

Huidekoper: High school graduation rates aren't necessarily a reason to celebrate

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Graduates toss their caps in the air during the Broomfield High 2015 commencement at the 1stBank Center on May 23. (David R. Jennings, Daily Camera)

In Colorado, high school graduation statistics tell us little about what that degree means in terms of a graduate's knowledge and skills. The recently published [2014 Legislative Report on Remedial Education](#) (available at highered.colorado.gov) again makes that clear, especially if you look at several high schools where the four-year graduation rate is impressive but the (low) ACT scores and (high) remediation rates are not.

Shouldn't we insist on clear expectations of what it means to be a high school graduate in Colorado? Most states do a better job of this. [A recent report by National Public Radio](#)

[commended Colorado](#) for moving in a positive direction, thanks to changes approved by our state board in 2013 "spelling out what Colorado students must do to earn a high school diploma."

However, the current majority on the [state Board of Education seems skeptical of that plan](#). Many worry the board will renege on expectations agreed to two years ago, leaving us in even worse shape when it comes to giving real meaning to a high school diploma.

The recent reduction in high school tests leaves us with one statewide measure in 11th grade: the ACT, which most agree is an assessment that matters.

I examined the ACT scores for a recent class in 20 metro-area high schools, those who were juniors in 2012, using data from the Colorado Department of Higher Education report and other sources. I then noted their graduation rate senior year, 2013. Finally, for those who entered a Colorado college the next fall, I found their remediation rate.

I began to see a pattern: The lower the ACT scores, the higher the remediation rates. But it raises doubts about those "impressive" graduation rates.

For students with ACT scores 21 and above, nearly 90 percent graduate. Remediation rates were exceptionally low. At the Denver School of Science and Technology, for example, the remediation rate was 7.5 percent. For the Denver School of the Arts, it was 18.4 percent.

For ACT scores between 18.5 and 21, over 80 percent graduate, and remediation rates are at 45 percent or below.

For ACT scores between 17.3 and 18.2, most often, fewer than 80 percent graduate. One surprise: Martin Luther King Early College had an average ACT score of 17.4, yet its graduation rate was high, 83.8 percent. The average ACT score in DPS that year was 17.6, and yet the district's graduation rate was more than 22 percent lower, at 61.3 percent.

When ACT scores are under 17, usually fewer than 70 percent graduate. So it is curious to see Westminster High and Alameda International with ACT scores of 16.3 (or 3.7 points below the state average) and yet, a year later, the graduation rates neared or exceeded the state average of 76.9 percent.

No surprise, really, to see that most of those graduates who went on to college that fall required remedial classes.

Strange, too, to see Bruce Randolph with an ACT average of only 16.0 for its juniors and yet, a year later, 91.4 percent of that class earned a diploma. Of the 27 Bruce Randolph graduates enrolled in higher education the next fall, 16 of them (59.3 percent) needed remedial classes.

Also puzzling: South High, with an ACT score of 16.1, had a graduation rate exceeding the state average: 78.1 percent. The remediation rate for that class at South — 64.5 percent — is also telling.

We must wait until next spring for a report on the remediation rate of the class of 2014, but a look at its ACT scores and graduation rates raises similar concerns. How is it that juniors at several high schools averaged 16.4 or below on the ACT, but a year later their graduation rates exceeded the state average: Adams City High (with 78.8 percent), Sheridan High (82.7 percent), and Alameda International (89.9 percent)?

MLK saw slightly lower ACT scores in 2013 for its juniors than the year before, but still a remarkably high graduation rate for that class (84 percent).

The graduation rate at Abraham Lincoln rose over 11 points from 2013 to 2014 — from 64 percent to 75.5 percent — even though the dismal ACT results for those two graduating classes were little better (15.5 in 2012, 15.6 in 2013).

The 91.4 percent graduation rate at Bruce Randolph in 2013 dropped nearly 30 points, to 62.6 percent in 2014. That's more credible, and more consistent with the discouraging ACT score for this class of 2014: 15.2.

All this is evidence enough, I hope, for the state and districts to take a closer look at our graduation rates. The public has a right to know if a diploma from a Colorado high school truly stands for something.

I was struck by a comment from Michael Clough, the superintendent of Sheridan schools, in an article in Chalkbeat Colorado last winter. It featured the good news about Sheridan High's graduation rate going from 60 percent in 2013 to over 80 percent in 2014. "These numbers are a testament to what is happening at our high school," Clough said. "It's also evidence of the quality of the learning coming up through our entire system."

If the ACT measures learning, and graduation rates do not, I disagree. Here are the ACT scores at Sheridan High over the past three years: 16.7 in 2012; 16.4 in 2013; and 15.9 in 2014.

I hope the state board realizes, sadly, that this is an issue for all of Colorado — not just in the metro area. Let's keep in mind that our staggering statewide remediation rate of 34.2 percent does not include nearly half of the 2013 graduates who did *not* go on to college. Include every senior who receives a high school diploma in our state, and the percentage that graduate "college-ready" is, most likely, appalling.

ACT results and remediation rates tell us something important about the skills and knowledge of soon-to-be-graduates and just-graduated students. But in Colorado, in measuring the "quality of the learning," our high school graduation rates say little.

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