

Schools Just Can't Keep Up

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JERSEY CITY — Tough new graduation requirements and a battery of tests are supposed to guarantee every New Jersey high school student gets a college-ready education.

But students in some struggling urban districts are raising questions and gathering data to show their schools may not be up to the task.

In a symposium Saturday, about 75 students, educators and state officials gathered at St. Peter's College in Jersey City to hear the findings of the New Jersey Urban Youth Research Initiative, an ear-to-the-ground, eight-month research project on the new requirements completed by 19 teenagers from Paterson, Newark and Jersey City. The students studied test scores and graduation data, and surveyed educators and community leaders to gauge how aware and prepared their schools are for the new rules.

"It was really surprising just to see the contrast between, in terms of the High School Proficiency Assessment scores and graduation rates, the [urban] schools and the rest of the schools in New Jersey," said student Kwame Gilbert, 18, of Paterson. "There is a stark contrast."

At Paterson's John F. Kennedy High School, an entering freshman class of 972 shrank to 437 students by senior year in 2008-09, according to the New Jersey School Report Card. An estimated 13 percent of the remaining students dropped out, and 40 percent of the graduates earned their diplomas by passing an alternative graduation exam criticized as an easy back door to a diploma. Statewide, the average dropout rate is a reported 1.7 percent.

Advocates have worried aloud that tougher standards will punish students in schools that are already failing too many of them.

"We need better secondary programs, not only harder ones," said Stan Karp of the Education Law Center and a former teacher at Kennedy.

But state officials say raising the stakes is the best way to make sure students get the education they need after high school.

"The schools themselves are the problems that we have, and the school people know it," said Willa Spicer, deputy commissioner at the state Department of Education. "There is no attempt on the part of the state of New Jersey to wish bad things upon children in the schools. There is instead a belief that if you leave things the way they are, you and your friends, your brothers and sisters, will not be able to compete in the society in which you find yourselves."

New Jersey is among the highest-spending states when it comes to education, and Spicer noted there are ample funds, due in part to the federal stimulus package.

"There is more money than there has ever been in the history of education in this country," she said. "Scream and yell that that money is going into the things that will help you to learn."

The student-researchers studied data and created a survey, which was given to 243 people in urban and suburban districts. In urban communities, some 54 percent of respondents supported end-of-course exams, but 42 percent thought they would increase dropout rates. Some 8 percent of respondents in urban districts believed the schools had the necessary equipment in place to offer lab sciences to every student.

Spicer and state Board of Education President Josephine Hernandez said the state would study the findings and use them to inform a larger research agenda. In addition, the students earned three college credits for their work — a boon for graduating seniors like Gilbert, who is headed to Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison next month.

That, despite the countless distractions students in low-income cities contend with, he said.

"When you come up as a student, there are a lot of students in your class and maybe one or two are disruptive, but those disruptive students mess up the whole class," he said. "So from a young age, students don't get a lot of educational experience. There are so many other factors around, like gangs and drugs. There are just a lot of things that prohibit learning."