

**A STUDY OF
COLLEGE READINESS IN SIX NORTHERN
WEST VIRGINIA COUNTIES**

BY:

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PURPOSE: The purpose of this study was to examine college readiness in high schools in Hancock, Brooke, Ohio, Marshall, Wetzel, and Tyler counties in West Virginia.

BACKGROUND:

From the time I started teaching in 1979, I have had a problem with the way we evaluate schools in West Virginia. My first year of teaching was filled with meetings listening to administrators talking about test scores and their importance. So when I asked about consequences for students who do poorly on the test, I was surprised to learn that the answer was nothing. Test scores did not affect students' grades, prevent students from passing classes, or affect graduation. When I talked to my students about the test, many said that they didn't really try on the test and some said that they didn't even read the questions. So my performance as a teacher for the entire year was being partially judged by my students' performance on a twenty minute test with forty questions that most of my students didn't try on. Many things have changed in education in the last forty years, but this is one thing that has not changed. We have spent millions of dollars and countless hours on standardized testing that is invalid and meaningless. At one time, students who did not do well on the test were required to take a skill development class the next year. This would have helped except for the fact that parents could sign a waiver and get their child out of the skills class which many parents did. That program didn't last very long. Any standardized test that is given in states like West Virginia is meaningless because there is no penalty for not trying. So then the game becomes giving students incentives to get them to try harder. I have heard suggestions of giving pizza parties, prizes, or even paying students who do well. The point is, these tests cannot be used to tell how schools in West Virginia and many other states are doing. Some states require students to pass a standardized test as a graduation requirement which means that these tests tell you something because students try. All states should do this. I suggest using the ACT (American College Test) and require students to get a composite score of 16 in order to graduate.

I just mentioned the ACT. This is a college entrance exam taken by many students to get into college. In most schools, more than half of the students take the ACT. These students are usually the best students because they are planning to go to college which means that they will try on this test. Therefore, these scores can be used to analyze student and school performance. The ACT program does an excellent job of analyzing the scores for each school. They provide each school with a detailed "Profile Report" each year which provides an extensive breakdown of the school's scores. Among the many things provided in the report are college readiness or "Benchmark" scores. These scores were empirically derived over the years based on the actual performance of students in college. (1) For example, they have determined that if a student gets a score of 18 or better on the English section of the ACT, they have a 50% chance of obtaining a B in a college English composition class or a 75% chance of getting a C. A student who scores a 22 in math on the ACT, has a 50% chance of a B or a 75% of a C in college algebra. A student who scores a 22 in Reading has a 50% chance of obtaining a B or a 75% chance of getting a C in college Social Sciences. A student who scores a 23 in science on the ACT has a 50% of a B or 75% chance of a C in college biology. In the profile report, ACT provides each school with the percentage of students who meet the benchmark of each category and the percentage of students that meet all 4

of the benchmarks. They also show trends, by showing the last 5 years of benchmark scores.(1) My study compares the high schools in the 6 counties based on the 5 year averages of the percentage of students that met all 4 benchmarks. I believe that for a student to be considered college ready, they should have met all 4 benchmarks. You cannot say that a student is ready for college except for math, science or any category. Being deficient in one or more areas means that you are not fully prepared for college. I know that all students do not want to attend college. However, since many jobs require education beyond high school, we should be concerned with college readiness. The job of a high school is to prepare those students that want to go to college for college.

METHODOLOGY

To collect information for my study, I used the Freedom of Information Act and requested the college readiness scores along with some other information. Some schools sent the requested materials, however, some school districts stated that they had already disposed of the profile report from that year. Others were not that familiar with the profile report and only sent part of the material. I had to follow up with another freedom of information request to get all the results. For each school, I calculated a 5 year average of the percentage of students who met or exceeded all 4 benchmarks. In some schools there would be 4 years with similar scores and one much higher or lower. To account for this, I did an average of the 4 highest years and an average of the 4 lowest years for each school. The final score for each school is the average of the 3 averages. For each school I also obtained the grade point average of all students that graduated for one of the years in the study. I calculated the average grade point average for that graduating class. In all of the information, no student names were included.

RESULTS:

High School	% of ACT Students meeting all 4 benchmarks (5 year average)	Average GPA of all Students	Graduating Class	% of all Students with GPA 3.5 or above
Wheeling Park	28.70%	3.36	2016	48%
Tyler	21.50%	3.40	2016	45%
Weir	21.00%	2.90	2016	27%
Oak Glen	19.30%	Not Available		
John Marshall	19.20%	3.00	2017	29%
Magnolia	18.30%	3.34	2016	50%
Brooke	17.80%	3.04	2016	29%
Cameron	16.90%	3.23	2017	50%
Hundred	15.03%	3.32	2016	42%
Valley	10.80%	3.19	2016	43%
Paden City	7.80%	3.09	2016	19%
State Average	19.80%	National Average (1)		26.00%

* Study years 2013 - 2017 (I had 2018 scores from some schools but they were so low that I decided not to use them and did not request them from the other schools)

As you can see from the results, the schools in this region are not doing a good job of preparing students for college. Even at the best school, at 28.7% meeting all 4 benchmarks, this is not acceptable. Keep in mind that the ACT is not taken by every student. Only the students that are planning to go to college. So what this study shows is that of the students that plan on going to college and take courses to prepare for college, only a small percentage are actually prepared for college. The students that are not prepared may be accepted into college, but will be required to take remedial classes to teach them what they did not learn in high school. These classes probably do not count toward the major so they cost the student time in completing their major. Colleges probably don't mind teaching these classes since they can be taught by graduate students instead of high paid professors and still charge tuition for them. Plus, they keep you in school longer. So when a high school brags about a large percentage of students entering college, that tells you nothing about the job they did. Colleges have an incentive to accept students that are not prepared. Keep in mind that West Virginia has a PROMISE Scholarship that pays tuition for students who meet the requirements for the scholarship, one of which is an ACT requirement. The ACT requirement for the PROMISE Scholarship is higher than the college readiness benchmark requirements. In some schools there were years in which no student met all 4 benchmarks. This means that it is very unlikely that any student received the PROMISE Scholarship.

So the question becomes, why are scores so low and what can be done to improve college readiness. One thing that is obviously happening in schools today is grade inflation. This means that students are receiving higher grades than their academic abilities warrant. In other words, students that should be receiving C's are getting A's. The evidence for this comes when you look at college readiness scores compared to grade point averages. Almost all schools in the study have an average grade point that is nearly an A. But most schools have a college readiness percentage below 20. Keep in mind that the average grade point is of all students, while the college readiness scores are only for the students who took the ACT, which for most school is about 60% of the students in the class. So what you have is students making mostly A's in college preparatory classes who are not prepared for college. Two schools had nearly half of their students with a GPA of 3.5 or above but have college readiness scores of less than 20%. One school had 43% of students with a GPA above 3.5 yet only 10% of the students met all 4 college readiness benchmarks. Many students in this study had a cumulative GPA above 4.0 which means they made A's in honors or advanced placement classes. Yet many of these students did not meet all 4 college readiness benchmarks. The bottom line is that in many classrooms today, including honors and advanced placement classes, it is too easy to get an A and D's and F's are almost unheard of. Teachers are not challenging students with material difficult enough to prepare students for college and are not giving low grades to students that do not learn the material.

There are several factors that result in grade inflation. First of all, teachers just do not want to give low grades. They do not want to deal with angry students and parents so it easier to give higher grades and pass them on. Secondly, many teachers grade on doing work instead of learning. So if you turn in all of your worksheets, reports, papers, or other assignments, you get an A. If you turn in some, you get a B and if you do practically nothing, you get a C unless you disrupt class and then you may get a D. Third, many school principals and district administrators tell their teachers not to give a

failing grade because they do not want to deal with angry students and parents either. Administrators sometimes use the phrase, “D’em and Free’em”. In other words, give them a D and pass them on. Lately, this has become “C’em and Free’em”. School and district administrators like to use the excuse that giving low grades is bad for the students self-esteem. My answer to that has always been: which is worse for someone’s self-esteem? Getting low grades in high school or dropping out of college because you are not prepared. Fourth, many teachers do not know the level of ability that is required in college. Schools need to work with colleges to make sure they are preparing students.

So lets say that you are a math teacher teaching Algebra I. Your job is to prepare your students for Algebra II. However, on the first day of school, you discover that most of your students cannot do basic math. They do not know how to divide and are clueless about fractions. So what do you do? If you teach Algebra the way you are suppose to, most students will fail and parents will complain to the principal and you will get called into the office. If you do not teach the way you are suppose to, they do not learn Algebra and they go on to Algebra II or other courses that require math without being prepared and the Algebra II teacher has the same problem. My entire teaching career, I taught Biology and part of my career I taught Physical Science as part of a Coordinated Science Class. Every year, most of the students that came into my classes were not prepared to take the class. Some students failed the classes and many got low grades. I was occasionally called into the principals office and sometime into the Superintendent’s Office for giving too many low grades and asked to reduce the number of low grades and not to fail students (“D’em and Free’em”). I refused. One year in a Physical Science class for 10th grade students, I was preparing to teach the concept of division. I told the class that they should have learned how to divide in grade school. One student raised her hand and said “I was absent that day”. I told my students at the beginning of each year that I would teach them how to become better students and get them up to speed but that they would probably get low grades until they got there. So in the first grading period, many students got D’s and F’s. Had I not given them low grades, they would not have worked hard to improve. By the end of the year, most students were caught up and many of them thanked me for helping them become better students. Some students did not work and failed.

There are other factors that contribute to low college readiness scores. One is that many students did not take enough upper level courses to prepare them for the ACT. It is important that counselors meet with students and make sure that they are getting into the upper level courses that they need. In most schools the schedule is also a detriment to students getting into upper level courses. Most schools have what I call an “8 period school day” which includes 7 instructional periods and a lunch. This schedule limits the number of upper level electives that a student can take because you can only take 28 classes in 4 years. After taking the required classes, this does not leave much room for upper level classes (some students skip lunch to take another class). This schedules especially limits classes available to vocational students who usually take a 2-3 hour block for their vocation class (welding, autobody, etc.). This leaves just enough time to take the required classes and little or no time to take college preparatory classes. What sometimes happens to those students is they find out that they need to go to college to complete their vocational program or they change their mind and decide to go to college. Either way they are woefully unprepared for college. Some schools in the study have a

block schedule which divides the day into 90 minute classes, so students complete their entire course in one semester. Science teachers especially like this type of schedule because it makes it easier to do lab work. The problem with this type of schedule is that it is difficult to cover concepts in a 90 minute class so teachers cover concepts for 45 minutes and let students do worksheets or homework for the rest of the class. For example, with a regular schedule, a math teacher would cover a concept in class, give homework for the next day, go over the homework the next day, and then cover another concept. In a block schedule, with a 90 minute class, the teacher would cover the concept in the first 45 minutes and let the students complete homework in the next 45 minutes instead of covering the next concept. Therefore, they end up only covering half of the concepts that they would have covered in a regular schedule. In some instances teacher get a 90 minute preparation period so a lot of teacher like it. Some schools use a modified block schedule which has some 90 minutes classes or double periods.

I recommend what I call a 9 period day which has 8 instructional periods and a lunch. I worked with this schedule for several years. Our instructional periods were 45 minutes and our lunch was 30 minutes. Students were able to take 32 classes in 4 years which enabled them to take more upper level classes. Some students chose to take 1 study period instead of the extra class. As someone who has worked with scheduling for a school, this schedule gave us more flexibility so that students could get the classes they wanted. Our school had a very strong Vocational/ Agriculture program. This schedule allowed students to take their vocational classes, get their required courses, and still have room to take upper level science and math courses which many of them wanted to take.

There are other things that schools can do to improve college readiness. ACT provides each school with a very extensive analysis of their ACT scores. Some schools use this information and some do not. In fact when I first requested this information from school districts some said that they had already disposed of their ACT scores and some did not understand what I was asking for. Schools should use this information to better prepare their students for college.

Finally, some schools have exam exemption policies which exempt students from taking final exams due to good behavior or good attendance. School should eliminate this policy because final exams help prepare students to take the ACT or any other standardized test.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Eliminate grade inflation. Raise standards in the classroom and hold students accountable.
2. Make sure students are taking the classes they need to become college ready.
3. Adopt a 9 period day – 8 instructional periods to allow students to take more upper level classes.
4. Utilize the information provided by ACT to improve college readiness.
5. Eliminate exam exemption policies.

SOURCES

- (1) ACT Profile Report – National – Graduating Class 2014