of course requirements for graduation.

"Our high school diploma doesn't mean anything to employers," said Dana Egreczky, a vice president of the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce and a leader in the reform push. "It used to be a ticket to the middle class, but not anymore."

The coalition has finished nearly a dozen forums with the public and education community, and plans a formal proposal by the start of the next school year.

In the meantime, the state must still face questions about its current requirements that critics and others say inflate its graduation rates.

Students graduating must now pass the state's High School Proficiency Assessment, along with various course requirements. But those failing the high school test have to fall back in the state's controversial alternative test known as the Special Review Assessment, an untimed and loosely structured exam that virtually all pass.

Statewide, nearly 15 percent of the graduates each year need the SRA, and in some urban high schools the rate well exceeds 50 percent. The state currently plans to eliminate the SRA, starting with this year's freshman class, but debate has continued over how or whether to provide some safety net.

