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Colleges report dismal results

Rates of enrolling, graduation low for city's students

By Sara Neufeld

Sun reporter

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Baltimore school board meetings have been ending on a somber note lately, as schools chief Andres Alonso is capping the evenings with presentations of student data that thus far have been dismal.

Last night was no exception, as the new chief executive officer turned to the subject of city students' college enrollment and graduation rates.

According to the data presented at the meeting, only 14 percent of students who graduated from Baltimore's public high schools in 2001 had earned a college degree five years later. And among students who graduated from high school in the spring of 2006, just 44 percent enrolled in a two- or four-year college that fall, compared with a national college enrollment rate of 66 percent.

Alonso was quick to acknowledge the information's shortcomings: The data were gathered by the National Student Clearinghouse, which collects student enrollment and graduation information from the majority of the nation's colleges and universities. But Morgan State University did not provide statistics to the clearinghouse, nor did Allegany College or Sojourner-Douglass College.

Still, even if those schools had been included, Alonso said the data show that the city is clearly not doing its job to prepare students for college.

"If there are still people out there who argue that the children should be graduated, this is what happens," said Alonso in an interview before the meeting. He added that college graduation rates for students from other urban school systems are comparably low.

The report adds fuel to the debate on the state's High School Assessments, which would require students starting in the Class of 2009 to pass exams in English, Algebra 1, biology and government to graduate.

Faced with the prospect of denying diplomas to thousands of students, many in Baltimore, state officials are weighing whether to back down. State Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick has proposed allowing students who fail the tests to instead complete a senior project.

But Grasmick, too, said in an interview that the city's college enrollment and graduation rate data show why schools must still prepare their students for the tests.

"If we don't create a meaningful and accountable foundation for these students, we're never going to be able to build on that to make students work-ready and college-ready," she said.

Grasmick pointed to the city's low pass rate on the Algebra 1 test: Only 35.6 percent of students in the Class of 2009 have passed so far. To do well on the SAT college entrance exam, she said, students must have mastery not only of Algebra 1, but also Algebra 2.

Like Grasmick, Alonso has backed the senior project option, but he says he also wants to make sure that students are earning a diploma that means something. He supports keeping students in school for as long as they want up to age 21 to get a diploma with value.

At the same time, he must find a way to curb the high school dropout rate. In the Class of 2009, about 6,300 students started out as ninth-graders two years ago. Today, the class has about 4,500 students, meaning 1,800 have dropped out or moved.

Since taking the helm of the city school system in July, Alonso has been fixated on measuring the baseline from which he is starting. He says it is important for him, and the public, to understand the magnitude of the task at hand to reform education in Baltimore. Skeptics question whether he might be trying to paint an overly negative picture now so he can take credit for improvements later.

The statistics presented last night called into question even the value of diplomas from the city's prestigious citywide magnet schools: Polytechnic Institute, City College, Western High, Dunbar High and School for the Arts. Only 33 percent of students from those schools' Class of 2001 who enrolled in college that fall had earned a bachelor's or associate's degree five years later, the data show.

At the city's career and technology high schools - Carver, Mergenthaler and Edmondson - 6 percent of students in the Class of 2001 had a degree within five years. At the city's neighborhood high schools, the figure was just 4 percent.

Had Morgan State been included in the study, the figures would have been slightly better. Joseph Popovich, vice president for planning and information technology, said Morgan enrolls about 1,200 freshmen each year, about 200 of them from the city.

"We've got a 42 percent graduation rate," Popovich said. "That's good for urban universities, and I don't have any reason to think that the city kids would be much different than our average."

The city's numbers might also have been slightly better if they included students who deferred their college acceptances.

At last night's board meeting, officials outlined a variety of strategies they plan to use to improve students' college-readiness.

The system will spend \$250,000 to bring services from the CollegeBound Foundation, already serving 20 city high schools, into 10 additional schools. CollegeBound's services include organizing college fairs and taking students on college tours.

Principals will receive college guides, and school counselors will receive calendars reminding them of

important dates in the college admissions process.

Alonso began the end-of-board-meeting presentations last month with a report on HSA scores. It was followed by presentations on suspensions and truancy. Alonso plans to continue the presentations at the end of each meeting.

sara.neufeld@baltsun.com

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