

## Students will face tougher courses

PATERSON – When Aileen Rosario started classes at Passaic County Community College three years ago, she discovered her writing skills were poorly developed.

"The writing in college is different than in high school," said the 2003 John F. Kennedy High School graduate and current Montclair State University senior. Rosario transferred from New York City to Paterson as a junior.

"In high school, I didn't learn nothing," added Rosario, a criminal justice major who also serves as operation manager for the Paterson Education Fund. "They gave you a topic and you just wrote about it – just one big paragraph. No introduction, no body, no conclusion. When I went to college I was amazed."

In order to catch up, she took four remedial courses: one in writing, one in reading and two in mathematics.

Rosario's academic struggles are examples of what the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee, a coalition of the state's leading educational organizations, including the state Department of Education, is trying to solve with plans to make high school courses more challenging. It is an effort to better prepare students for college and the work force in an ever-demanding global economy.

"Will our graduates be able to compete with students from Korea, Japan, China, Germany, Ireland, India – you name it – for jobs in a global economy?" asked Lucille Davy, state commissioner of education. "That's the crux of this whole thing."

Rosario's classroom experience is not unique, but in an effort strengthen student writing skills, language arts classes at Kennedy High School now emphasize persuasive and narrative essays and require research papers for mid-term exams, said Laura Constable, district spokeswoman.

However, an average of 40 percent of students at New Jersey colleges and universities need remedial classes, while at community colleges, the average number jumps to nearly 78 percent, according to the steering committee.

Meanwhile, only 25 percent of New Jersey's high school graduates receive college diplomas within six years, according to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

But by 2010, it is projected that 67 percent of employers will require a two- or four-year college degree and by 2020, that number will jump to 84 percent, Davy said.

On today's landscape, supply is not meeting demand, said Dana Egreczky, vice president of work force development for the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce and a Steering Committee member.

"A high school diploma is no longer a ticket to the middle class," she said. "It is a ticket to a menial, low-skilled job."

The reason for high school reform is that all Garden State students entering universities or the work force need the same skills and knowledge to succeed, steering committee members said.

"We can't have two tracks," Davy said. "It's about making sure we have high expectations for all students and that we provide the educational opportunities to meet the expectations."

Davy said reform plans will not require additional money because the number of classes will not be increased. But each district will be required to allocate resources they already have.

Launched by Gov. Jon S. Corzine in August, the steering committee is charged with formulating plans to require Algebra I, II and geometry; biology, chemistry and physics; four years of college-preparatory English; two years of the same foreign language; three years of social studies and one semester of economics.

The curricular recommendations result from findings of the American Diploma Project, a national consortium of business, government and education leaders who studied what students need to learn in high school to better compete for jobs in the 21st century. New Jersey is one of 25 states that have endorsed the project's findings.

Locally, some community leaders and educators said they supported the idea of making classes academically challenging, but had questions about implementing the changes.

"Theoretically it's a really good idea because schools aren't turning out kids who are work force-ready," said Irene Sterling, president of the Paterson Education Fund, a community advocacy organization that promotes improving public education, but questioned whether there would be additional cost.

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Michael Rice, Clifton schools superintendent, supports making the curriculum more challenging. This year, 336 Clifton High School students are taking advance placement classes compared with 167 in 2003-04, an increase of 101 percent, he said.

But Rice said not all the most difficult courses, like calculus or physics, should be mandatory.

He also cautioned that providing public schools with qualified teachers in hard-to-fill subjects like mathematics and science were essential to making the changes successful.

"Any added rigor of the high school curriculum needs to include added rigor to the teacher preparation programs at the university level," he said.

Co-chaired by Corzine, Prudential Financial chairman and CEO Arthur F. Ryan and Montclair State University President Susan A. Cole, the committee hosted meetings for educators to discuss the reform plans in October. In early December, meetings will take place for the general public – parents, students and community members.

Passaic High School Principal, Carlist Creech attended one of the information sessions at Montclair State.

He was shocked by the statistics on remediation.

"If we continue to do the same old things the same old way, you'll get the same old results," Creech said. "The same old results are not good enough."