

## **DPS grads face remedial work More than half are unprepared for college classes**

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Amber Mendoza is a freshman at Denver's North High School who is slogging through algebra and looking forward to the day when, diploma in hand, she can say goodbye to high school math forever.

Except that, chances are, she won't be able to.

More than half of all Denver Public Schools graduates who enroll in a state college or university must take at least one **remedial** course, according to a Rocky Mountain News analysis, and in most cases, that class is math.

For graduates of high-poverty schools such as North, the remediation rate shoots even higher - up to nearly 70 percent. That means two out of every three graduates have to pay for and complete a basic skills course that does not count for college credit before they can enroll in a class that will count toward a degree.

Even Denver's higher-performing schools don't fare so well in the Rocky analysis of three years' worth of data. At the Denver School of the Arts, one of two DPS high schools rated "excellent" by the state, the remediation rate is 36 percent.

North's remediation rate, the third-highest in Colorado, is double that of DSA - 67 percent. For Amber, 14, who has struggled to make the adjustment from middle to high school, that's not good news.

"Just because I'm a student at North, I shouldn't have to take **remedial** courses," she said. "I should be getting the right education now."

State law requires Colorado public colleges and universities to report annually on the numbers of first-time students who must take **remedial** courses.

Four-year universities typically rely on a student's ACT or SAT college entrance exam scores to make that determination; two-year colleges use an exam called the Accuplacer.

The Rocky analysis looked at data from 2006, 2007 and 2008 by district and by school. The state report excludes schools with fewer than 25 graduates, so only larger high schools and districts are included. Among the findings:

\* Ten of the 70 school districts have remediation rates of 50 percent or above. That includes DPS, Sheridan and Commerce City in the metro area.

\* Seven school districts have remediation rates of 20 percent or less. Boulder Valley is the only

metro area district in that group.

\* School remediation rates ranged from a low of 4.8 percent for D'Evelyn Junior/Senior High School in Jefferson County to a high of 71.7 percent for Denver's West High School.

\* Three metro-area school districts have seen double-digit increases in their remediation rates over the past three years - DPS, Sheridan and Commerce City. DPS' rate was 46.4 percent in 2006 and 56.3 percent in 2008.

### Pervasive phenomenon

Colorado's statewide remediation rate in 2008 was 29.9 percent, where it has hovered for at least four years.

A breakdown shows 53 percent of students enrolling in two-year schools required remediation compared with 21 percent of those attending four-year schools.

That's similar to the national **remedial** rate, according to a September report from Strong American Schools, the group headed by former Gov. Roy Romer.

Titled Diploma to Nowhere, the report found 43 percent of two-year college students needed remediation compared with 29 percent of four-year students.

In fact, the **remedial** phenomenon is so pervasive that the College Board lists advice for avoiding it on its Web site, starting with "Be aware that simply meeting graduation requirements might not be enough . . . "

If researchers know about the issue, many students do not.

"You feel proud with your diploma," said Juan Evangelista, who graduated from North High School in May 2005.

But when he enrolled in Community College of Denver that fall, a counselor said he had to take **remedial** courses in three subjects.

"I had the diploma saying, OK, I'm ready for college," Evangelista said. "But it turned out, I had to go back into **remedial** , learning what I should already have been taught."

### Boosting proficiency

Brad Jupp, DPS senior academic adviser, said the district has focused on improving students' access to college, citing efforts such as the Denver Scholarship Foundation.

The Rocky findings show DPS must boost its efforts at proficiency, too.

"The challenge is . . . we can't just increase the number of kids we have going to college," Jupp

said, "We have to increase their proficiency rates if we're going to see them succeed in college."

At **Abraham Lincoln** High School, the number of graduates attending a Colorado college or university over three years has nearly doubled - along with the school's remediation rate.

Jupp said the district's reform plan, the Denver Plan, includes interventions such as doubling up math and literacy classes. Other interventions, such as summer school, have not been implemented for lack of funding.

DPS' tough new graduation requirements, effective with the Class of 2011, also may boost proficiency.

"We care very much about the new graduation requirements," said Kristen Sharp, an organizer with Padres y Jovenes Unidos, an advocacy group working in DPS schools with some of the worst remediation rates.

But Sharp said DPS also should implement "continuation requirements" or set standards a student must meet before being promoted from grade to grade.

"We know that more than 80 percent of students walking into North or Montbello or **Lincoln**, they're behind walking into the ninth grade," she said. "So it's kind of like no surprise that then they need **remedial** courses when they're walking into college.

More than 44,000 students were enrolled in **remedial** courses in Colorado colleges and universities during the 2007-08 school year. Total cost: \$14.6 million in state tax dollars.

Nationwide, the cost of **remedial** education for high school graduates is more than \$2.3 billion annually, according to Romer's report.

But Van Schoales, urban education officer with the Denver-based Piton Foundation, believes those figures underestimate the actual toll - in dollars and students.

For example, consider that Denver's West High School enrolled 569 students in fall 2004. Four years later, 52 West graduates enrolled in a Colorado college or university. Of those, 42 students needed at least one **remedial** course. That leaves 10 graduates of West who attended a state school who were fully prepared for college classes.

Given that DPS received at least \$6,500 per pupil per year each of those four years, the cost of educating 10 students fully prepared for college works out to about \$1 million each, Schoales calculated.

"It's not that people aren't working hard," he said. "It's just that the schools are totally ill-prepared to get kids ready for college."

INFOBOX 1

The best and worst

A Rocky analysis three years' worth of data\* shows some high schools are preparing their graduates well for college - and some are not. The percentages refer to the number of a school's graduates attending a Colorado college or university who were required to take at least one **remedial** course.

\* TOP HIGH SCHOOLS

District \* School \* Graduates in **remedial** courses

1. Jefferson County, D'Evelyn Jr./Sr. High, 4.8%
2. Boulder Valley, Fairview H.S., 10.8%
3. Academy District 20, Air Academy H.S., 13.5%
4. Cherry Creek Schools, Cherry Creek H.S., 14.6%
5. Cheyenne Mountain 12, Cheyenne Mountain H.S., 15.1%

\* BOTTOM HIGH SCHOOLS

District \* School \* Graduates in **remedial** courses

1. Denver Public Schools, West H.S., 71.1%
2. Denver Public Schools, Montbello H.S., 68.9%
3. Denver Public Schools, North H.S., 66.7%
4. Aurora Public Schools, Aurora Central H.S., 64.5%
5. Denver Public Schools, **Abraham Lincoln** H.S., 64.3%

INFOBOX 2

Link between poverty and the need for **remedial** classes

A Rocky analysis of three years' data correlates the need for **remedial** courses with the need for lunch aid. One column shows the number of graduates in each of the 15 metro-area districts who were required to take at least one **remedial** course after enrolling in a Colorado college or university. Another column shows the percentage of students in each district who are eligible for federal lunch aid, an indicator of poverty.

Students District \* Graduates requiring remediation \* Students in poverty

1. Boulder Valley, 20%, 17%
2. Littleton, 23%, 15%
3. Douglas County, 24%, 5%
4. Cherry Creek, 27%, 22%
5. Jefferson County, 29%, 25%
6. St. Vrain, 34%, 31%
7. Adams Five-Star, 39%, 29%
8. Englewood, 45%, 44%
9. Brighton, 48%, 28%
10. Westminster, 49%, 73%
11. Aurora, 49%, 57%
12. Mapleton, 51%, 65%
13. Denver, 53%, 68%
14. Sheridan, 61%, 82%
15. Adams 14/Commerce City, 63%, 83%