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High school graduation rates rise

Annual statewide report shows 3 percent more students finished course work on time in June 2007

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ALBANY -- New York's high school graduation rate crept up 3 percent last year, with nearly 69 percent of students who began ninth grade in 2003 graduating in June 2007.

Still, graduation rates among minority students and the disabled lagged and there is a persistent gender gap with girls outperforming boys.

"The trend for graduation is moving in the right direction but not nearly fast enough," Regents Chancellor Robert Bennett said Monday at a news conference to release the data.

At Albany High School, the graduation rate is creeping up slowly. In 2007, 61 percent of students graduated after four years, compared with 56 percent in each of the previous two years.

The district was pleased with the improvement but wants graduation rates to climb, spokesman Ron Lesko said. "While we're glad to see our graduation rate heading in the right direction. It's a reminder of where we need to be," he said.

Albany is focusing on helping middle school students and ninth-graders so they stay in school even if they start to fall behind, he said.

Five Capital Region districts had rates in the 90s -- Bethlehem, Niskayuna, Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake, Hoosic Valley and Voorheesville, which led the pack with 97 percent. The biggest drop was in the Rensselaer City School District, in which 53 percent of students graduated in 2007, down from 74 percent in 2006.

In Troy, 68 percent of students graduated, the same rate as the previous school year. In Schenectady the rate for 2007 was 56 percent, the same as the year before.

Schenectady Superintendent Eric Ely said district officials were working with struggling students starting at the elementary level to prevent them from dropping out when they reach high school. He said the district had also introduced new Web-based and alternative programs to encourage students to stay in school.

With the start of the new school year less than a month away, the Report Card on the Schools, which reflects data from the 2006-07 year, came out later than ever this year. When the annual report started in the late 1990s, it was issued in March or April.

State Education Commissioner Richard Mills said the delay resulted from a change in the way data are collected from thousands of school districts each year. Under the new system, students can be individually tracked even if they transfer from one school to another and officials can present a more realistic picture of indicators such as graduation rates.

But the changeover, in which schools need to update their reporting, has been plagued by problems. "Making that transition has been complex and time consuming," said Mills, who vowed to release next year's Report Card earlier.

Creation of the new system has led to a more detailed look at who graduates on time, and some of the trends became clear Monday.

Mills and Bennett both stressed that some students simply need more time to gather all 22 credits and pass the tests required of them.

"The extra time really helps," said Mills.

Students who don't earn all their credits by June can attend summer school and retake exams during the summer. Roughly 2 percent of 2007 graduates completed their course work in August.

Bennett said he doesn't believe the current 180-day school year is adequate, but there are no immediate proposals to lengthen the school year.

Doing so would likely require approval from politically powerful teachers unions and more money for the longer time that teachers would have to work.

Mills and Bennett pointed to summer school and after-school programs as well as the growing use of pre-K as ways to provide more time.

For a Regents diploma, students must pass five exams: English, math, two social studies and science. Starting this September, freshmen will also lose the option of earning the less-demanding non-Regents degrees and they'll have to pass their Regents exams with a 65, rather than 55. (Students with disabilities will still have other options).

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Out on time
Four-year 2006-2007 graduation rates for local high schools: Albany: 61 Bethlehem: 90
Guilderland: 85 Schenectady: 56 Troy: 68 State: 69

For more
The statistics on graduation rates are part of the Report Card on the Schools, released this afternoon, which includes test scores, class size, spending and other data of schools statewide. They can be accessed at <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/irts/reportcard/2007/home.shtml>.