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## Kentucky high schools only slightly better at getting graduates ready for college, workforce

### Graduates not always prepared for life after high school

*By Chris Kenning | The Courier-Journal*

More than 60 percent of Kentucky high school graduates left school this spring unprepared for college or the workforce, according to new Kentucky Department of Education data.

Although the state's public high schools are doing a better job than last year, just 38 percent of the Kentucky's 41,784 graduates in 2011 were deemed prepared for college or careers. In 2010, the figure was 34 percent.

Education Commissioner Terry Holliday said Kentucky's rates are unacceptable, especially considering that the state is pushing for 67 percent of students to be college-ready by 2015.

"We're not where we need to be," Holliday said. "But it's heading in the right direction."

Readiness is determined based on the number of students meeting benchmarks on the ACT college-entrance exam set by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, plus the number of graduates receiving career certificates.

In Jefferson County, the results showed slight improvement but even lower college-readiness. In 2011, only one-third of the district's 5,508 graduates were prepared for college or a career, compared with 31 percent last year. The district fell short of its annual goal of 38 percent. Among JCPS schools, the results ranged from as low as 4 percent at Valley High School to 81 percent at Manual High, a selective magnet school.

"We're certainly not satisfied with the results," Superintendent Donna Hargens said at a news conference Tuesday. "We want our kids to be college-ready."

Post-secondary education officials said they weren't surprised, given that last year, 63 percent of recent high school graduates entering community and technical colleges and 27 percent entering public universities needed remedial courses.

Additionally, 90 percent of GED graduates weren't ready to take credit-bearing college courses, according to the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.

"We still have tons more work to do," said Aaron Thompson, senior vice president of the council, although he added that the gain this year "doesn't sound like a lot, but it's fairly significant."

Across the state, the top-ranked school districts were Fort Thomas Independent, which had 76 percent of students ready for college or a career, and Oldham County, with 66 percent.

State officials attributed Kentucky's slight improvement to more industry certifications, more schools paying attention to the ACT college-entrance exam and increased efforts by universities to help address academic shortfalls before high school graduation.

Thompson said a range of efforts are under way to raise Kentucky's rate, including partnerships with state universities and schools and earlier remediation, especially among low-income and minority students.

Senate Bill 1, passed by the 2009 General Assembly, calls for schools and districts to improve the college and career readiness of their students by 50 percent by the 2014-15 school year.

High school students are now required to take end-of-course assessments instead of the Kentucky Core Content Test. Students also are required to take the PLAN test in 10th grade, which predicts how well students will do on the ACT, and the ACT in the 11th grade.

Brent McKim, president of the Jefferson County Teachers Association, said he thinks the ACT is an imperfect gauge of college readiness. He said the tests measures aptitude, which may not directly reflect the quality of high school instruction.

But Thompson said the ACT does show necessary skills for college and should spur deeper looks into where deficiencies can be addressed.

And that lack of readiness has a significant impact on the local economy, said Carmen Hickerson, vice president for communication at Greater Louisville Inc. She said the low number puts Louisville at a competitive disadvantage in luring employers. That applies to careers as equally as colleges, she said.

"Advanced manufacturing is a key focus area — you need people who can be skilled laborers and get certificates and trade certifications," Hickerson said. "That's why we're so focused on education as a top priority and a partner in 55,000 Degrees."

55,000 degrees is a public-private partnership with the goal of adding 40,000 bachelor's degrees and 15,000 associate's degrees by 2020.

Bob Rodosky, director of testing and accountability for JCPS, said his district's focus on college readiness through 55,000 Degrees, high school reforms, new attention to persistently low-performing schools and more ACT prep is starting to return dividends.

At Western High, which saw big gains in test scores this year and whose readiness rate rose from 4 percent to 11 percent, principal David Mike said he plans to work harder to boost ACT scores by increasing vocabulary lessons and using incentives to make sure students are motivated to do well.

At Valley High, which recorded the district's lowest readiness rate, principal Gary Hurt said he's begun to use Kaplan ACT test prep materials while teachers work ACT-like questions into lessons. He said despite the low percentage, most of his students who graduated were accepted to some kind of community or post-secondary school.

In Oldham County, 66 percent of the district's 805 graduates were college or career ready, compared with 57 percent last year.

In addition to providing extra help for seniors who don't perform well on the ACT as juniors, Oldham school leaders are looking at results from the EXPLORE test to see which eighth-graders could use help as they enter ninth grade, said Lauterbach, Oldham's assistant superintendent and high school director.

In Bullitt County, 31 percent of the district's 813 graduates were college or career ready, compared with 27 percent last year.

To help improve readiness, district leaders launched a Career Readiness Center this fall where students complete online coursework while they work toward certifications in fields such as automotives, welding, health sciences, graphics technology and carpentry.

“Our whole focus is now on college and career ready,” said Dave Marshall, director of secondary schools for the Bullitt district. “We have to make sure those diplomas we give them when they leave us mean something so they have a fighting chance.”

## Ready for college or work

Kentucky’s latest report shows the 2011 college and career readiness of graduating seniors. It is based on the number of students meeting benchmarks on the ACT college-entrance exam set by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education and the number of graduates receiving career certificates. The number of graduates does not include students who received a diploma through an equivalency program.

High school	2011 graduates	College or career ready	Percentage
<b>Jefferson County Public Schools</b>			
Atherton	214	85	40%
Ballard	342	178	52%
Brown School	38	15	39%
Butler Traditional Tech	350	139	40%
Central	190	30	16%
Doss	181	18	10%
Dupont Manual	449	362	81%
Eastern	357	197	55%
Fairdale	198	40	20%
Fern Creek Traditional	291	91	31%
Iroquois	178	20	11%
Jeffersontown	197	32	16%
Louisville Male	395	235	59%
Moore Traditional School	139	25	18%
Pleasure Ridge Park	396	115	29%
Seneca	302	95	31%
Southern	223	28	13%
The Academy @ Shawnee	82	5	6%
Valley Traditional	167	6	4%
Waggener Traditional	179	33	18%
Western	188	20	11%
<b>Oldham County Schools</b>			
North Oldham	185	141	76%

Oldham County	328	203	62%
South Oldham	260	188	72%
<b>Bullitt County Public Schools</b>			
Bullitt Central	233	63	27%
Bullitt East	290	117	40%
North Bullitt	227	73	32%
<b>Spencer County Public Schools</b>			
Spencer County	174	58	33%
<b>Shelby County Public Schools</b>			
Martha Layne Collins	154	74	48%
Shelby County	251	144	57%

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