

INNOVATOR

News about high school innovation

April 12, 2010

Welcome to INNOVATOR, a bimonthly report on high school change in North Carolina from the North Carolina New Schools Project. INNOVATOR informs practitioners, policy makers, and friends of public education about high school innovation in North Carolina as well as success stories and research from across the nation.

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Research shows early college students more likely on track

Students in North Carolina's early college high schools are more likely to be making progress to college than similar students attending other high schools, according to summary findings released this week from an ongoing experimental study of the innovative schools.

The study's first-year analysis found that by the end of 9th grade, 83 percent of early college students had successfully completed Algebra I, compared to 67 percent of students attending other schools. To be on track for college, students need to have completed English I and Algebra I by the end of 9th grade.

The research methods used in the study make the findings especially compelling. The study, led by the SERVE Center at UNC Greensboro, uses an experimental design, often considered the "gold standard" in educational research.

Out of a pool of students who applied to attend each of the schools in the study, one group was randomly chosen by lottery to attend early college high schools while the remaining students who were not chosen formed a "control" group, enrolling instead in a traditional high school. Using a lottery produces two groups for comparison that have few systematic differences from one another, even on characteristics that are hard to measure, such as motivation.

Among other findings from the study's first year of data are these:

Early colleges are closing gaps in achievement:

By the end of 9th grade, little or no gap separated the performance of non-minority students

from under-represented minorities in the core 9th grade subjects of English I and Algebra I. By comparison, within the non-ECHS control group of students, a 14 percentage point gap separated non-minority and minority students in Algebra I and a 9 point gap in English I.

Suspensions and absences were fewer among early college students:

In 9th grade, 2.7 percent of early college students had been suspended compared to 20.6 percent of students in the control group. Early college students had an average of 3.85 unexcused absences compared to an average of 6.41 unexcused absences for control-group students.

Early college students more engaged and more confident in math:

Studies have shown that student motivation and engagement are associated with students staying in school. Based on surveys, early college students report significantly higher levels of academic engagement and confidence in their math abilities than students in the control group.

Early college students experience a more positive school environment:

Surveys also show that early college students report higher expectations from teachers, more rigorous and relevant instruction, more support and better relationships with their teachers than students in the control group.

Early college students said in interviews conducted as part of the study how positive relationships and high expectations helped them achieve success in school.

One student told researchers: "... even when ... you're done, the teacher is always pushing you and pushing you to make sure that you've done all that you can possibly do and that your best can always be better. ... We learned that we can do this even when we think we can't."

The SERVE study will continue to examine early college high school results by following students through upper grades and incorporating the outcomes of more students and more schools.

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Education leaders convene in NC to discuss early college

Education leaders from across the nation met last week in Raleigh for a conference on early college high school, an innovative approach North Carolina is helping pioneer with the largest investment of any state in the nation.

The two-day conference, Connect to College: How States can use College Credit-in-High School to Improve College Readiness for Underserved Students, was co-sponsored by Boston-based [Jobs for the Future](#) and North Carolina's [James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy](#).

Representatives from the North Carolina New Schools Project, which has helped launch and support 70 early college high schools, provided insight into the state's experience with the break-the-mold schools. Also participating were Lt. Gov. Walter Dalton, Scott Ralls, president of the North Carolina Community College System, Bill Harrison, chairman of the State Board of Education and Howard Lee, executive director of the N.C. Education Cabinet, who spoke on behalf of Gov. Beverly Perdue.

In an address to the group, Dalton highlighted the connection of North Carolina's early colleges to the growing need for innovative approaches to economic development. He praised the work of the state's early colleges, and suggested that other states look to the North Carolina model as an effective strategy for moving students and future workers into the 21st

century.

Inclusion of college courses in the high school curriculum is a growing strategy for improving the success of low-income high school students and others with low educational attainment. The number of early college high schools has grown to over 200 serving nearly 50,000 students nationwide. North Carolina alone has created 70 such schools since 2004.

Other states have or are planning to implement a substantial number of such schools, including California, New York, Georgia, Michigan, and Tennessee. Texas, whose early colleges were also highlighted at the conference, uses a variety of settings to promote completion of college-level courses by low-income students. These include STEM schools and dual enrollment pathways, in addition to early college, as options available to all students.

The Connect to College conference was organized to help states that are interested in developing, sustaining, or expanding community college- and university-connected approaches. The conference also focused on the critical issues of financing and ensuring program quality.

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Study: College boosts disadvantaged students the most

A new study argues that the students who stand to see the biggest income gains from a college degree are those least likely to continue their education after high school: students who are black, Latino, low-income and those whose parents did not pursue postsecondary education themselves.

The [study](#), published in the latest edition of the American Sociological Review, found that male college graduates from groups considered least likely to attend college had earned 30 percent more during their lifetimes, on average, than similar students whose education ended with high school. For female college graduates from similar circumstances, the average income boost was 35 percent more than females who only finished high school.

The income gap is less pronounced for students who would more likely attend college because of their demographic and academic backgrounds. Male college graduates who were considered very likely to attend college earned only about 10 percent more than similar students whose education didn't extend beyond high school. For women college graduates from similar backgrounds, the pay difference was 20 percent above women high school graduates.

The study cites 2007 Census data showing that college graduates earned about \$55,000, on average, compared with less than \$30,000 for individuals with only a high school diploma.

The study's findings about economic advantage related to postsecondary education tend to contradict the perception among some economists that students most likely to attend college also stand to benefit the most, according to the authors, Jennie E. Brand of the University of California, Los Angeles, and Yu Xie of the University of Michigan, both of whom are sociologists.

Brand and Xie argue that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have a stronger economic motivation compared to more advantaged students for whom college is an expectation related to cultural and social norms.

In addition, they say, disadvantaged students with only a high school diploma have fewer prospects in the job market than more advantaged students who may be able to use family or social connections to gain employment if they don't attend college.

"One interpretation of our results is that college education may be particularly beneficial among groups targeted by educational expansion efforts," the researchers write, "that is, individuals who are otherwise unlikely to attend college based on their observed characteristics."

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NC students make little gain on NAEP reading results in 2009

Reading performance among North Carolina's fourth and eighth graders was essentially unchanged on the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress compared to both 2007 and 2005, prompting calls from state education leaders for efforts to strengthen instruction.

While [fourth graders](#) in North Carolina performed at the national average on the closely watched reading assessment, the results of which were released late last month, the state's [eighth graders](#) were slightly below the nation's average performance, which was up by 1 point.

"The NAEP scores show that we have much work to do in reading," State Superintendent June Atkinson said. "While our state's scores are similar to the national average, we are not satisfied with performance and will be looking at ways to strengthen the quality of reading instruction our students receive at every level, from kindergarten through 12th grade."

Bill Harrison, chairman of the State Board of Education, said the use of formative assessments throughout the year will help teachers better pinpoint the needs of students throughout the year.

"One of our goals for the federal Race to the Top funding is to improve diagnostic measures of student learning so that teachers get more frequent feedback to help students when they have difficulties," Harrison said. "The NAEP reading scores show that we can benefit from such an approach."

Commenting on the nation's overall performance, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan linked the reading performance of students in fourth and eighth grades to their eventual performance in high school.

"Today's results once again show that the achievement of American students isn't growing fast enough," Duncan said.

"After modest gains in recent years, fourth-grade reading scores are flat and eighth-grade scores were up just one point. The achievement gap didn't narrow by a statistically significant amount in either grade," he said. "Like the NAEP 2009 math scores released last fall, the reading scores demonstrate that students aren't making the progress necessary to compete in the global economy.

"By this and many other measures, our students aren't on a path to graduate high school ready to succeed in college and the workplace."

Reading instruction in North Carolina's elementary and middle schools is also coming under scrutiny by the superior court judge who is overseeing the state's response to legal mandates in the Leandro adequacy case.

Judge Howard Manning, Jr. has set a hearing May 4 for officials from the state and three urban districts to explain low performance in a long list of elementary schools where more than half the students are failing state end-of-grade tests in reading.

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