

State unveils data to bolster high school plan

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As top New Jersey leaders gathered at William Paterson University yesterday to unveil their plan for improving public high schools, evidence of the need was all around them.

Last year, nearly half the incoming students on the Wayne campus ended up in at least one "basic skills" class, usually math, essentially re-learning what they should have learned in high school.

Statewide, the average remediation rate in four-year colleges isn't much below that, and it's considerably higher in the county colleges, where state officials said the average is close to 80 percent of incoming students.

These were among the statistics rolled out yesterday as Gov. Jon Corzine and a wide-ranging coalition of business and education leaders presented a long-awaited proposal for improving the state's 300-plus high schools.

"We are all very proud of what we do educationally in the state New Jersey," Corzine said. "But just because we are doing well, it doesn't mean we can't do it better. This whole redesign is all about raising the standards, raising the level of excellence and the level of opportunity for our children."

Developed by a coalition that ranged from Prudential Financial chairman Arthur Ryan to New Jersey Education Association president Joyce Powell, the plan calls for several proposed tracks of reforms, to be phased in over the next eight years.

The centerpiece is new course requirements in math and science, with end-of-year testing in each that would be required for graduation.

The plan also includes steps to bolster the state's teaching corps to meet new demands and redesigning high schools into smaller "learning communities." And it includes better coordination of the state's public education system with the colleges and universities.

Montclair State University President Susan Cole, who co-chaired the coalition, maintained the level of math a student attains in high school is the best predictor of success in college. She said few win when a student needs to take non-credit remedial courses.

"It increases the costs to the college, it increases the cost to the students, and it is demoralizing to both," Cole said.

Added Ryan, the Prudential chief and another co-chair: "This is not just about getting to college but graduating on time; this is not only about getting a job but succeeding."

The plan next moves to a variety of agencies and bodies that would be charged with further developing and approving its many pieces. And yesterday at the presentation, some of the many sticking points emerged, including questions about whether there is a ready supply of math and science teachers to meet the new demands.

Others questioned why the bar was being raised to include algebra II and chemistry, when existing, less-rigorous standards aren't always being met. Last year, one in five high school juniors failed either the state's math or science exam on the first try, with the rates far higher in many urban districts.

"How is this going to help schools that aren't meeting the current standards to meet tougher ones?" asked Stan Karp, a director with the Education Law Center in Newark who has led a statewide effort to improve urban high schools.

State Education Commissioner Lucille Davy responded that many schools are now meeting these standards or on their way, but she acknowledged the plan sets a challenging course. "The hard work is really yet to come," she said.