

# Daily Herald

Big Picture . Local Focus

## Chapter 10: Only 1 in 5 high school graduates are ready for college

By Emily Krone | Daily Herald Staff

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High school seniors throughout Illinois are half a year from graduation and college, the culmination of 13 years of public schooling.

The state is half a year from completing its constitutional duty to give these seniors a free and efficient education.

Taxpayers know the schools weren't free.

Data show the schools weren't efficient.

Between August 1996 -- when today's seniors began first grade -- and June, taxpayers funneled nearly \$200 billion into the Illinois public school system.

Yet, just 21 percent of Illinois seniors leaves the billion-dollar system ready for college -- or the workplace.

In the suburbs, the results aren't much better.

The Daily Herald reviewed ACT College Readiness reports from the 36 high school districts in our coverage area, from Gurnee down to Bolingbrook, from Des Plaines west to Huntley.

According to the reports, only 27 percent of suburban seniors are prepared to earn a college C or better in all four major subject areas tested by the ACT: science, social science, algebra and English.

Only 52.6 percent met or exceeded standards on the Prairie State exam, the test designed to gauge mastery of the material Illinois educators say all high school juniors should know.

Though nearly half haven't mastered state learning standards, and just one in five tested as college ready, most seniors will leave high school with a diploma.

Illinois reports an 86 percent graduation rate.

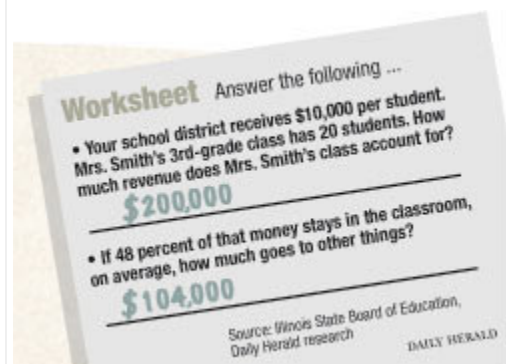
"It's pretty horrifying," said Jennifer Presley, who has studied the issue of college readiness for the Illinois Education Research Council at Southern Illinois University. "We've turned graduating from high school into an almost meaningless benchmark for people, and you're seeing that in the data."

Local community colleges say they're seeing it in the number of incoming kids -- about half -- who must take at least one remedial class before they can take freshman classes.

And employers say they're seeing it on the job, as applicants who aren't ready for college increasingly aren't ready for work either.

<http://www.dailyherald.com/story/print/?id=83593>

### SCHOOL FINANCE 101



### Chapter 10

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[Bottom line on schools](#)

[Student costs and ACT scores](#)

Here is the cost of educating a typical student, listed by elementary district with the high school district number in parentheses. [View report](#)

Also available is a downloadable list of the same information.

[\[XLS document\]](#)

### Chapter 9

## The school tab

Current 12th-graders started first grade in 1996, the first year covered by our School Finance 101 series.

Taxpayers have invested heavily in the typical suburban 12th-grader's scholastic career.

In total, during the decade covered by School Finance 101, taxpayers spent \$117,000 on a typical suburban kid.

When that student was in first grade, taxpayers kicked in \$8,312 for his education.

A decade later, when our typical student was a high school sophomore, the figure had climbed to \$12,674 per student, a 52 percent bump, more than twice the rate of inflation during that period.

As the rising cost of educating our student outpaced inflation, suburban taxpayers picked up the majority of the tab, year after year.

Between 1997 and 2006, a combination of local fees and property taxes accounted for 84 percent of revenue to suburban schools.

Many suburban taxpayers even voted to increase their taxes, reasoning that more money would buy a better education.

Within the Herald coverage area, 56 of 94 districts passed a tax rate increase for schools between 1997 and 2006.

"We've seen huge increases in spending," said Jeff Mayes, president of the Illinois Business Roundtable, an association of Illinois CEOs that is involved in education policy.

"But with all of the money we've spent, these scores haven't gone up," Mayes said, "and so you have to ask, Does money really count?"

Some school board members are happy to supply an answer.

"We're spending more money, and it's not getting us better performance," said Tim Millar, school board president in Palatine Township Elementary District 15, who campaigned on a taxpayer platform. "The culture is to talk about lack of money rather than return on investment. It's really frightening."

## The ACT standards

The ACT has established minimum benchmark scores that indicate a 50 percent chance of earning a B or higher and a 75 percent chance of earning a C or higher in individual subject areas during a student's first year of college.

ACT formulated its benchmarks based on interviews with thousands of middle and high school teachers, guidance counselors, and college professors; and on the first-year college

### **Bond debt**

Here is the total amount of revenue area school districts collected in 2005-06, the total amount of bond debt for each district, their enrollment and how much the bond debt equals on a per-student basis. [View report](#)

Also available is a downloadable list with expanded information, including 1998-99 data (the earliest year electronically available), ADA (average daily attendance) for both years, plus bond debt as a percent of 2005-06 total revenue.

[\[XLS document\]](#)

## Chapter 8

### **Feeder and unit districts**

The Daily Herald combined 2005-06 statistics for area high schools and their feeder elementary districts. These are presented here next to unit districts (single K-12 districts) for comparison. After each high school district are its feeder districts in parentheses. We then list the total revenue for each unit and combined high school/feeder district, the number of students, total revenue per student, the amount of revenue from local sources (mostly property taxes and school fees), the administrative expenditures per student, superintendent compensation (excluding health insurance costs) and superintendent compensation per student. [View report](#)

Also available is a downloadable Excel file with the same information

[\[XLS document\]](#)

## Chapter 7

### **Super pay for superintendents**

Here are the 2005-06 pay packages for area school superintendents, listing salary; bonuses (also includes all annuities, stipends, payments for unused sick and vacation days, and car allowance); pension costs (includes all payments by district to health pension and retirement pension plans); total pay package (does not include health, dental, life or disability insurance costs); years as superintendent in district; total years as a superintendent; ADA (district's average daily attendance); and number of schools in district. Note: \* means district did not respond to survey; pay figure obtained from state report.

[View report](#)

Also available is a downloadable Excel file with

grades of thousands of students who took the ACT.

To be considered college ready, students must score 18 on the English composition portion of the ACT, 21 on social science, 22 on algebra and 24 on biology.

Few in the suburbs hit the mark in all four areas.

Stevenson High School District 125 in Lincolnshire posted the highest percentage of its seniors testing as college ready in all four subjects.

But even at Stevenson, just 53 percent of students made the grade.

Across all Daily Herald high school districts, only two had more than 50 percent of students meeting college readiness benchmarks in all four subjects: Stevenson and Naperville Unit District 203.

Other districts fared much worse.

Just 7 percent of seniors at Round Lake Unit District 116 are considered college ready.

In Elgin Area School District U-46, the state's second largest school system, 14 percent of this year's senior class is college ready.

Science scores sunk at many schools.

In Northwest Suburban High School District 214, for example, 81 percent of students were college ready in English and 59 percent were college ready in algebra.

But just 41 percent were prepared in biology, slashing the number of college-ready District 214 students to 34 percent.

"It's not pretty," said Mayes, "and it's right at our doorsteps."

A solid guideline

In an era of modified tests and sliding grading scales, the ACT provides one of the few consistent, unbiased measures of a student's progress -- or lack of progress.

"It's as good as we've got," Presley said. "It's very thorough and something to be taken seriously."

The dismal college readiness scores might surprise parents who have seen their student succeed year-after-year on the Illinois State Assessment Tests, which determine whether a school is considered passing or failing under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Illinois students score much higher on the ISAT, taken by all third- through eighth-graders statewide, than they do on the high school state test, which includes the ACT.

A study by the Fordham Institute, a Washington-based nonprofit

the same information

[\[XLS document\]](#)

## Chapter 6

[Administrator pay vs. teacher pay](#)

[The numbers: Administrator vs. teacher pay](#)

Here is the average pay for teachers and administrators in area school districts as reported on the 1998 and 2006 school report cards, with the amount of change over the 8-year period. [View report](#)

Also available is a downloadable Excel file with the same information

[\[XLS document\]](#)

## Chapter 5

[Non-class costs weigh heavy on schools](#)

[The numbers: Spending outside the classroom](#)

Here are the total amounts of revenue area school districts collected in the 2005-06 school year and the percentages of revenue spent on administration, support services and other costs. [View report](#)

Also available is a downloadable, 10-year look at area school districts and their total revenues, with expenditures on instruction, administration, support services and other costs each year, and the 10-year totals for each category.

[\[XLS document\]](#)

## Chapter 4

[1 of every 2 education dollars stays in classroom](#)

[65-percent solution gains traction](#)

[The numbers: Spending in the classroom](#)

Here are the total amounts of revenue area school districts collected in the 1996-97 and 2005-06 school years; instruction expenditures each year; and the percentage of revenue spent on instruction. [View report](#)

Also available is a downloadable, 10-year look at area school districts and their total revenues, instruction expenditures, and the percent of revenue spent on instruction.

[\[XLS document\]](#)

## Chapter 3

[Suburban taxpayers' heavy share](#)

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promoting high standards and school choice, recently found the ISATs set some of the lowest standards in the nation.

What's more, the level of difficulty declined between 2003 and 2006 -- "dramatically so" in some subjects, according to the Fordham study.

Meanwhile, the ACT has not changed, said Ed Colby, a spokesman for ACT.

"It's used by colleges all over the country to determine whether students are ready to succeed," Colby said. "There's a direct benefit for students to do their best on the exam."

Palatine-Schaumburg High School District 211 Superintendent Roger Thornton said the discrepancy is too wide between the ISAT and the ACT, which all Illinois juniors must take.

"The Illinois ISAT is viewed as one of least difficult nationally, while the ACT would be one of the more difficult," Thornton said.

But some college instructors say even the ACT benchmarks are too low.

At Elgin Community College, for example, students must score a 20 on the English exam, not an 18, to qualify automatically for English 101. Just 42 percent of ECC students who score an 18 pass the college's placement exam to take English 101.

This fall, nearly two-thirds of ECC freshman had to take one or more remedial classes.

Other suburban community colleges grapple with similar statistics.

Half of the high school class of 2005 at College of DuPage and 56 percent at McHenry County College took at least one remedial course last year.

At Harper College in Palatine, the percentage of recent high school graduates who arrive unprepared has held steady for several years. Generally, about 50 percent require remedial math, 20 percent require remedial English and 15 percent require remedial reading.

Nationwide, 42 percent of community college freshman and 20 percent of freshman in public four-year colleges enroll in at least one remedial course, according to the U.S. government's National Center for Education Statistics.

### Employers track test

Illinois employers and college officials say the college readiness numbers reflect what they see at the workplace.

St. Charles-based Bison Gear, a manufacturing company with 220 employees, has joined with other manufacturers and educational leaders to form a 12-week work-training program to address the shortage of qualified entry-level workers in

Here are the total amounts of local revenue area school districts collected in the 1996-97 school year, the average daily attendance that year, and the local revenue on a per pupil basis; then the same data for the 2005-06 school year; and finally, the total amount of local revenue received over the 10-year period. [View report](#)

Also available is a downloadable look at the amount of local revenue area school districts collected in each of the school years from 1996-97 through 2005-06. With each year's local revenue total is that year's average daily attendance (ADA) and the local revenue shown on a per pupil basis (pp). At the end of each row is the total amount of local funding each district received over the 10-year period, and how much the revenue, attendance and per pupil revenue changed over those 10 school years.

[\[XLS document\]](#)

## Chapter 2

[Unequal state equalizer](#)

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[School finance by the numbers](#)

[The numbers: Revenue and attendance](#)

Here are the total amounts of state revenue area school districts collected in the 1996-97 school year, the average daily attendance (ADA), and the state revenue on a per pupil (pp) basis; then the same data for 2005-06; and finally, the total amount of state revenue received over the 10-year period. [View report](#)

Also available is a downloadable look at year-by-year state revenue for area school districts, also with average daily attendance (ADA) and per pupil (figures), and more.

[\[XLS document\]](#)

## Chapter 1

[Schools' revenue growth outpaces inflation](#)

[The numbers: Total revenue amounts](#)

Here are the total revenue amounts area school districts collected in the 1996-97 school year, the 2005-06 school year, how much that amount changed over the 10-year period, and the total amount of money received over the 10-year period. [View report](#)

Also available is a complete, downloadable

manufacturing.

look at year-by-year total revenue for area school districts. - [\[XLS document\]](#)

"It's a challenge for us to find workers with the basic skill set we're looking for," said Sylvia Wetzel, who runs the program. "We spoke with other manufacturers and they had the same concerns.

"We're more than willing to do on-the-job technical training, but we're talking about ground-zero knowledge, like passing an eighth-grade math test," Wetzel said.

More and more, studies show, the same skills necessary for college readiness are the skills workers need to earn a living wage.

"College and workplace standards are very similar," said Marilyn McConachie, vice president for university outreach at Northern Illinois University.

"There were always people who thought, especially in the old manufacturing towns, that there were factories you could go to if you weren't ready for college, and that's no longer the case," McConachie said. "The ACT is appropriate whether you're going to college or not."

### Schools respond

Some Illinois high schools have begun using the ACT college readiness standards to guide and improve instruction.

U-46 recently hired an ACT consultant to identify the areas teachers most needed to emphasize if students are going to meet college readiness benchmarks.

"We're finding ways to heighten awareness of what students are going to need to be successful in college," said Tom Donausky, director of secondary education at U-46.

Thornton at District 211 said high schools across the state are trying to increase academic rigor.

But, he said, students begin school with different skills and can't all stick to the same college readiness timeline.

"If every kid entered high school at grade level, then we could have them ready for college," Thornton said. "And if every kid came into first grade with requisite level, we'd have them ready for high school. But it's never been that way and I'll submit it never will be, and the issue is that we stay at it."

Some business leaders say they can't wait.

"My members have the need for talent to stay pre-eminent in their enterprise, and the fact that they have to find the talent elsewhere bothers them," said Mayes of the Business Roundtable. "They're committed to trying to grow it here, but they're frustrated that the system doesn't sense the urgency."

Some suburban school board members do sense the urgency.

"The system is not efficient, and it's anything but high-quality," said Chris Jenner, a school board member at Cary Elementary District 26.

Jenner is part of an informal group of a dozen suburban school board members who meet occasionally to talk shop, and believe the public school system in Illinois is fundamentally flawed.

"The complete and utter focus is on funding, not on how the money's spent, but on getting more money," Jenner said. "People should be outraged."