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State ranked 47th smartest

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The future looks grim for the state and even grimmer for the Inland Empire in education and the economy, according to a Cal State Sacramento study.

Called "State of Decline," the study by the university's Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy found the Inland Empire is least likely in California to prepare students for college.

And a second, unrelated report issued by Morgan Quitno Press lists the state as one of the nation's dumbest, ranking it in 47th place out of the 50 states.

Declining college-going rates and an achievement gap between students from different races and regions of the state could result in a weakened California economy years down the line, according to the "Decline" study released Thursday. It found student achievement in California differed by region and race.

By race, whites and Asians were more likely to take college preparatory courses and earn a college degree than blacks or Latinos, the report found.

While projections for California show American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, black and white populations declining or growing moderately between 2000 and 2020, the Latino population is expected to rise by millions.

"We're going to see the older, more highly educated population leave the work force to be replaced by younger, less-educated workers unless we start making immediate progress in closing the gap," said Nancy Shulock, director of the Sacramento institute and a co-author of "Decline."

Overall, the percentage of students attending college directly out of high school has been dropping for a decade in California.

The Inland Empire came in 14th of 14 regions in college preparation.

Most students in the Inland Empire - more than in any region but the San Diego/Imperial area - take eighth-grade algebra, considered an important step on the path to college.

But just 28.5 percent of Inland Empire high school graduates complete course work necessary to enroll in state universities, compared with 35.2 percent in California.

While achievement in the Inland Empire ranks low in the state, California ranks low in the nation.

Rankings released this week by Morgan Quitno Press found that only Mississippi, Nevada and Arizona ranked lower than California in intelligence. The ranking used 21 factors, including class size, student proficiency and dropout rates to determine which states were "smartest."

Juan Gutierrez, a College of Education professor at Cal State University San Bernardino, said studying the achievement gap by race does not provide a full picture of who needs help.

Elsa Valdez, a San Bernardino City Unified School District board member and a professor of sociology at Cal State San Bernardino, noted that Cuban Americans are more likely to succeed in school than Mexican Americans.

Also, first-generation Latinos who must learn English have different needs from second-generation students, Gutierrez and Valdez said.

"To lump them all together is doing a disservice to some of these students," Gutierrez said.

In recent years, too much emphasis has been placed on test scores and too little on teachers, he added.

He said encouraging experienced teachers to move to needy schools could help low-achieving students learn more.

Urban districts often have the least experienced teachers, and San Bernardino district schools hire as many as 300 new teachers a year, said Linda Whitaker, president of the San Bernardino Teachers Association.

A proposal discussed last week at a district board meeting included creating incentives to lure experienced teachers to low-performing schools.

On a wider scale, the Sacramento report's authors suggest fostering regional collaboration to help close the achievement gap, encouraging four-year universities to offer courses at community colleges.

Groups composed of representatives from local schools and higher-education institutions in a region could help teachers better understand students' needs, the authors said.

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